THE NEW YORKER

FICTION

DEEP-HOLES

BY ALICE MUNRO

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Sally packed devilled eggs—something she usually hated to take on a picnic, because they were so messy. Ham sandwiches, crab salad, lemon tarts—also a packing problem. Kool-Aid for the boys, a half bottle of Mumm's for herself and Alex. She would have just a sip, because she was still nursing. She had bought plastic champagne glasses for the occasion, but when Alex spotted her handling them he got the real ones—a wedding present—out of the china cabinet. She protested, but he insisted, and took charge of them himself, the wrapping and packing.

"Dad is really a sort of *bourgeois gentilhomme*," Kent would say to Sally a few years later, when he was in his teens and acing everything at school, so sure of becoming some sort of scientist that he could get away with spouting French around the house.

"Don't make fun of your father," Sally said mechanically.

"I'm not. It's just that most geologists seem so grubby."

The picnic was in honor of Alex's publishing his first solo paper, in *Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie*. They were going to Osler Bluff because it figured largely in his research, and because Sally and the children had never been there.

They drove a couple of miles down a rough country road—having turned off the highway and then off a decent unpaved country road—and found a place for cars to park, with no cars in it at present. A sign was painted on a board and needed retouching: "CAUTION. DEEP-HOLES."

Why the hyphen? Sally thought. But who cares?

The entrance to the woods looked quite ordinary and unthreatening. Sally understood, of course, that these woods were on top of a high bluff, and she expected a daunting lookout somewhere. She did not expect the danger that had to be skirted almost immediately in front of them.

Deep chambers, really, some the size of a coffin, some much bigger than that, like rooms cut out of the rocks. Corridors zigzagging between them, and ferns and mosses growing out of the walls. Not enough greenery, however, to make any sort of cushion over the rubble below. The path went meandering between them, over hard earth and shelves of not quite level rock.

"Oooeee," came the cry of the boys, Kent and Peter, nine and six years old, running ahead.

"No tearing around in here," Alex called. "No stupid showing off, you hear me? You understand? Answer me."

They said O.K., and he proceeded, carrying the picnic basket and apparently believing that no further fatherly warning was necessary. Sally stumbled after him faster than was easy for her, with the diaper bag and the baby, Savanna. She couldn't slow down till she had her sons in sight, saw them trotting along taking sidelong looks into the black crevasses, still making exaggerated but discreet noises of horror. She was nearly crying with exhaustion and alarm and some familiar sort of seeping rage.

The lookout did not appear until they had followed the dirt-and-rock path for what seemed to her like half a mile, and was probably a quarter mile. Then there was a brightening, an intrusion of sky, and her husband halted ahead. He gave a cry of arrival and display, and the boys hooted with true astonishment. Sally, emerging from the woods, found them lined up on an outcrop above the treetops—above several levels of treetops, as it turned out—with the summer fields spread far below in a shimmer of green and yellow.

As soon as she put Savanna down on her blanket, she began to cry.

"Hungry," Sally said.

Alex said, "I thought she got her lunch in the car."

"She did. But she's hungry again."

She got Savanna latched on to one side and with her free hand unfastened the picnic basket. This was not how Alex had envisioned things. But he gave a good-humored sigh and

retrieved the champagne glasses from their wrappings in his pockets, placing them on their sides on a patch of grass.

"Glug glug. I'm thirsty, too," Kent said, and Peter immediately imitated him.

"Glug glug. Me, too. Glug glug."

"Shut up," Alex said.

Kent said, "Shut up, Peter."

Alex said to Sally, "What did you bring for them to drink?"

"Kool-Aid, in the blue jug. The plastic glasses are in a napkin on top."

Of course, Alex believed that Kent had started that nonsense not because he was really thirsty but because he was crudely excited by the sight of Sally's breast. He thought it was high time that Savanna was transferred to the bottle—she was nearly six months old. And he thought Sally was far too casual about the whole procedure, sometimes going around the kitchen doing things with one hand while the infant guzzled. With Kent sneaking peeks and Peter referring to Mommy's milk jugs. That came from Kent, Alex said. Kent was a troublemaker and the possessor of a dirty mind.

