

[ABOUT](#)

[CONTRIBUTORS](#)

[SUBMISSION GUIDELINES](#)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/about/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/about/)[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/authors/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/authors/)[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/submission](https://thewritelaunch.com/submission)

The Spider and the Butterfly

[Issue 24 \(https://thewritelaunch.com/issues/issue-twenty-four/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/issues/issue-twenty-four/)

by D.P. Snyder

[Short Story \(https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/short-story/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/short-story/)



That rotating fan's like a blind old man shaking his head

no, no, no. No what? No, don't look? No, I've no clue when they'll replace the window unit in my room? They promise, then nothing. The sheets are sticky with sweat, so I stay still and try not to notice. I'd feel better if I got dressed, you say? What for? Where am I going? This bleached-out cotton thing is to keep them from having to look at my body, to keep me from seeing them looking. I'd go naked if they'd let me. What do I care? My skin's full of freckles, moles and loose flesh like those slobbery bloodhounds. It's age. I hardly recognize myself anymore. Well.

Daddy used to say a woman's most important asset was her hands. Imagine! Mother took exquisite care of hers. When she was older, the veins stuck out like extra bones, but still she sat in front of that old console TV filing, polishing, buffing. Every year, they went to Chicago to buy her new clothes at Marshall Field's. But I always remember her in the same dress, the blue silk shirtwaist with the pearl buttons. Me, I started biting my nails in college. Did it for years. Mother would say *Livy, why? Why won't you take care of yourself?* I know she hated the weight I put on after the kids were born, though she never said it out loud. Then after she died, I stopped biting them and, later, I started skipping meals and now look at me! Back to a size two. Even my breasts have shrunk and now I have little-girl nipples. Mother was a great cook, but I hated cooking. I say if you can't do something perfectly, why do it at all?

Stay, have lunch with me. When I don't touch my tray, they write me up. *Recalcitrant*. You like the food here? I don't.

But what choice do we have, two old people alone in the world? If I'd saved more money, married somebody worthwhile, I wouldn't have ended up in a dump like this. All the so-called nurses are from some godforsaken country where life's so brutal it's like heaven to be here changing the diapers on someone else's mother. Well.

Mother and Daddy both died at home. After she was gone, we hired a woman to see to him. He'd had multiple sclerosis for years, and it got worse as those things always do. He shuffled around with the walker until he couldn't anymore. Now this woman, someone said she was part-Choctaw, but her parts were unknown to me. What I can tell you is not a single one of them had an ounce of grace. Square-faced, liver-colored, you know? Rugged, like one of those topographical maps, jet-black hair. Sometimes the sweat on her forehead had a gray tinge as if the dye were melting right off her. But the old girl could walk around in those black lace-ups and she needed the job. Her name was Mrs. Wilson, and she said she used to cook for cowboys.

No, no one knew about a Mr. Wilson. She was so plain, I figured her Missus was to make us believe someone had wanted her once. Daddy hated her cooking as much as I hate this pap they give us here. He said so right in front of her. *It's nothing like Mother's. Now there was a real chef.* Mother's name was Olivia, but Daddy always called her Mother to her face like us kids did. Her angel food cake was so light it turned to sugar mist on your tongue.

Of course. Daddy and I both knew death was the next

rodeo for him and neither of us knew how to talk about it, so we jawboned about nothing at all on our calls. *What'd you have for dinner, Daddy?* And he'd say *Another one of her mushes*. Mushes. I bet she was standing right there when he said it. He didn't call her by name ever. It was always "she" or "her" like it was too much trouble to remember the name of the person keeping him alive.

Twice a week, Mrs. Pierce came to do the heavy house cleaning and ironing. She'd been Mother's maid since forever and was territorial as an old barn cat. She'd call me to tattle on the other woman, say what she was doing wrong. There was always something: a burned pot, a broken dish, a suspicious stain. *I'll keep an eye on things for you*. As if I'd asked her to, the old biddy.

Mrs. Wilson stayed in the converted attic, what Mother called "Clarence's room" even though my older brother was already in the Air Force when they built it and didn't sleep there but a few times. For Mother, that room was a shrine, one framed photo of her boy and one of herself, a gentleman's butler, a fine big bed, chenille coverlet, shiny dark wood everywhere. Oh, it would've killed Mother to know that old woman was sleeping in her boy's bed! No matter where she was, Mrs. Wilson was always tethered to Daddy by an intercom so he could squawk her. Especially at night. He always needed something lying in the dark. The sleep that didn't come, a sip of ginger ale to kill the medicine taste, Mother to come back to life and lie down next to him in that mahogany four-poster. But Mrs. Wilson told me he never

bothered her at night. Never. I'm the same. I wait for my urges to pass. I bet he hoped every gas pain was going to be the one to finish it, too.

