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FICTION

FREE RADICALS

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At first, people kept phoning, to make sure that Nita was not too depressed, not too lonely, not eating too little or drinking too much. (She had been such a diligent wine drinker that many forgot that she was now forbidden to drink at all.) She held them off, without sounding nobly grief-stricken or unnaturally cheerful or absent-minded or confused. She said that she didn't need groceries; she was working through what she had on hand. She had enough of her prescription pills and enough stamps for her thank-you notes.

Her closer friends probably suspected the truth—that she was not bothering to eat much and that she threw out any sympathy note she happened to get. She had not even informed the people who lived at a distance, to elicit such notes. Not Rich's ex-wife in Arizona or his semi-estranged brother in Nova Scotia, though those two might have understood, perhaps better than the people near at hand, why she had proceeded with the non-funeral as she had done.

Rich had told her that he was going to the village, to the hardware store. It was around ten o'clock in the morning, and he had just started to paint the railing of the deck. That is, he'd been scraping it to prepare for the painting, and the old scraper had come apart in his hand.

She hadn't had time to wonder about his being late. He'd died bent over the sidewalk sign that stood in front of the hardware store offering a discount on lawnmowers. He hadn't even managed to get into the store. He'd been eighty-one years old and in fine health, aside from some deafness in his right ear. His doctor had checked him over only the week before. Nita was to learn that the recent checkup, the clean bill of health, cropped up in a surprising number of the sudden-death stories that she was now presented with. "You'd almost think that such visits ought to be avoided," she'd said.

She should have spoken like this only to her close and fellow bad-mouthing friends, Virgie and Carol, women around her own age, which was sixty-two. Her younger friends found this sort of talk unseemly and evasive. At first, they had crowded in on Nita. They had not actually spoken of the grieving process, but she had been afraid that at any moment they might start.

As soon as she got on with the arrangements, of course, all but the tried and true had fallen away. The cheapest box, into the ground immediately, no ceremony of any kind. The undertaker had suggested that this might be against the law, but she and Rich had had their facts straight. They'd got their information almost a year before, when the diagnosis of her cancer became final.

"How was I to know he'd steal my thunder?" she'd said.

People had not expected a traditional service, but they had looked forward to some kind of contemporary affair. Celebrating the life. Playing his favorite music, holding hands together, telling stories that praised Rich while touching humorously on his quirks and forgivable faults.

The sort of thing that Rich had said made him puke.

So it was dealt with privately, and soon the stir, the widespread warmth that had surrounded Nita melted away, though some people, she supposed, were likely still saying that they were concerned about her. Virgie and Carol didn't say that. They said only that she was a selfish bloody bitch if she was thinking of conking out now, any sooner than was necessary. They would come around, they said, and revive her with Grey Goose.

She assured them that she wasn't, though she could see a certain logic to the idea.

Thanks to the radiation last spring, her cancer was at present in remission—whatever that actually meant. It did not mean gone. Not for good, anyway. Her liver was the main theatre of operations and as long as she stuck to nibbles it did not complain. It would only have depressed her friends to remind them that she couldn't have wine, let alone vodka.

Rich died in June. Now here it is midsummer. She gets out of bed early and washes herself and dresses in anything that comes to hand. But she does dress and wash, and she brushes her teeth and combs her hair, which has grown back decently, gray around her face and dark at the back, the way it was before. She puts on lipstick and pencils her eyebrows, which are now very scanty, and out of her lifelong respect for a narrow waist and moderate hips she checks on the achievements she has made in that direction, though she knows that the proper word for all parts of her now might be "scrawny."

She sits in her usual ample armchair, with piles of books and unopened magazines around her. She sips cautiously from the mug of weak herbal tea that is now her substitute for coffee. At one time, she thought that she could not live without coffee, but it turned out that it was really just the large warm mug she wanted in her hands, that was the aid to thought or whatever it was she practiced through the procession of hours, or of days.