"Well, I have to do things," Sally said.

"That's not one of the things you have to do. You could have her on the bottle tomorrow."

"I will soon. Not quite tomorrow, but soon."

But here she is, still letting Savanna and the milk jugs dominate the picnic.

The Kool-Aid is poured, then the champagne. Sally and Alex touch glasses, with Savanna between them. Sally has her sip and wishes she could have more. She smiles at Alex to communicate this wish, and maybe the idea that it would be nice to be alone with him. He drinks his champagne, and, as if her sip and smile were enough to soothe him, he starts in on the picnic. She points out which sandwiches have the mustard he likes and which have the mustard she and Peter like and which are for Kent, who likes no mustard at all.

While this is going on, Kent manages to slip behind her and finish up her champagne. Peter must have seen him do this, but for some peculiar reason he does not tell on him. Sally discovers what has happened some time later and Alex never knows about it at all, because he soon forgets that there was anything left in her glass and packs it neatly away with his own, while telling the boys about dolostone. They listen, presumably, as they gobble up the sandwiches and ignore the devilled eggs and crab salad and grab the tarts.

Dolostone, Alex says, is the thick caprock they can see. Underneath it is shale, clay turned into rock, very fine, fine-grained. Water works through the dolostone and when it gets to the shale it just lies there; it can't get through the thin layers. So the erosion—that's the destruction of the dolostone—is caused as the water works its way back to its source, eats a channel back, and the caprock develops vertical joints. Do they know what "vertical" means?

"Up and down," Kent says lackadaisically.

"Weak vertical joints, and they get to lean out and then they leave crevasses behind them and after millions of years they break off altogether and go tumbling down the slope."

"I have to go," Kent says.

"Go where?"

"I have to go pee."

"Oh, for God's sake, go."

"Me, too," Peter says.

Sally clamps her mouth down on the automatic injunction to be careful. Alex looks at her and approves of the clamping down. They smile faintly at each other.

Savanna has fallen asleep, her lips slack around the nipple. With the boys out of the way, it's easier to detach her. Sally can burp her and settle her on the blanket, without worrying about an exposed breast. If Alex finds the sight distasteful—she knows he dislikes the whole conjunction of sex and nourishment, his wife's breasts turned into udders—he can look away, and he does.

As she buttons herself up, there comes a cry, not sharp but lost, diminishing, and Alex is on his feet before she is, running along the path. Then a louder cry getting closer. It's Peter.

"Kent falled in. Kent falled in."

His father yells, "I'm coming."

Sally will always believe that she knew at once—even before she heard Peter's voice, she knew what had happened. If an accident had happened, it would not be to her six-year-old, who was brave but not inventive, not a showoff. It would be to Kent. She could see exactly how—peeing into a hole, balancing on the rim, teasing Peter, teasing himself.

He was alive. He was lying far down in the rubble at the bottom of the crevasse, but he was moving his arms, struggling to push himself up. Struggling so feebly. One leg caught under him, the other oddly bent.

"Can you carry the baby?" she said to Peter. "Go back to the picnic and put her on the blanket and watch her. That's my good boy. My good strong boy."

Alex was on his way into the hole, scrambling down, telling Kent to stay still. Getting down in one piece was just possible. It would be getting Kent out that was hard.

Should she run to the car and see if there was a rope? Tie the rope around a tree trunk? Maybe tie it around Kent's body so she could lift him when Alex raised him up to her?

There wouldn't be a rope. Why would there be a rope?

Alex had reached him. He bent and lifted him. Kent gave a beseeching scream of pain. Alex draped him around his shoulders, Kent's head hanging down on one side and useless legs—one so unnaturally protruding—on the other. He rose, stumbled a couple of steps, and while still hanging on to Kent dropped back down to his knees. He had decided to crawl and was making his way—Sally understood this now—to the rubble that partly filled the far end of the crevasse. He shouted some order to her without raising his head, and though she could not make out any word she knew what he wanted. She got up off her knees—why was she

on her knees?—and pushed through some saplings to that edge of the rim, where the rubble came to within perhaps three feet of the surface. Alex was still crawling along with Kent dangling from him like a shot deer.