Do you mind if I just close my eyes for a few minutes? It seems such effort to talk.

Norma Wilson sits alone in the kitchen at dawn ready to bring Doctor his breakfast whenever he calls. She'll have to coax him, wipe the bits of cereal that fall from his trembling spoon onto his pajama top. He'll look away as if ignoring her could let him forget the helplessness that makes her necessary.

She holds a turquoise-enamel lighter, heavy as a pistol. She turns it over and over in her hand, admires the elaborate sterling base and heating element. She can't smoke the menthols she used to favor anymore, but she's still attracted to the tools of the habit. In all her days she's never owned anything solid as this. Mrs. Doctor had a small army of lighters that still stand guard next to ashtrays at all the stations of the house where she'd sit: The settee in the living room, the sofa in the three-seasons room, and here. Norma picks up the ashtray and weighs the green crystal against the lighter. The sheer density of the dead woman's things! The intercom squawks. Norma grunts as she pushes herself up from the table on sinewy, freckled forearms.

The hand that summoned her lies limp on the intercom. Good morning, Doctor. Would you like your instant coffee today? Turning his gaze toward the wall, he waggles a long, pale finger toward his groin. She pulls back the covers. The bag's full

finger toward his groin. She pulls back the covers. The bag's full. It's always full. She removes it, empties the dark gold urine in the bathroom, reattaches it and adjusts tubes and clips. She wipes his bony hip, blotting the parchment skin with a soft towel, and lets the sheet settle over him again. He sighs and closes his eyes. I'll rustle up your breakfast, Doctor, then we'll get you in the chair for a while. He nods.

I'm sorry, I must have drifted off. I was dreaming of something, but now I've forgotten. My memory's like a broken cup these days. What are you reading? One of those Elmore Leonard stories, huh? Amazing anyone ever survives in those books, what with all the guns and prostitutes and everyone always drunk. At least they go out with guns blazing and everyone bleeding out on the spot, right? Now that's a death! Good or bad, everyone dies. Now everyone's supposed to live forever.

Mother, she did it to perfection like everything else. You have high blood pressure, her doctor said. You've got to stop smoking. Get more help at the house, you can't take care of him alone. His MS was a disappointment, something she wouldn't talk about, but she wasn't interested in making changes. At sixty-four, he went from cane to walker and, five or six years later, he had to sell his practice to a younger man. He sure as hell didn't want some stranger coming to the house to tend to him, and neither did she. He never said anything about her smoking, as far as I know. They all smoked back then. But he loved to watch her polished fingers lift the cigarette to her mouth, set it back smudged with lipstick, hold

cigarette to her mouth, set it back smudged with lipstick, gold bracelet sliding up and down the white arm, diamond rings winking. *Look at her, Livy, he'd say. Just look.*

Mother wore dresses, never pants. Day dresses, night dresses, funeral dresses, travel dresses, dresses to go to garden club. Shoes and bags to match, pigskin, Italian silk, and patent leather. When I visited with the kids, she was always the first up. I'd find her in the kitchen reading a magazine, gold cat-eye reading glasses perched on the tip of her sharp nose. We'd talk while everyone else was still asleep, lighting our first cigarettes of the day, neglecting them till they turned to ash.

She collected ashtrays and fancy lighters. Daddy collected paperweights with blown designs and natural objects trapped inside. My favorites were the blue morpho butterfly and a big spider. You'd think the spider would be the worst, right? But they both had the same ugly insect parts, the butterfly just distracted you with its beautiful wings. That armored thorax, the alien limbs, the cold-blooded inhumanity of the thing! The poor spider had eight thick legs and a meatball-shaped body like a spaceship from *War of the Worlds*. No makeup. I used to love scaring myself by pretending it was alive and imagining what would happen if I broke the glass. Then I would put it back in front of their wedding portrait, right next to the red rose, the frosted cyclone, the butterfly.

No one came to see me this month. Did anyone visit you? My children have lives of their own, thank God.

After her last client died, it took four months to find a new

position, but it was worth the wait. She's happy here with Doctor. He doesn't cause her any trouble, and the house is a big improvement after a lifetime of trailer parks, cowboy camps and longhouses. Most of the time, she does what she wants.