This was Rich's house. He'd bought it when he was with his first wife, Bett. It had been intended as a weekend place, closed up in the winter. Two tiny bedrooms, a lean-to kitchen, half a mile from the village. But soon Rich had begun working on it, learning carpentry, building a wing for two new bedrooms and a bathroom and another wing for his study, turning the original house into an open-plan living room, dining room, kitchen. Bett had become interested; she'd claimed in the beginning not to understand why he'd bought such a dump, but practical improvements always engaged her, and she bought matching carpenter's aprons. She'd needed something to become involved in, having finished and published the cookbook that had occupied her for several years. They'd had no children.

And at the same time that Bett had been busy telling people that she'd found her role in life as a carpenter's helper, and that it had brought her and Rich much closer, Rich had been falling in love with Nita. She'd worked in the registrar's office of the university where he taught medieval literature. The first time they'd made love was amid the shavings and sawn wood of what was to become the house's central room with its arched ceiling, on a weekend when Bett had stayed in the city. Nita had left her sunglasses behind—not on purpose, though Bett, who never forgot anything, could not believe that. The usual ruckus followed, trite and painful, and ended with Bett going off to California, then Arizona, Nita quitting her job at the suggestion of the registrar, and Rich missing out on becoming dean of arts. He took early retirement, sold the city house. Nita did not inherit the smaller carpenter's apron, but she read her books cheerfully in the midst of construction and disorder, made rudimentary dinners on a hot plate, and went for long exploratory walks, coming back with ragged bouquets of tiger lilies and wild carrot, which she stuffed into empty paint cans. Later, when she and Rich had settled down, she felt somewhat embarrassed to think how readily she had played the younger woman, the happy home-wrecker, the lissome, laughing, tripping ingénue. She was really a rather serious, physically awkward, self-conscious woman, who could recite not just the kings but the queens of England, and knew the Thirty Years' War backward, but was shy about dancing in front of people and would never learn, as Bett had, to get up on a stepladder.

The house had a row of cedars on one side and a railway embankment on the other. The railway traffic had never amounted to much, and by now there were only a couple of trains a month. Weeds were lavish between the tracks. One time, when she was on the verge of menopause, Nita had teased Rich into making love up there—not on the ties, of course, but on the narrow grass verge beside them—and they had climbed down inordinately pleased with themselves.

She thought carefully, every morning when she first took her seat, of the places where Rich was not. He was not in the smaller bathroom, where his shaving things still were, along with the prescription pills for various troublesome but not serious ailments which he'd refused to throw out. Nor was he in the bedroom, which she had just tidied and left. Not in the larger bathroom, which he had entered only to take tub baths. Or in the kitchen, which

had become mostly his domain in the last year. He was of course not out on the half-scraped deck, ready to peer jokingly in the window—through which she might, in earlier days, have pretended to be alarmed at the sight of a peeping tom.

Or in the study. That was where, of all places, his absence had to be most often verified. At first, she had found it necessary to go to the door and open it and stand there, surveying the piles of paper, the moribund computer, the overflowing files, the books lying open or face down, as well as crowded on the shelves. Now she could manage just by picturing these things.

One of these days, she would have to enter the room. She thought of it as invading. She would have to invade her dead husband's mind. This was one possibility that she had never considered. Rich had seemed to her such a tower of efficiency and competence, so vigorous and firm a presence that she had always believed, quite unreasonably, that he would survive her. Then, in the last year, this had become not a foolish belief at all but in both their minds, she thought, a certainty.

She would deal with the cellar first. It really was a cellar, not a basement. Planks made walkways over the dirt floor, and the small high windows were hung with dirty cobwebs. There was nothing down there that she ever needed. Just Rich's half-filled paint tins, boards of various lengths, tools that were either usable or ready to be discarded. She had opened the door and gone down the steps just once since Rich had died, to see that no lights had been left on, and to assure herself that the fuse switches were there, with labels written beside them to tell her which controlled what. When she came up, she had bolted the door as usual, on the kitchen side. Rich used to laugh about that habit of hers, asking what she thought might get in, through the stone walls and elf-size windows, to menace them.

Nevertheless, the cellar would be easier to start on; it would be a hundred times easier than the study.