She called, “I’m here. I’m here.”

Kent would have to be raised up by his father, pulled to the solid shelf of rock by his mother. He was a skinny boy, who had not yet reached his first spurt of growth, but he seemed as heavy as a bag of cement. Sally’s arms could not do it on the first try. She shifted her position, crouching instead of lying flat on her stomach, and with the full power of her shoulders and chest and with Alex supporting and lifting Kent’s body from beneath they heaved him over. Sally fell back with him in her arms and saw his eyes open, then roll back in his head as he fainted again.

When Alex had clawed his way out, they collected the other children and drove to the Collingwood Hospital. There seemed to be no internal injury. Both legs were broken. One break was clean, as the doctor put it. The other leg was shattered.

“Kids have to be watched every minute in there,” he said sternly to Sally, who had gone into the examining room with Kent while Alex managed Peter and Savanna. “Haven’t they got any warning signs up?”

With Alex, she thought, he would have spoken differently. “That’s the way boys are. Turn your back and they’re tearing around where they shouldn’t be,” he would have said.

Her gratitude—to God, whom she did not believe in, and to Alex, whom she did—was so immense that she resented nothing.

It was necessary for Kent to spend the next six months out of school, strung up for the first few weeks in a rented hospital bed. Sally picked up and turned in his school assignments, which he completed in no time. Then he was encouraged to go ahead with Extra Projects. One of these was “Travels and Explorations—Choose Your Country.”

“I want to pick somewhere nobody else would pick,” he said.

The accident and the convalescence seemed to have changed him. He acted older than his age now, less antic, more serene. And Sally told him something that she had not told to another soul. She told him how she was attracted to remote islands. Not to the Hawaiian Islands or the Canaries or the Hebrides or the Isles of Greece, where everybody wanted to go, but to small or obscure islands that nobody talked about and that were seldom, if ever, visited. Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, Chatham Island and Christmas Island and Desolation Island and the Faeroes. She and Kent began to collect every scrap of information they could find about these places, not allowing themselves to make anything up. And never telling Alex what they were doing.

“He would think we were off our heads,” Sally said.

Desolation Island’s main boast was of a vegetable, of great antiquity, a unique cabbage. They imagined worship ceremonies for it, costumes, and cabbage parades in its honor.

Sally told her son that, before he was born, she had seen footage on television of the inhabitants of Tristan da Cunha disembarking at Heathrow Airport, having all been evacuated, owing to a great volcanic eruption on their island. How strange they had looked, docile and dignified, like creatures from another century. They must have adjusted to England, more or less, but when the volcano quieted down, a couple of years later, they almost all wanted to go home.

When Kent went back to school, things changed, of course, but he still seemed mature for his age, patient with Savanna, who had grown venturesome and stubborn, and with Peter, who always burst into the house as if on a gale of calamity. And he was especially courteous to his father, bringing him the paper that he had rescued from Savanna and carefully refolded, pulling out his chair at dinnertime.

"Honor to the man who saved my life," he might say, or "Home is the hero."

He said this rather dramatically, though not at all sarcastically, yet it got on Alex's nerves. Kent got on his nerves, had done so even before the deep-hole drama.

"Cut that out," Alex said, and complained privately to Sally.

"He's saying you must have loved him, because you rescued him."

"Christ, I'd have rescued anybody."

"Don't say that in front of him. Please."

When Kent got to high school, things with his father improved. He chose to focus on science. He picked the hard sciences, not the soft earth sciences, and even this roused no opposition in Alex. The harder the better.

But after six months at college Kent disappeared. People who knew him a little—there did not seem to be anyone who claimed to be a friend—said that he had talked of going to the West Coast. A letter came, just as his parents were deciding to go to the police. He was working at a Canadian Tire in a suburb just north of Toronto. Alex went to see him there, to order him back to college. But Kent refused, said that he was very happy with his job, and was making good money, or soon would be, when he got promoted. Then Sally went to see him, without telling Alex, and found him jolly and ten pounds heavier. He said it was the beer. He had friends now.