Norma doesn't watch TV. She drinks coffee, reads her stories, and does the Jumbles. She has stacks of completed ones. She rearranges chaos into order by inking letters until all the empty spaces are full. This afternoon, she's working in Jumble Getaway: Caribbean Dream Vacation. They start easy—EBHCA, TOLEH, TNOIOL—and then get longer and harder—ARTAMRAGI. BEACH, she writes. HOTEL. LOTION. MARGARITA. She enjoys these words she has no practical use for. They write the clues, so you make incorrect assumptions, like the ART in ARTAMRAGI. Norma can't imagine being on a Caribbean dream vacation or applying suntan lotion to her strong arms, wide back and swollen ankles. She'd have to move into another body, soft, curved, and petite, like the ones in the magazines. BIKINI. HAPPY HOUR. SPA TREATMENT. As she prints the block letters, she imagines her new, tanned limbs and long ash-blond hair done up in a bright BANDEAU.

The intercom squawks, transforming her back into Mrs. Wilson. Doctor wants his lunch.

That night after she's put Doctor to bed, she goes upstairs and sits at the dressing table. Her back to its oval mirror, she takes off her shoes and enters the deep walk-in closet. Before she moved in, Mrs. Pierce cleaned out half of it for Norma's stuff. The garment bags on the other side hold Mrs. Doctor's clothes,

things he couldn't bear to give away. She strips, smells the armpit of her polyester blouse to see if she can wear it again. Then she tosses shirt, pilled black pants and underwear into the hamper. She slides her legs into the faded green cotton scrubs that serve as pajama bottoms. The man's cotton undershirt she pulls on is an old one of Doctor's that Mrs. Pierce said was ready for the bin. She breathes in the garment bags' light fragrance of gardenia and cedar. Her fingers itch to lower one zipper, but she's got no business.

Norma turns down the covers. Every time she gets into this bed, she feels like an intruder. But she sighs with pleasure as she pulls the creamy sheets and fluffy duvet up to her chin. Mrs. Doctor smiles at her from the silver-framed sepia photograph on the opposite wall. She holds a cigarette and a spiral of frozen smoke arabesques past her curved lips and right eye. Every night and every morning, Mrs. Doctor smiles at Norma from the photo and Norma smiles back. A serious young soldier is on the dressing table, in a big silver frame next to the window. He has a thousand-mile gaze that makes Norma feel lonesome and lost in her belly. The boy lives in Rochester, Doctor said. As if the word "Rochester" explained the lack of visits and calls. He doesn't speak about his daughter but takes the handpiece when she rings on Sundays and then stares at the tabletop for a long time after they hang up.

Norma reaches for the bedside lamp with the fussy silk shade and turns it off. Then she brushes her palm across the night table's drawer. Inside she keeps a travel pack of Kleenex, a ballpoint pen, her book, and an old wallet-sized photo of Will.

She doesn't need to see the photo; she knows it's there. Touching the drawer is like saying goodnight. Within minutes she's asleep.

Haven't seen you for a few days. I s'pose you have better things to do than listen to me jaw. You don't? Well, at least you can move around by yourself. I have to stay where they put me, like a potted plant. They fixed the AC, but now it's so cold in here I have to wear socks in bed. Would you mind handing me that extra blanket? No, don't call them. Please. I'll just cover myself like this. Good, now that's fine.

Your kids came to visit, huh? And the grandkids, too? Nice for you. Mine keep telling me to get a computer so we can visit on those programs they have now. But then they'd expect me to have it on all the time, wouldn't they? And I don't want to feel like I'm dangling at the end of some string where people can look at me whenever they feel like. If people want to see me, they can come here in person like you do.

You'll say I'm terrible, but I don't care if I never see them again. Last Christmas, it was exhausting, a parade of people, all standing around looking like they wished they were someplace else. The little ones cry and beg their mothers for things. The older ones whine about how bored they are. Mom this, Mom that. It's a shame. If I'm not smiling, it's *Mom, what's wrong? Does something hurt?* And if I'm smiling, my face feels like a big cramp. Do I love them? What a question! Look, I say all the words. *How nice. I love you. I'm proud of you.* After all, they haven't killed anyone as far as I know, and they get along. But I don't *know* them, and they don't know

One of the nurses came today and told me there's a party for us birthdays tomorrow. Dear God, how depressing! It's not a personal celebration, thank heavens. I couldn't stand that. I don't like birthdays, never have. Mother, she insisted on them. Birthdays were productions for her. She'd wrap my presents so beautifully; I swear I was afraid to open them. She'd bring those long shears shaped like a crane's beak to cut the paper, dislodge the velvet bows. It was more operation than fun. By the time I got to the present, the thrill was gone, you know? Well.

$$1 \ 1 \quad \cdot \cdot 1 \ 1 \quad \cdot 1 \ 1 \quad 1 \quad \overline{11} \cdot \ 1 \quad \cdot \cdot 1 \quad 1 \cdot 1 \ 1 \quad 1 \ \wedge \quad 1 \cdot 1 \quad \vee$$

necklace with both hands. *Think of the children!* And then I said more terrible things to her I can't even remember. Mother's crying set Cindy to wailing and Daddy was saying *Livy, why? Why?* That's the only time I remember talking back to Mother. Ever. And when the stroke took her a year later, that was all I could think about.