She did make up the bed and tidy her own little messes in the kitchen or the bathroom, but in general the impulse to take on any wholesale sweep of housecleaning was beyond her. She could barely throw out a twisted paper clip or a fridge magnet that had lost its attraction, let alone the dish of Irish coins that she and Rich had brought home from a trip fifteen years ago. Everything seemed to have acquired its own peculiar heft and strangeness.

Carol or Virgie phoned every day, usually toward supper-time, when they must have thought her solitude was least bearable. She told them that she was O.K.; she would come out of her lair soon. She just needed this time to think and read. And eat and sleep.

It was true, too, except for the part about reading. She sat in her chair surrounded by her books without opening one of them. She had always been such a reader—that was one reason, Rich had said, that she was the right woman for him; she could sit and read and let him alone—but now she couldn't stick to it for even half a page.

She hadn't been just a once-through reader, either. "The Brothers Karamazov," "The Mill on the Floss," "The Wings of the Dove," "The Magic Mountain," over and over. She

would pick one up, planning to read that one special passage, and find herself unable to stop until the whole thing was redigested. She read modern fiction, too. Always fiction. She hated to hear the word “escape” used about fiction. She once might have argued, not just playfully, that it was real life that was the escape. But real life had become too important to argue about.

And now, most strangely, all that was gone. Not just with Rich’s death but with her own immersion in illness. She had thought that the change was temporary and the magic of reading would reappear once she was off certain drugs and exhausting treatments.

But apparently not.

Sometimes she tried to explain why, to an imaginary inquisitor.

“I got too busy.”

“So everybody says. Doing what?”

“Too busy paying attention.”

“To what?”

“I mean thinking.”

“What about?”

“Never mind.”

One morning, after sitting for a while, she decided that it was a very hot day. She should get up and turn on the fans. Or she could, with more environmental responsibility, try opening the front and back doors and letting the breeze, if there was any, blow through the house.

She unlocked the front door first. And even before she had allowed half an inch of morning light to show itself she was aware of a dark stripe cutting that light off.

There was a young man standing outside the screen door, which was hooked.

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” he said. “I was looking for a doorbell or something. I gave a little knock on the frame here, but I guess you didn’t hear me.”

“Sorry,” she said.

“I’m supposed to look at your fuse box. If you could tell me where it is.”

She stepped aside to let him in. She took a moment to remember.

“Yes. In the cellar,” she said. “I’ll turn the light on. You’ll see it.”

He shut the door behind him and bent to take off his shoes.

“That’s all right,” she said. “It’s not as if it’s raining.”

“Might as well, though. I make it a habit. Could leave you dust tracks insteada mud.”

She went into the kitchen, not able to sit down again until he left the house.

She opened the cellar door for him as he came up the steps.

“O.K.?” she said. “You found it O.K.?”

“Fine.”

She was leading him toward the front door, then realized that there were no footsteps behind her. She turned and saw him still standing in the kitchen.

"You don't happen to have anything you could fix up for me to eat, do you?"

There was a change in his voice—a crack in it, a rising pitch that made her think of a television comedian doing a rural whine. Under the kitchen skylight, she saw that he wasn't as young as she'd thought. When she'd opened the door, she had been aware only of a skinny body, the face dark against the morning glare. The body, as she saw it now, was certainly skinny but more wasted than boyish, affecting a genial slouch. His face was long and rubbery, with prominent light-blue eyes. A jokey look, but a persistence, too, as if he generally got his way.

"See, I happen to be a diabetic," he said. "I don't know if you know any diabetics, but the fact is when you get hungry you got to eat. Otherwise your system goes all weird. I shoulda ate before I came in here, but I let myself get in a hurry. You mind if I sit down?"

He was already sitting down at the kitchen table.

"You got any coffee?"

"I have tea. Herbal tea, if you'd like that."

"Sure. Sure."

She measured tea into a strainer, plugged in the kettle, and opened the refrigerator.

"I don't have much on hand," she said. "I have some eggs. Sometimes I scramble an egg and put ketchup on it. Would you like that? I have some English muffins I could toast."