"It's a phase," she said to Alex when she confessed the visit. "He wants to get a taste of independence."

"He can get a bellyful of it, as far as I'm concerned."

Kent had not said where he was living, and when she made her next visit to Canadian Tire she was told that he had quit. She was embarrassed—she thought she caught a smirk on the face of the employee who told her—and she did not ask where Kent had gone. She assumed he would get in touch, anyway, as soon as he had settled again.

H

e did write, three years later. His letter was mailed in Needles, California, but he told them not to bother trying to trace him there—he was only passing through. Like Blanche, he said, and Alex said, "Who the hell is Blanche?"

"Just a joke," Sally said. "It doesn't matter."

Kent did not say where he had been or whether he was working or had formed any connections. He did not apologize for leaving his parents without any information for so long, or ask how they were, or how his brother and sister were. Instead, he wrote pages about his own life. Not the practical side of his life but what he believed he should be doing—what he *was* doing—with it.

"It seems so ridiculous to me," he said, "that a person should be expected to lock themselves into a suit of clothes. I mean, like the suit of clothes of an engineer or doctor or geologist, and then the skin grows over it, over the clothes, I mean, and that person can't ever get them off. When we are given a chance to explore the whole world of inner and outer reality and to live in a way that takes in the spiritual and the physical and the whole range of the beautiful and the terrible available to mankind, that is pain as well as joy and turmoil. This way of expressing myself may seem over-blown to you, but one thing I have learned to give up is intellectual pridefulness—"

"He's on drugs," Alex said. "You can tell a mile off. His brain's rotted with drugs."

In the middle of the night he said, "Sex."

Sally was lying beside him, wide awake.

"What about sex?"

"It's what makes you do what he's talking about—become a something-or-other so that you can earn a living. So that you can pay for your steady sex and the consequences. That's not a consideration for him."

Sally said, "My, how romantic."

"Getting down to basics is never very romantic. He's not normal is all I'm trying to say."

Further on in the letter—or the rampage, as Alex called it—Kent said that he had been luckier than most people, in having had what he called his "near-death experience," which had given him perhaps an extra awareness, and he would be forever grateful to his father, who had lifted him back into the world, and to his mother, who had lovingly received him there.

He wrote, "Perhaps in those moments I was reborn."

Alex groaned.

"No. I won't say it."

"Don't," Sally said. "You don't mean it."

"I don't know whether I do or not."

That letter, signed with love, was the last they heard from him.

Peter went into medicine, Savanna into law.

To her own surprise, Sally became interested in geology. One night, in a trusting mood after sex, she told Alex about the islands—though not about her fantasy that Kent was now living on one or another of them. She said that she had forgotten many of the details she used to know, and that she should look all these places up in the encyclopedia, where she had first got her information. Alex said that everything she wanted to know could probably be found on the Internet now. Surely not something so obscure, she said, and he got her out of bed and downstairs, and there in no time, before her eyes, was Tristan da Cunha, a green plate in the South Atlantic Ocean, with information galore. She was shocked and turned away, and Alex, who was disappointed in her, asked why.

"I don't know. Maybe I don't want it so real."

He said that she needed something to do. He had just retired from teaching at the time and was planning to write a book. He needed an assistant and he could not call on graduate students now as he had been able to when he was still on the faculty. (She didn't know if this was true or not.) She reminded him that she knew nothing about rocks, and he said never mind that, he could use her for scale, in the photographs.

So she became the small figure in black or bright clothing, contrasting with the ribbons of Silurian or Devonian rock or with the gneiss formed by intense compression, folded and deformed by clashes of the North American and the Pacific plates to make the present continent. Gradually she learned to use her eyes and apply her knowledge, till she could stand in an empty suburban street and realize that far beneath her shoes was a crater filled with rubble that had never been seen, because there had been no eyes to see it at its creation or through the long history of its being made and filled and hidden and lost. Alex did such things the honor of knowing about them, and she admired him for that, although she knew enough not to say so. They were good friends in these last years, which she didn't know were their last years. He went into the hospital for an operation, taking his charts and photographs with him, and on the day he was supposed to come home he died.