God, I'm dreading this thing tomorrow. You'll be there, won't you?

The big soft bed is a magic raft, her rest there good medicine. Not like when she ran the chuckwagon and had to sleep with one eye open for drunken cowboys and wild animals. Boise's a real city and, in this attic room with its slanting eaves and dormer windows, Norma's a princess in a tower.

At first, she slept so well she was afraid of not hearing Doctor if he squawked. When she finally relaxed and began to dream, she had the same one over and over. There were strangers trying to get up the stairs into her room, her bed. She had to chase them away and, anxious for herself and Doctor, she would retreat to the big closet. It turned into a passageway, longer than a freight train and littered with suitcases, hat boxes and dark figures. Sometimes, Will was at the end calling out to her. C'mon, gal! C'mon! She'd run, stumbling over things, getting closer and closer. Once, she got to him and they started making love. When she woke up, she reached down and her wetness surprised her.

Will Wilson was a mustang runner and horse-breaker at the Triple L. He said she was built like a fine filly. They'd met on

the rez when she was a senior in high school, and he was a young apprentice at the ranch. She was walking home from school when he caught up and cut her from her group of friends. He started in with his questions and compliments without a by-your-leave. People said they matched, two Ponca with thick black hair, wide sunburnt faces and quiet ways. Will talked low and slow. He lit her on fire without even touching, looking at the dusty tips of his boots as he told her his plans, his desire for her.

After Will and Norma got married, he'd come home every night to their trailer exhausted. He smelled of horse dander and man-sweat, sweetgrass and sage. Hey there, Little Crow. He'd collapse onto the big pleather recliner, legs splayed and head tilted back. His throat was brown and glossy with sweat, his hair alive as snakes. Looking at him, Norma thought how easy it'd be to draw a sharp knife across his neck to see the red blood ooze out. Not that she wanted to kill him. No. She wanted to see the life inside wriggle free where she could see it, touch it, taste it. She'd kneel to pull off his boots, then unbutton his fly where the hard mound was already rising. She'd pat his leg so he'd raise up his rump and she could pull off his jeans. A horse-breaker, he always had new wounds and bruises beneath the denim. She'd locate fresh ones and with her fingertips she read the shiny souvenirs left by the old. Then she'd wipe his legs down with a warm washcloth and massage his feet, digging into the insteps and kneading her way up to his thighs. By then, he'd be ready for her and grab a thick handful of her long black hair and guide her down on him. Soon, she'd be on her knees as he steered her body back into his at the angle that pleased them

most. Afterwaras, sne pullea nim aown on ner cnest so sne coula kiss his mouth and ears. When he started to breathe slow and got heavy on top of her, she rolled him off and went to put dinner on.

Ten months into their marriage, Norma was taking a nap in Will's chair when they knocked at the trailer door. Most people knew them well enough to open it and walk on in. That's how she knew something was wrong.

Later, she couldn't remember how she'd made it to the door, or what the ranch manager said after he made her sit down. That Will Wilson's head had been stove-in by a stallion, a big mean one he insisted on taking a crack at. He didn't even make it to the hospital, Norma. He never knew what happened to him, girl. She didn't eat the food the other women delivered, couldn't tell you who was at the funeral. She cut her own hair short, watched hunks of it fall into the bathroom sink. The Triple L sent a check over to help her out, and the insurance paid less than half what she'd figured on.

Norma hired out as a cook to a big cattle outfit in Oklahoma. She ran the chuckwagon for the cowboys driving cattle. She made sure there was always enough hot coffee, biscuits, bacon and eggs for fifty or so hungry men. And if they got an appetite for something else out there on the prairie, well, too bad. She raised up her widowhood like a shield to protect her body from the men. Norma was untouchable.

She liked the featureless land with its bloody sunsets and chill nights. There, she found few reminders of her loss. In the wee hours, she rustled breakfast, splitting wood for the camp

stove while the sun cleaved the sky and spilled color onto the prairie, and in the afternoon there was the spicy, dusty smell of the cowpokes when they'd come to the mess tent, silent and hungry. At night she read her stories. Louis L'Amour was her favorite. That's when she discovered the jumbles, too. She did thousands of them to keep herself from thinking. Piecing the words together was like closing a wound, cleaning a pot, a way to bring her mind to heel. She didn't want to think about Will's head cracked open, his body crushed and mangled so bad they didn't let her see the body.