"English, Irish, Yukoranian, I don't care."

She cracked a couple of eggs into the pan, broke up the yolks, and stirred them with a cooking fork, then sliced a muffin and put it into the toaster. She got a plate from the cupboard, set it down in front of him. Then a knife and fork from the cutlery drawer.

"Pretty plate," he said, holding it up as if to see his face in it. Just as she turned her attention back to the eggs she heard it smash on the floor.

"Oh, mercy me," he said in a new voice, a squeaky and definitely nasty voice. "Look what I gone and done."

"It's all right," she said, knowing now that nothing was.

"Musta slipped through my fingers."

She got down another plate, set it on the counter until she was ready to put the toasted muffin halves and the eggs smeared with ketchup on top of it.

He had stooped down, meanwhile, to gather up the pieces of broken china. He held up one piece that had broken so that it had a sharp point to it. As she set his meal down on the table, he scraped the point lightly down his bare forearm. Tiny beads of blood appeared, at first separate, then joining to form a string.

"It's O.K.," he said. "It's just a joke. I know how to do it for a joke. If I'd've wanted to be serious, we wouldn't've needed no ketchup, eh?"

There were still some pieces on the floor that he had missed. She turned away, thinking to get the broom, which was in a closet near the back door. He caught her arm in a flash.

"You sit down. You sit right here while I'm eating," he said. He lifted the bloodied arm to show it to her again. Then he made a sandwich out of the muffin and the eggs and ate it in a very few bites. He chewed with his mouth open. The kettle was boiling.

"Tea bag in the cup?" he said.

"Yes. It's loose tea, actually."

"Don't you move. I don't want you near that kettle, do I?"

He poured boiling water through the strainer into the cup.

"Looks like hay. Is that all you got?"

"I'm sorry. Yes."

"Don't go on saying you're sorry. If it's all you got, it's all you got. You never did think I come here to look at the fuse box, did you?"

"Well, yes," Nita said. "I did."

"You don't now. You scared?"

She chose to consider this not as a taunt but as a serious question.

"I don't know. I'm more startled than scared, I guess. I don't know."

"One thing. One thing you don't need to be scared of. I'm not going to rape you."

"I hardly thought so."

"You can't never be too sure." He took a sip of the tea and made a face. "Just because you're an old lady. There's all kinds out there—they'll do it to anything. Babies or dogs and cats or old ladies. Old men. They're not fussy. Well, I am. I'm not interested in getting it any way but normal and with some nice lady I like and what likes me. So rest assured."

Nita said, "Thank you for telling me."

He shrugged, but seemed pleased with himself.

"That your car out front?"

"My husband's car."

"Husband? Where's he?"

"He's dead. I don't drive. I meant to sell it, but I haven't yet."

What a fool, what a fool she was to tell him that.

"2004?"

"I think so. Yes."

"For a second I thought you were going to try and trick me with the husband stuff. Wouldn't've worked, though. I can smell it if a woman's on her own. I know it the minute I walk in a house. Minute she opens the door. Instinct. So it runs O.K.? You know the last time he drove it?"

"The seventeenth of June. The day he died."

"Got any gas in it?"

"I would think so."

"Nice if he filled it up right before. You got the keys?"

"Not on me. I know where they are."

"O.K." He pushed his chair back, hitting one of the pieces of china. He stood up, shook his head in some kind of surprise, sat down again.

"I'm wiped. Gotta sit a minute. I thought it'd be better when I'd ate. I was just making that up about being a diabetic."

She shifted in her chair and he jumped.

"You stay where you are. I'm not that wiped I couldn't grab you. It's just that I walked all night."

"I was only going to get the keys."

"You wait till I say. I walked the railway track. Never seen a train. I walked all the way to here and never seen a train."

"There's hardly ever a train."

"Yeah. Good. I went down in the ditch going around some of them half-assed little towns. Then it come daylight and I was still O.K., except where it crossed the road and I took a run for it. Then I looked down here and seen the house and the car, and I said to myself, 'That's it.' I coulda took my old man's car, but I got some brains left in my head."