This was in the summer, and that fall there was a dramatic fire in Toronto. Sally sat in front of her television watching coverage of the fire for a while. It was in a district that she knew, or used to know, in the days when its nineteenth-century buildings were inhabited by hippies, with their tarot cards and beads and paper flowers the size of pumpkins. Later, the vegetarian restaurants had been transformed into expensive bistros and boutiques. Now a block of those nineteenth-century buildings was being wiped out, and the newsman was bemoaning this, speaking of the people who lived in old-fashioned apartments above the shops and had now lost their homes or were being dragged out of harm's way onto the street.

He didn't mention the landlords of the buildings, Sally thought, who were probably getting away with substandard wiring, as well as with epidemics of cockroaches, bedbugs, not to be complained about by the deluded or the fearful poor.

She sometimes felt Alex talking in her head these days, and that was surely what was happening now. She turned off the television.

No more than ten minutes later, the phone rang. It was Savanna.

"Mom. Have you got your TV on? Did you see?"

"You mean the fire? I did have it on, but I turned it off."

"No. Did you see—I'm looking for him right now—I saw him not five minutes ago. . . . Mom, it's Kent. Now I can't find him. But I saw him."

"Is he hurt? I'm turning it on now. Was he hurt?"

"No, he was helping. He was carrying one end of a stretcher. There was a body on it—I don't know if it was dead or just hurt. But Kent. It was him. You could even see him limping. Have you got it on now?"

"Yes."

"O.K. I'll calm down. I bet he went back into the building."

"But surely they wouldn't allow—"

"He could be a doctor, for all we know. Oh, fuck, now they're talking to that same old guy they talked to before—his family owned some business for a hundred years. Let's hang up and just keep our eyes on the screen. He's sure to come in range again."

He didn't. The footage began to repeat itself.

Savanna phoned back. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. I know a guy that works on the news. I can get to see that shot again. We have to find out."

Savanna had never known her brother very well—she had been nine when he left—so what was all the fuss about? Had her father's death made her feel the need of family? She should marry soon, Sally thought. She should have children. But she had such a stubborn streak when she set her mind on something. Her father had told her when she was ten years old that she could gnaw an idea to the bone—she ought to be a lawyer. And, from then on, that was what she had said she would be.

It was Kent, and within a week Savanna had found out all about him. No. Change that to found out all he wanted her to know. He had been living in Toronto for years. He had often passed the building where Savanna worked and thought he had spotted her a couple of times on the street. Of course, she wouldn't have recognized him, because he was wearing a kind of robe.

"A Hare Krishna?" Sally said.

"Oh, Mom, if you're a monk it doesn't mean you're a Hare Krishna. Anyway, he's not that now."

"So what is he?"

"He says he lives in the present. So I said, 'Well, don't we all, nowadays,' and he said no, he meant in the *real* present."

"Where we are now," he had said, and Savanna had said, "You mean, in this dump?" Because it was—the coffee shop where he had asked her to meet him was a dump.

"I see it differently," he said, but then he said he had no objection to her way of seeing it, or anybody else's.

"Well, that's big of you," Savanna said, but she made a joke of it and he sort of laughed.

He said that he had seen Alex's obituary in the paper and thought it was well done. He guessed Alex would have liked the reference to his contribution to geology. He had wondered if his own name would appear on the list of relatives, and he was rather surprised that it was there. Had his father told them what names he wanted listed, before he died? he asked.

Savanna had said no—he hadn't been planning on dying anything like so soon. It was the rest of the family who'd had a conference and decided that Kent's name should be included.

"Not Dad," Kent had said. "Well, no."

Then he had asked about Sally.

Sally felt a kind of inflated balloon in her chest.

"What did you say?"

"I said you were O.K., maybe at loose ends a little, you and Dad being so close and you not having much time yet to get used to being alone. Then he said, 'Tell her she can come to see me, if she wants to,' and I said I would ask you."