For years, she tended those huge pots of rice and beans and the queen-bed-sized grills for searing steak and potatoes. She could still smell the odor of charred mesquite and fat long after she quit and signed on with the home healthcare agency. She was perfect for the old folks: Capable, quiet, strong, no vices, no family to cause complications. Her clients were a lot easier to deal with than fifty wranglers, too. Sometimes she felt like she was taking money for nothing. The decades on the range had taught her how to disappear, a useful talent in the rooms of the dying. If anyone ever tried to call her Norma, she'd let them know: She was Mrs. Wilson. No one called her Little Crow again.

One night, Mrs. Doctor seems to say, Go ahead, Norma. Why not look? What's the harm? And she gets out of bed and walks into the big closet.

She holds her breath as she pulls down the zipper of one of the big rectangular garment bags. A puff of perfumed air emerges. There are beautiful dresses in many colors. Mrs.

Wilson fingers the fine cloth that feels soft as rayon, but heavier. She hurries to shuck her scrubs and T-shirt, chooses a blue dress. It feels cool as spring water against her bare skin. She has a sense that she's released something from the bag that she can't get back in. Norma walks to the polished mahogany dressing table, holding the dress in front of her. In the frame of the oval mirror, she sees the iridescent blue silk floating in the dim light. The pearl buttons glow like little moons along the length of the bodice up to the prim white collar. A wide white patent leather belt, one hole showing wear, encircles the vacant waist. The fit in the shoulders would be tight, she thinks, but maybe. . . The mirror points downward, beheading her reflection. She straightens her back, lifts her chin and poses, dancing with the dress. See the difference quality makes, Norma? says the smiling woman in the photograph, her sepia eyes shining.

Norma spends her evenings investigating the dresses in the closet. She limits herself to one a night. That way, it'll take several weeks to look at everything Doctor couldn't bear to get rid of. She finds jackets and one peach nightgown and matching peignoir that ripples over her skin like cool menthol on the tongue. Shoe boxes rise in stacks on an overhead shelf. There are sling-backs, ankle-strap wedges, stilettos with pointy toes, spectator pumps. Most are pristine. Norma's wide feet don't fit, but she likes to hold them in her hands, match them to dresses. She takes the peignoir off the hanger and traces the scalloped lace border with her fingernail, daring to shrug it on. It whispers against her bare calves as she walks to the mirror to see.

She thinks how earlier she brought Doctor out to the patio

room to get a touch of sun. It's hard to lift him from the bed into the wheelchair, but they have a system. She grasps him under the arms in a big face-to-face hug and brings him up to a sitting position. Then he hangs onto her neck so she can swing him around to the wheelchair. It's work they do together without words. Today, she felt the pleasant rasp of his not-yet-shaven cheeks against her bosom. She was happy when his lunch plate came back empty.

Norma's breasts strain against the peignoir, made for a slighter body. She wouldn't dare sleep in it. Doctor liked the sunshine today, she thinks. She traces the outline of her long, hardened nipples where they push out against the silk. Her hand slips between her legs, pushing inside to find out what pleasure remains.

Norma always puts the evening's garment away in the morning. But all night it hangs from one of the brass pulls on the big Chesterfield highboy, so she sees it there, beautiful as a dream, when she wakes up.

This morning she's startled awake by the intercom squawking over and over. Something's wrong. It's quarter to eight already, forty-five minutes later than she usually gets up. She races downstairs in bare feet wearing her scrubs and Doctor's old undershirt. She finds him pounding the intercom with his fist and weeping. His bag's disconnected from the tubes and the bedding's all wet. She crawls across the mattress from the other side and grabs him under the arms, pulling him with all her might. Now, now, don't you worry, Doctor. We'll fix it

up. Help me if you can. *She takes the offending bag away to the bathroom and hooks him up to a new one. She strips the wet bedding, pulls off his pajama bottoms. She's seen his thin, pale legs and dark, withered sex many times by now, but she can tell he never gets used to it by how he turns his face away, squeezing his eyes shut as if in pain. She wipes, dries, powders, gives instructions, tells him what's next. She tries to erase insult with efficiency. She covers him with a fresh sheet.*

He's stopped weeping, but his face looks altered and flushed. She's dumped the soiled bedding in the bathtub in a sodden, malodorous clump. There, Doctor. We've got it all under control. I'm so, so sorry. He looks at her, the corona of wild black hair, breasts rising and falling from the exertion and darkly obvious beneath his old, white undershirt, the wide wrinkled mask of her face, the sorrowful eyes. He reaches for her hand. She gives it to him, squeezing. He squeezes back.

When Mrs. Pierce arrives five minutes later, she finds the urine-soaked bedding in the bathtub. Upstairs, one of the Missus's dresses is hanging on the highboy.