She knew that he wanted her to ask what he had done. She was also sure that the less she knew the better it would be for her.

Then, for the first time since he had entered the house, she thought of her cancer. She thought of how it freed her, put her out of danger.

"What are you smiling about?"

"I don't know. Was I smiling?"

"I guess you like listening to stories. Want me to tell you a story?"

"I'd rather you'd leave."

"I will leave. First, I'll tell you a story."

He put his hand in a back pocket. "Here. Want to see a picture? Here."

It was a photograph of three people, taken in a living room with closed floral curtains as a backdrop. An old man—not really old, maybe in his sixties—and a woman of about the same age were sitting on a couch. A very large younger woman was sitting in a wheelchair drawn up close to one end of the couch and a little in front of it. The old man was heavy and gray-haired, with eyes narrowed and mouth slightly open, as if he were asthmatic, but he was smiling as well as he could. The old woman was much smaller, with dyed brown hair and lipstick. She was wearing what used to be called a peasant blouse, with little red bows at the wrists and neck. She smiled determinedly, even a bit frantically, her lips stretched over perhaps bad teeth.

But it was the younger woman who monopolized the picture. Distinct and monstrous in a bright muumuu, her dark hair done up in a row of little curls along her forehead, cheeks

sloping into her neck. And, in spite of all that bulge of flesh, an expression of some satisfaction and cunning.

"That's my mother and that's my dad. And that's my sister, Madelaine. In the wheelchair. She was born funny. Nothing no doctor or anybody could do for her. And ate like a pig. There was bad blood between her and me since ever I remember. She was five years older than me and she just set out to torment me. Throwing anything at me she could get her hands on and knocking me down and trying to run over me with her fuckin' wheelchair. Pardon my French."

"It must have been hard for you. And for your parents."

"Huh. They just rolled over and took it. They went to this church, see, and this preacher told them she was a gift from God. They took her with them to church and she'd fuckin' howl like a fuckin' cat in the back yard and they'd say, 'Oh, she's tryin' to make music, oh, God fuckin' bless her.' Excuse me again.

"So I never bothered much with sticking around home, you know. I went and got my own life. That's all right, I says, I'm not hanging around for this crap. I got my own life. I got work. I nearly always got work. I never sat around on my ass drunk on government money. On my rear end, I mean. I never asked my old man for a penny. I'd get up and tar a roof in the ninety-degree heat, or I'd mop the floors in some stinkin' old restaurant or go grease-monkey for some rotten cheatin' garage. I'd do it. But I wasn't always up for taking their shit, so I wasn't lasting too long. That shit that people are always handing people like me, and I couldn't take it. I come from a decent home. My dad worked till he got too sick—he worked on the buses. I wasn't brought up to take shit. O.K., though—never mind that. What my parents always told me was 'The house is yours. The house is all paid up and it's in good shape and it's yours.' That's what they told me. 'We know you had a hard time here when you were young, and if you hadn't had such a hard time you coulda got an education, so we want to make it up to you how we can.' Then not long ago I'm talking to my dad on the phone and he says, 'Of course, you understand the deal.' So I'm, 'What deal?' He says, 'It's only a deal if you sign the papers that you will take care of your sister as long as she lives. It's only your home if it's her home, too,' he says.

"Jesus. I never heard that before. I never heard that was the deal before. I always thought the deal was that when they died she'd go into a home. And it wasn't going to be my home.

"So I told my old man that wasn't the way I understood it, and he says, 'It's all sewed up for you to sign, and if you don't want to sign it you don't have to. If you do sign it, your Aunt Rennie will be around to keep an eye on you, so when we're gone you see you stick to the arrangements.' Yeah, my Aunt Rennie. She's my mom's youngest sister and she is one prize bitch. Anyway, he says, 'Your Aunt Rennie will be keeping an eye on you,' and suddenly I just switched. I said, 'Well, I guess that's the way it is and I guess it is only fair. O.K. O.K. Is it all right if I come over and eat dinner with you this Sunday?' 'Sure,' he says.