Sally didn't reply.

"You there, Mom?"

"Did he say when or where?"

"No. I'm supposed to meet him in a week in the same place and tell him what you said. I think he sort of enjoys calling the shots. I thought you'd agree right away."

"Of course I agree. Did he really risk his life in the fire?"

"He won't talk about it. But my information is yes. He's quite well known, as it turns out, in certain parts of town and by certain people."

Sally received a note. This in itself was special, since most people she knew used e-mail or the phone. She was glad he hadn't called. She did not yet trust herself to hear his voice. The note instructed her to leave her car in the subway parking lot at the end of the line and take the subway to a specified station, where he would meet her.

She expected to see him on the other side of the turnstile, but he was not there. Probably he had meant that he would meet her outside. She climbed the steps and emerged into the sunlight and paused, as people hurried and pushed past her. She had a feeling of dismay and embarrassment. Dismay at Kent's apparent absence and embarrassment because she was feeling just what people from her part of the country often felt in neighborhoods like this,

though she would never have said what they said. *You'd think you were in the Congo or India or Vietnam.*

On the steps of an old bank building just beyond the subway entrance, several men were sitting or lounging or sleeping. It was no longer a bank, of course, though the bank's name was cut into the stone. She looked at the name rather than at the men, whose slouching or reclining postures were such a contrast to the old purpose of the building and the rush of the crowd coming out of the subway.

"Mom."

One of the men on the steps got up and came toward her in no hurry, with a slight drag of one foot, and she realized that it was Kent and waited for him.

She would almost as soon have run away. But then she saw that not all the men were filthy or hopeless-looking, and that some glanced at her without menace or contempt and even with friendly amusement, now that she had been identified as Kent's mother.

Kent didn't wear a robe. He wore gray pants that were too big for him, a T-shirt with no message on it, and a threadbare jacket. His hair was cut so short you could hardly see the curl. His skin was quite pale, and his thin body made him look older than he was. He was missing some teeth.

He did not embrace her—she did not expect him to—but he put his hand lightly on her back to steer her in the direction he wanted her to go.

"Do you still smoke your pipe?" she said, sniffing the air, and remembering how he had taken up pipe smoking in high school.

"Pipe? Oh. No. It's the smoke from the fire you smell. We don't notice it anymore. I'm afraid it'll get stronger, where we're walking."

"Are we going to go through where it was?"

"No, no. We couldn't, even if we wanted to. They've got it all blocked off. Too dangerous. Some buildings will have to be taken down. Don't worry—it's O.K. where we are. A good block and a half away from the mess."

"Your apartment building?" she said, alert to the "we."

"Sort of. Yes. You'll see."

He spoke gently, readily, yet with an effort, like someone speaking, as a courtesy, in a foreign language. And he stooped a little, to make sure she heard him. The slight labor involved in speaking to her seemed something she was meant to notice. The cost.

As they stepped off a curb he brushed her arm—perhaps he had stumbled a little—and he said, "Excuse me." And she thought he gave a slight shiver.

AIDS. Why had that never occurred to her before?

"No," he said, though she had certainly not spoken aloud. "I'm quite well at present. I'm not H.I.V.-positive or anything like that. I contracted malaria years ago but it's under control. I may be a bit run-down but nothing to worry about. We turn here—we're right on this block."

We.

"I'm not psychic," he said. "I just figured out something that Savanna was trying to get at, and I thought I'd put you at rest. Here we are then."

It was one of those houses whose front doors are only a few steps from the sidewalk.

"I'm celibate, actually," he said, holding open the door. A piece of cardboard was tacked up where one of its glass panes should be.

The floorboards were bare and creaked underfoot. The smell was complicated, all-pervasive. The smoke had got in here, of course, but it was mixed with the odors of ancient cooking, burned coffee, toilets, sickness, decay.

"Though 'celibate' might be the wrong word. That sounds as if it had something to do with will power. I guess I should have said 'neuter.' I don't think of it as an achievement. It isn't."