She hurries downstairs to dial the phone.

I'm pretty sure one of the last things Daddy ever said to me was *You tell that old biddy to shut her gob.* Mrs. Pierce said if Mother was alive, she wouldn't put up with Mrs. Wilson's sloppiness and dishonesty. *Imagine, leaving the Doctor lying there in his own waste!* Boy, that woman had Mother lined up for sainthood and her stuff for relics! I told her I'd talk to Mrs. Wilson, work things out, but she threatened to quit if I didn't

fire her. Of course, Mrs. Pierce stayed on, but she made me grovel. Mrs. Wilson offered to quit. No one who's guilty does that, I figured. It wasn't more than a few months later that Daddy had the stroke, and then she was the one who called me. *Missus, I have some bad news.*

What time is it? Aren't they s'posed to wheel us to the common room? I hope there aren't any balloons or singing at this thing. Well, they'll do what they want.

After the dust-up with Mrs. Pierce, a bare wooden rod and a couple of bent wire hangers are all that remain. Norma doesn't know where Mrs. Pierce took everything. Maybe to the basement cedar room where fur coats hang in the cold under lock and key. If they'd told the agency, it could've kept her from ever working again. The worst is them knowing she's been dressing up like a little girl in her mother's closet. Pitiful. Silly. Plain is plain, ain't no dressing it up, Norma. She reaches for the old T-shirt and the faded scrubs and puts them on.

The next day after breakfast, Doctor asks her to take him to the kitchen and bring him the old green dial-up. He calls his daughter Olivia, the one who hired her, and she goes to sit on the couch in the three-seasons room, out of sight but in range.

I know. I know. Livy, I know. I know, but . . . No. Now you listen to me . . .

Won't have her running his life. Still her father. They can fight like cats after he's dead, but until then he'll run his household the way he goddamn well pleases. He calls Mrs.

Pierce an old biddy. Norma claps a hand over her mouth, all the anxiety welling up in her and wanting to escape as laughter. She hears him slam down the phone. The house goes quiet. Is it so bad what she did? She wasn't stealing, after all, just pretending. And as for the accident, well, they call them accidents for a reason.

After a while, Norma gets up and walks into the kitchen to break the spell. Doctor sits at the table in his wheelchair, plucking at his pants, always checking the bag that lies hot against his thigh. His cheeks are pink, eyes bright. Norma goes to the dishwasher and starts unloading it, taking care not to clatter.

"What's this ashtray doing here, Mrs. Wilson?" says Doctor, after a while.

"It's been there since I got here, Doctor."

"Well. Put it away somewhere."

She turns and takes it and the lighter and stows them both on a high shelf near the back of a cupboard. Later, she collects the rest of the lighters and ashtrays throughout the house and puts them away, too.

That night, after she gets Doctor into his plaid pajamas and double-checks the clips on his bag, she turns to go upstairs.

"Mrs. Wilson." She stops, looks back at him, surprised.

"Mrs. Wilson, pull up that chair, would you?" He gestures with
her at the velvet boudoir chair that always sits in
the tiny where Mrs. Doctor's brushes, combs and
perfumes are still arrayed. She does as he asks, standing behind



BACK ISSUES

POETRY

SHORT STORIES

(<https://thewritelaunch.com/back-issues/>)(<https://thewritelaunch.com/poetry/>)(<https://thewritelaunch.com/short-stories/>)

the chair until invited to sit. He looks at her, quizzical, his dark eyes studying her wrinkled face and the big hands nested in her lap.

"Do you like to read, Mrs. Wilson?"

"I do, Doctor. Just cowboy novels, things like that. Nothing fancy."

"Well, go get your book, if you don't mind. And one for me, too. Something light." He waves his pale hand in the air as if to demonstrate how light he wishes the book to be. "Pull something off the shelf next to the fireplace in the living room. Anything will do."

Norma goes upstairs and gets her Louis L'Amour from the bedside table. Then she goes down to the living room and runs a finger across the leather spines of the books there, reading the titles: Gulliver's Travels. The Deerslayer. For Whom the Bell Tolls. All sound interesting, but she doesn't know if they're "light" enough for Doctor. She locates a slim cloth-bound book: Franny and Zooey. That sounds easy and fun as a children's book. She pulls it from the shelf and returns to Doctor's bedroom.

"An interesting choice, Mrs. Wilson." And when she still just stands there, he gestures at the empty chair. "Sit. Please."

She waits until Doctor starts reading before she opens her own book.