‘Glad you have come to look at it the right way. You always fire off too quick,’ he says. ‘At your age you ought to have some sense.’ ‘Funny you should say that,’ I says to myself.

“So over I go, and Mom has cooked chicken. Nice smell when I first go into the house. Then I get the smell of Madelaine, just her same old awful smell. I don’t know what it is, but even if Mom washes her every day it’s there. But I acted very nice. I said, ‘This is an occasion. I should take a picture.’ I told them I had this wonderful new camera that developed right away and they could see the picture. ‘Right off the bat, you can see yourself—what do you think of that?’ And I got them all sitting in the front room just the way I showed you. Mom, she says, ‘Hurry up. I have to get back in my kitchen.’ ‘Do it in no time,’ I says. So I take their picture and she says, ‘Come on, now, let’s see how we look,’ and I say, ‘Hang on, just be patient, it’ll only take a minute.’ And while they’re waiting to see how they look I take out my nice little gun and *bin-bang-barn* I shoot the works of them.

“Then I took another picture and I went out to the kitchen and ate up some of the chicken and didn’t look at them no more. I kind of had expected Aunt Rennie to be there, but Mom said she had some church thing. I would’ve shot her, too, just as easy.

“So lookie here. Before and after.”

The man’s head had fallen sideways, the woman’s backward. Their expressions were blown away. The sister had fallen forward, so there was no face to be seen, just her great flowery swathed knees and dark hair with its elaborate and outdated coiffure.

“I coulda just sat there feelin’ good for a week. I felt so relaxed. But I didn’t stay past dark. I made sure I was all cleaned up and I finished off the chicken and I knew I better get out. I was prepared for Aunt Rennie walkin’ in, but I got out of the mood I’d been in and I knew I’d have to work myself up to do her. I just didn’t feel like it no more. One thing, my stomach was so full. It was a big chicken, and I ate it all instead of packin’ it with me, because I was scared the dogs would smell it and cut up a fuss when I went by the back lanes like I figured to do. I thought that chicken inside of me would do me for a week. Yet look how hungry I was when I got to you.”

He glanced around the kitchen. “I don’t suppose you got anything to drink here, do you? That tea was awful.”

“There might be some wine,” she said. “I don’t know—I don’t drink anymore.”

“You A.A.?”

“No. It just doesn’t agree with me.”

She got up and found that her legs were shaking. Of course.

“I fixed up the phone line before I come in here,” he said. “Just thought you ought to know.”

Would he get careless and more easygoing as he drank, or meaner and wilder? How could she tell? She found the wine without having to leave the kitchen. She and Rich used to drink red wine every day in reasonable quantities because it was supposed to be good for

your heart. Or bad for something that was not good for your heart. In her fright and confusion, she was not able to think what that was called.

Because she *was* frightened. Certainly. Her cancer was not going to be any help to her at the present moment, none at all. The fact that she was going to die within a year refused to cancel out the fact that she might die now.

He said, “Hey, this is the good stuff. No screwtop. Haven’t you got no corkscrew?”

She moved toward a drawer, but he jumped up and put her aside, not too roughly.

“Uh-uh, I get it. You stay away from this drawer. Oh my, lots of good stuff in here.”

He put the knives on the seat of his chair, where she would never be able to grab them, and used the corkscrew. She did not fail to see what a wicked instrument it could be in his hands, but there was not the least possibility that she herself would ever be able to use it.

“I’m just getting up for glasses,” she said, but he said no.

“No glass,” he said. “You got any plastic?”

“No.”

“Cups, then. I can see you.”

She set down two cups and said, “Just a very little for me.”

“And me,” he said, businesslike. “I gotta drive.” But he filled his cup to the brim. “I don’t want no cop stickin’ his head in to see how I am.”

“Free radicals,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s something about red wine. It either destroys them because they’re bad or builds them up because they’re good—I can’t remember.”

She drank a sip of the wine and it didn’t make her feel sick, as she had expected. He drank, still standing. She said, “Watch for those knives when you sit down.”

“Don’t start kidding with me.”

He gathered the knives and put them back in the drawer and sat.

“You think I’m dumb? You think I’m nervous?”