He was leading her around the stairs and into the kitchen.

And there a gigantic woman stood with her back to them, stirring something on the stove.

Kent said, "Hi, Marnie. This is my mom. Can you say hello to my mom?"

Sally noticed a change in his voice. A relaxation, honesty, perhaps a respectfulness, that was different from the forced lightness he adopted with her.

She said, "Hello, Marnie," and the woman half turned, showing a squeezed doll's face in a loaf of flesh but not focussing her eyes.

"Marnie is our cook this week," Kent said. "Smells O.K., Marnie."

To his mother he said, "We'll go and sit in my sanctum, shall we?" and led the way down a couple of steps and along a back hall. It was hard to move there, because of the stacks of newspapers, flyers, and magazines neatly tied.

"Got to get these out of here," Kent said. "I told Steve this morning. Fire hazard. Jeez, I used to just say that. Now I know what it means."

Jeez. She had been wondering if he belonged to some plainclothes religious order, but if he did he surely wouldn't say that, would he? Of course, it could be an order of some faith other than Christian.

His room was down some more steps, actually in the cellar. There was a cot, a battered old-fashioned desk with cubbyholes, a couple of straight-backed chairs with rungs missing.

"The chairs are perfectly safe," he said. "Nearly all our stuff is scavenged from somewhere, but I draw the line at chairs you can't sit on."

Sally seated herself with a feeling of exhaustion.

"What are you?" she said. "What is it that you do? Is this a halfway house or something like that?"

"No. Not even quarter-way. We take in anybody that comes."

"Even me."

"Even you," he said without smiling. "We aren't supported by anybody but ourselves. We do some recycling with stuff we pick up. Those newspapers. Bottles. We make a bit here and there. And we take turns soliciting the public."

"Asking for charity?"

"Begging," he said.

"On the street?"

"What better place for it? On the street. And we go into some pubs that we have an understanding with, though it is against the law."

"You do that yourself?"

"I could hardly ask the others to do it if I wouldn't. That's something I had to overcome. Just about all of us have something to overcome. It can be shame. Or it can be the concept of 'mine.' When somebody drops a ten-dollar bill, or even a loonie, into the hat, that's when the notion of private ownership kicks in. Whose is it, huh? Ours or—unh-uh—mine? If the answer comes back 'mine,' it usually gets spent right away, and we have the person turning up here smelling of booze and saying, 'I don't know what's the matter with me today—I couldn't get a bite.' Then they might start to feel bad later and confess. Or not confess, never mind. We see them disappear for days—weeks—then show up back here when the going gets too rough. And sometimes we'll see them working the street on their own, never letting on that they recognize us. Never coming back. And that's all right, too. They're our graduates, you could say. If you believe in the system."

"Kent—"

"Around here I'm Jonah."

"Jonah?"

"I just chose it. I thought of Lazarus, but it's too self-dramatizing. You can call me Kent, if you like."

"I want to know what's happened in your life. I mean, not so much these people—"

"These people are my life."

"I knew you'd say that."

"O.K., it was kind of smart-arse. But this, this is what I've been doing for—seven years? Nine years? Nine years."

She persisted. "Before that?"

"What do I know? Before that? Before that. Man's days are like grass, eh? Cut down and put into the oven. Listen to me. Soon as I meet you again I start the showing-off. Cut down and put in the oven—I'm not interested in that. I live each day as it happens. Really. You wouldn't understand that. I'm not in your world, you're not in mine. You know why I wanted to meet you here today?"

"No. I didn't think of it. I mean, I thought naturally maybe the time had come—"

"Naturally. When I read about my father's death in the paper I thought, Well, where is the money? I thought, Well, she can tell me."

“It went to me,” Sally said, with flat disappointment but great self-control. “For the time being. The house as well, if you’re interested.”

“I thought likely that was it. That’s O.K.”

“When I die, to Peter and his boys and Savanna.”

“Very nice.”

“He didn’t know if you were alive or dead.”