Later, lying in her bed, she goes over the events of the day. After six months living with Doctor, this was the first time she'd been in his presence without providing a service. She reflects on

f
(http:
u=htt
spide
and-
the-
butte

t
(http:
text=
spide
and-
the-
butte

in
(http:
mini=
spide
and-
the-
butte

the pleasant, new experience of sitting with another person in silence. Reading, she'd always thought, was for filling the hours alone, not for together times. But after she got over the oddness of it, she'd become absorbed in To the Far Blue Mountains like never before. She didn't even notice when Doctor fell asleep, his book tented, rising and falling on his blanketed belly. When she looked up from the page, it was as if she was returning from far away.

Naked in her big bed, she feels the sheets cool. She pulls the salmon-colored peignoir from beneath the pillow, the only one of Mrs. Doctor's garments to escape Mrs. Pierce's furious purge. She holds the soft silk up to her face and closes her eyes, smelling the persistent odor of cedar and gardenia, then tucks it back under before she falls asleep.

It becomes a routine: preparing him for bed, then the two of them reading until he drops off. She finishes To the Far Blue Mountains and they let her trade it in for only twenty-five cents at The Bookworm for another book. He has his, she has hers. One night he asks what she's reading.

"Riders of the Purple Sage, Doctor. It's by this fella Zane Grey."

"What's it about?"

Mrs. Wilson furrows her brow as she tries to organize the story in her mind. She tells Doctor about Jane and the troubles she's having, hoping for peace but always having terrible things happen. The old Mormon polygamist who wants to marry her, how she escapes him and runs her father's herds by herself till

.....
they get rustled. She tells him about the cowboys who come to help but really just want to take advantage. It's hard to tell Doctor the complicated story so it makes any sense.

"Do you like it?" he asks. He waits while she considers.

"I'm not sure, Doctor. Honestly, I'm a little frustrated. Jane can't seem to make up her mind, you know? She's always running away, depending on somebody else to save her. Guess I'm a little annoyed with her."

Doctor's quiet then for a while. "You've always taken care of yourself, have you, Mrs. Wilson?"

She doesn't expect that, Doctor dropping into her personal life that way, as if you could talk about characters in books and real people the same. She doesn't think about herself like that. She does what she has to do, that's all. She thinks of Will and the little space of life when she felt special, full. But she rolled the big rock between herself and that time long ago.

"Not always, Doctor," she says. "But mostly."

"When you're done with that one, do you mind if I read it?"

Norma's eyes widen. "Well, no, Doctor, I don't mind at all."

You want to come in and sit a while? It'd be good to talk now they're all gone. You could've knocked me over with a feather! Both my daughters, the husbands, the grands and great-grands all running around having fun. All except Margaret's girl, the one with the sharp nose, just standing there straight and silent as a lightning rod. Maybe this place got on her nerves. Well. Teenagers, right?

got on her nerves. Well. Teenagers, right.

I felt a little sorry for the other two birthdays, didn't you? Mrs. Sayles had that sorry-looking bald son and his sourpuss wife. Did you see them? And the other one didn't have anyone at all. That's the danger of throwing a party. Might be no one comes. But you could've knocked me over. I didn't imagine it, all of them there. And me, ninety years old. I never imagined that, either. Well.

You're tired? Well, I'll stop chattering. But don't go. Not yet.

Norma goes to the Mayfair and buys some slacks and blouses. She washes the oldest of her old clothes and takes them to the Salvation Army. She hangs her new clothes in the closet, cuts off the white paper tags. There's a lavender blouse, a white one, and a light pink one. There's a fluffy white robe. She bought a pair of jeans with fancy stitching on the back pockets. The cream-colored slacks came with a real beaded leather belt and a silver buckle. Her old black lace-ups don't go with the slacks, so she bought some beige leather Burberrys on sale at the outlet. The first morning she wears her new clothes, she feels shy as she walks in to see Doctor. She blushes when he tells her she looks nice. They keep reading together every night. Doctor agrees about Jane from Riders of the Purple Sage. A professional victim, he says, not his kind of woman. He tells her he enjoyed the book anyway.

A month later, Norma sits in bed reading a little more upstairs as she often does after their sessions. Doctor said she

can read anything in the house, so she's started in on The Grapes of Wrath by this fellow Steinbeck. She chose it on account of the red cloth cover with a tractor. It seemed like something she might understand. Now she can't put it down. The Joad family feels like folks she knew growing up, and she hopes things turn out for them. She looks up from the book and is surprised to see it's already two in the morning. She figures she'll look in on Doctor one more time before lights out. She puts on her robe and goes downstairs.

The moonlight filters through the blinds, painting bars across the bed. The old man looks like a broken baby doll, one eye open, one closed. Fighting off panic, she crawls onto his big bed and wipes the drool from his chin with her hand, peering into his lopsided face. Doctor's left eye looks at her, hard and awake.