She took a big chance. She said, “I just think you haven’t ever done anything like this before.”

“Course I haven’t. You think I’m a murderer? Yeah, I killed them, but I’m not a murderer.”

“There’s a difference,” she said.

“You bet.”

“I know what it’s like. I know what it’s like to get rid of somebody who has injured you.”

“Yeah?”

“I have done the same thing you did.”

“You never.” He pushed back his chair but did not stand.

“Don’t believe me if you don’t want to,” she said. “But I did it.”

"Hell, you did. How'd you do it, then?"

"Poison."

"What are you talkin' about? You make them drink some of that fuckin' tea or what?"

"It wasn't a *them*—it was a *her*. There's nothing wrong with the tea. It's supposed to prolong your life."

"Don't want my life prolonged if it means drinkin' junk like that. They can find out poison in a body when it's dead, anyway."

"I'm not sure that's true of vegetable poisons. Anyway, nobody would have thought to look. She was one of those girls who had rheumatic fever as a child and coasted along on it, couldn't play sports or do anything much, always having to sit down and have a rest. Her dying was not any big surprise."

"What she ever done to you?"

"She was the girl my husband was in love with. He was going to leave me and marry her. He had told me. I'd done everything for him. He and I were working on this house together. He was everything I had. We hadn't had any children, because he didn't want them. I learned carpentry and I was frightened to get up on ladders, but I did it. He was my whole life. And he was going to kick me out for this useless whiner who worked in the registrar's office. Everything we'd worked for was going to go to her. Was that fair?"

"How would a person get poison?"

"I didn't have to get it. It was right in the back garden. Here. There was a rhubarb patch from years back. There's a perfectly adequate poison in the veins of rhubarb leaves. Not the stalks—the stalks are what we eat, they're fine—but the thin little red veins in the big rhubarb leaves, they're poisonous. I knew about this, but I didn't know exactly how much it would take to be effective, so what I did was more in the nature of an experiment. Various things were lucky for me. First, my husband was away at a symposium in Minneapolis. He might have taken her along, of course, but it was summer holidays and she had to keep the office going. Another thing, though—she might not have been absolutely on her own. There might have been another person around. And she might have been suspicious of me. I had to assume that she didn't know I knew. She had come to dinner at my house; we were friendly. I had to count on my husband's being the kind of person who puts everything off, who would tell me to see how I took it but not yet tell her that he had done so. So then you say, Why get rid of her? He might still have been thinking of staying with me? No. And he would have kept her on somehow. And even if he didn't our life had been poisoned by her. She'd poisoned my life, so I had to poison hers.

"I baked two tarts. One had the poison in it and one didn't. I drove down to the university and got two cups of coffee and went to her office. There was nobody there but her. I told her I'd had to come into town, and as I was passing the campus I'd seen this nice little bakery that my husband was always talking about, so I dropped in and bought a couple of tarts and two cups of coffee. I'd been thinking of her all alone when the rest of them got

to go on their holidays, and of me all alone with my husband in Minneapolis. She was sweet and grateful. She said that it was very boring for her at the office, and the cafeteria was closed, so she had to go over to the science building for coffee and they put hydrochloric acid in it. Ha-ha. So we had our little party."

"I hate rhubarb," he said. "It wouldn't have worked with me."

"It did with her. I had to take a chance that it would work fast, before she realized what was wrong and had her stomach pumped. But not so fast that she would associate it with me. I had to be out of the way and so I was. The building was deserted, and as far as I know to this day nobody saw me arrive or leave. Of course, I knew some back ways."

"You think you're smart. You got away scot-free."

"But so have you."

"What I done wasn't so underhanded as what you done."

"It was necessary to you."

"You bet it was."

"Mine was necessary to me. I kept my marriage. He came to see that she wouldn't have been good for him, anyway. She'd have got sick on him, almost certainly. She was just the type. She'd have been nothing but a burden to him. He saw that."

"You better not have put nothing in them eggs," he said. "You did, you'll be sorry."

"Of course I didn't. It's not something you'd go around doing regularly. I don't actually know anything about poison. It was just by chance that I had that one little piece of information."