“You think I’m asking for myself? You think I’m that much of an idiot to want the money for myself? But I did make a mistake thinking about how I could use it. Thinking, Family money, sure, I can use that. That’s the temptation. Now I’m glad, I’m glad I can’t have it.”

“I could let—”

“The thing is, though, this place is condemned—”

“I could let you borrow.”

“Borrow? We don’t borrow around here. We don’t use the borrow system around here. Excuse me, I’ve got to go get hold of my mood. Are you hungry? Would you like some soup?”

“No, thanks.”

When he was gone, she thought of running away. If she could locate a back door, a route that didn’t go through the kitchen.

But she could not do it. It would mean that she would never see him again. And the back yard of a house like this, built before the days of automobiles, would have no access to the street.

It was half an hour before he came back. He seemed a little surprised or bewildered to find her still there.

“Sorry. I had to settle some business. And then I talked to Marnie. She always calms me down.”

“You wrote a letter to us,” Sally said. “It was the last we heard from you.”

“Oh, don’t remind me.”

“No, it was a good letter. It was a good attempt to explain what you were thinking.”

“Please. Don’t remind me.”

“You were trying to figure out your life—”

“My life, my life, my progress, what all I could discover about my stinking self. The purpose of me. My crap. My spirituality. My intellectuality. There isn’t any inside stuff anymore, Sally. You don’t mind if I call you Sally? It just comes out easier. There is only outside, what you do, every moment of your life. Since I realized this, I’ve been happy.”

“You are? Happy?”

“Sure. I’ve let go of that stupid self stuff. I think, How can I help? And that’s all the thinking that I allow myself.”

“Living in the present?”

"I don't care if you think I'm banal. I don't care if you laugh at me."

"I'm not—"

"I don't care. Listen. If you think I'm after your money, fine. I *am* after your money. Also, I am after you. Don't you want a different life? I'm not saying I love you. I don't use stupid language. Or, I want to save you. You know you can only save yourself. So what is the point? I don't usually try to get anywhere talking to people. I usually try to avoid personal relationships. I mean I do. I do avoid them."

Relationships.

"Why are you trying not to smile?" he said. "Because I said 'relationships'? That's a cant word? I don't fuss about my words."

Sally said, "I was thinking of Jesus. 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?' "

The look that leaped to his face was almost savage.

"Don't you get tired, Sally? Don't you get tired being clever? I can't go on talking this way, I'm sorry. I've got things to do."

"So have I," Sally said. It was a complete lie. "We'll be—"

"Don't say it. Don't say we'll be in touch."

"Maybe we'll be in touch. Is that any better?"

Sally gets lost, then finds her way. The bank building again, the same or possibly a whole new regiment of loiterers. The subway ride, the car park, the keys, the highway, the traffic. Then the lesser highway, the early sunset, no snow yet, the bare trees, and the darkening fields.

She loves this countryside, this time of year. Must she now think herself unworthy?

The cat is glad to see her. There are a couple of messages from friends on her machine. She heats up a single serving of lasagna. She buys these separated, precooked, and frozen portions now. They are quite good and not too expensive when you think that there's no waste. She sips from a glass of wine during the few-minute wait.

She is shaking with anger. What is she supposed to do, go back to the condemned house and scrub the rotten linoleum and cook up the chicken parts that were thrown out because they're past the best-before date? And be reminded every day of how she falls short of Marnie or any other afflicted creature? All for the privilege of being useful in the life that somebody else—Kent—has chosen?

He's sick. He's wearing himself out; maybe he's dying. He wouldn't thank her for clean sheets and fresh food. Oh, no. He'd rather die on that cot under a blanket with a burned hole in it.

But a check, she can write some sort of check, not an absurd one. Not too big or too small. He won't help himself with it, of course. He won't stop despising her, of course.

Despising. No. Not the point. Nothing personal.

There is something, anyway, in having got through the day without its being an absolute disaster. It wasn't, was it? She had said "maybe." He hadn't corrected her.

And it was possible, too, that age could become her ally, turning her into somebody she didn't know yet. She has seen that look of old people, now and then—clear-sighted but content, on islands of their own making. ♦

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