"I'll call the EMTs, Doctor" she tells him. "They'll be here soon."

Doctor moans then and closes his left eye while Norma strokes his brow. She must act. But as she starts to go for the phone, he moans louder, gurgling as he turns his head, his one eye open again, dark and shining.

"I have to call," says Norma, her voice rising.

Doctor blinks once and stares. She takes a deep breath.

"Doctor, twice for yes, once for no."

He blinks twice.

Norma gazes long at him and crawls back onto the bed. She strokes his hot, dry forehead and tears prick the back of her eyes

as she smooths his hair back. She arranges the pillows next to him. Time is passing. The decision is being made anyway.

"Doctor, you do not want me to call the EMTs, is that right?"

Doctor blinks twice. There's no mistake. His left hand creeps across the blanket toward her and she takes it in her own. She squeezes.

"Do you want me to stay here with you?"

He blinks twice, sighs, and closes his eye.

She sits next to him without letting go of his hand, tucking her new robe close around her and listening to his rasping breaths. She places a second pillow behind her back. In Mrs. Doctor's dressing-table mirror, she sees two women now: A dark figure in a white robe and the sepia lady there in the depths of the glass, like someone gazing up from underwater. She smiles and the other woman smiles back. She recognizes herself in both faces, like a person she's been missing and is grateful to see again. Now she lies down on her side facing Doctor and rests her head on the pillow, offering him the warmth of her body, her silence. Soon, she falls asleep.

When Mrs. Pierce arrives the following morning, that's how she finds them: the old woman in a white robe holding hands with the dead man.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D.P. Snyder

Twitter (<https://twitter.com/DorothyPS>).

Website (<http://www.dorothypotter.com>).

D.P. Snyder is a writer of short fiction and literary translator of works by Hispanic women. She examines the challenge of inhabiting a human body, the quiet ferocity of the domestic environment, and the redemptive potential of sickness, death, and storytelling.

Read more work by D.P. Snyder
(<https://thewritelaunch.com/author/d-p-snyder/>).

All original work attributed to D.P. Snyder
(<https://thewritelaunch.com/author/d-p-snyder/>) © 2019 D.P. Snyder.

Next in Issue >

(<https://thewritelaunch.com/2019/03/kant-skateboard/>)

Get the literary works

SIGN UP FOR THE WRITE LAUNCH NEWSLETTER

By clicking SUBSCRIBE, I consent to The Write Launch using my details to send me The Write Launch newsletters and confirm that I have read and understood [bookscove2cover, LLC Privacy Policy \(https://bookscove2cover.com/privacy-policy/\)](https://bookscove2cover.com/privacy-policy/).

ABOUT

[Taking a Stand Against Racism](https://thewritelaunch.com/taking-a-stand-against-racism/)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/taking-a-stand-against-racism/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/taking-a-stand-against-racism/)

[Our Mission](https://thewritelaunch.com/about/)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/about/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/about/)

[Contributors](https://thewritelaunch.com/authors/)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/authors/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/authors/)

[Submission Guidelines](https://thewritelaunch.com/submission-guidelines/)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/submission-guidelines/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/submission-guidelines/)

[Support](#)

ARCHIVES

[Poetry](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/poetry/)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/poetry/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/poetry/)

[Short Story](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/short-story/)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/short-story/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/short-story/)

[Long Short Story](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/long-short-story/)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/long-short-story/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/long-short-story/)

[Novella](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/novella/)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/novella/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/novella/)

[Novel Excerpts](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/novel-)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/novel-](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/novel-)

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/support/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/support/)

Contact

[\(mailto:editor@thewritelaunch.com\)](mailto:editor@thewritelaunch.com)

Privacy Policy

[\(https://bookcover2cover.com/privacy-policy/\)](https://bookcover2cover.com/privacy-policy/)

[excerpts/](#)

Creative Nonfiction

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/creative-nonfiction/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/creative-nonfiction/)

Essay

[\(https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/essay/\)](https://thewritelaunch.com/tag/essay/)

"Imagination and Creativity transport us to fictional worlds, broaden our understanding of differences among people, expand our knowledge of the environment around us, and give us insight into our innermost self."



[\(https://www.facebook.com/thewritelaunch/\)](https://www.facebook.com/thewritelaunch/)



[\(https://twitter.com/thewritelaunch\)](https://twitter.com/thewritelaunch)



[\(https://www.instagram.com/thewritelaunch/\)](https://www.instagram.com/thewritelaunch/)

© COPYRIGHT 2020 [BOOKCOVER2COVER, LLC. \(HTTPS://BOOKCOVER2COVER.COM\)](https://bookcover2cover.com)