He stood up so suddenly that he knocked over his chair. She noticed that there was not much wine left in the bottle.

"I need the keys to the car."

She couldn't think for a moment.

"Keys to the car. Where'd you put them?"

It could happen. As soon as she gave him the keys, it could happen. Would it help to tell him that she was dying of cancer? How stupid. It wouldn't help at all. Death in the future would not keep her from talking today.

"Nobody knows what I've told you," she said. "You are the only person I've told."

A fat lot of good that might do. The whole advantage she had presented to him had probably gone right over his head.

"Nobody knows *yet*," he said, and she thought, Thank God. He's on the right track. He does realize. Does he realize?

Thank God, maybe.

"The keys are in the blue teapot."

"Where? What the fuck blue teapot?"

"At the end of the counter—the lid got broken, so we used it to just throw things in—"

"Shut up. Shut up or I'll shut you up for good." He tried to stick his fist in the blue teapot, but it would not go in. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" he cried, and he turned the teapot over and banged it on the counter, so that not only did the car keys and house keys and various coins and a wad of old Canadian Tire money fall out on the floor but pieces of blue pottery hit the boards.

"With the red string on them," she said faintly.

He kicked things about for a moment before he picked up the proper keys.

"So what are you going to say about the car?" he said. "You sold it to a stranger. Right?"

The import of this did not come to her for a moment. When it did, the room quivered. *Going to say*. "Thank you," she said, but her mouth was so dry that she was not sure any sound came out.

It must have, though, for he said, "Don't thank me yet. I got a good memory. Good long memory. You make that stranger look nothin' like me. You don't want them goin' into graveyards diggin' up dead bodies. You just remember, a word outta you and there'll be a word outta me."

She kept looking down. Not stirring or speaking, just looking at the mess on the floor.

Gone. The door closed. Still she didn't move. She wanted to lock the door, but she couldn't move. She heard the engine start, then die. What now? He was so jumpy, he'd do everything wrong. Then again, starting, starting, turning over. The tires on the gravel. She walked trembling to the phone and found that he had told the truth: it was dead.

Beside the phone was one of their many bookcases. This one held mostly old books, books that had not been opened for years. There was "The Proud Tower." Albert Speer. Rich's books.

"A Celebration of Familiar Fruits and Vegetables." "Hearty and Elegant Dishes and Fresh Surprises," assembled, tested, and created by Bett Underhill.

Once Rich had got the kitchen finished, Nita had made the mistake for a while of trying to cook like Bett. For a rather short while, because it turned out that Rich hadn't wanted to be reminded of all that fuss, and she herself hadn't had enough patience for so much chopping and simmering. But she had learned a few things that surprised her. Such as the poisonous aspects of certain familiar and generally benign plants.

She should write to Bett.

Dear Bett, Rich is dead and I have saved my life by becoming you.

But what would Bett care that her life had been saved? There was only one person really worth telling.

Rich. Rich. Now she knew what it was to miss him. Like having the air sucked out of the sky.

She told herself that she could walk down to the village. There was a police office in the back of the Township Hall.

She should get a cell phone.

But she was so shaken, so deeply tired that she could hardly stir a foot. She had first of all to rest.

She was wakened by a knock on her still unlocked door. It was a policeman, not the one from the village but one of the provincial traffic police. He asked if she knew where her car was.

She looked at the patch of gravel where it had been parked.

"It's gone," she said. "It was over there."

"You didn't know it was stolen? When did you last look out and see it?"

"It must have been last night."

"The keys were left in it?"

"I suppose they must have been."

"I have to tell you it's been in a bad accident. A one-car accident just this side of Wallenstein. The driver rolled it down into the culvert and totalled it. And that's not all. He's wanted for a triple murder. That's the latest we heard, anyway. Murder in Mitchellston. You were lucky you didn't run into him."

"Was he hurt?"

"Killed. Instantly. Serves him right."

There followed a kindly stern lecture. Leaving keys in the car. Woman living alone. These days you never know.

Never know. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: SAM WEBER