

## The Lemonwood Quarterly

A new literary magazine for today's world

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# A Necessary Assumption

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## A Necessary Assumption

by D.P. Snyder

Title image by Narcissa Niblack Thorne, *New England Bedroom, 1750-1850*, 1940 (1/12 scale miniature), Art Institute of Chicago.

Mrs. Parker is the best housewife.

She lives with Mr. Parker in a white Georgia-plan domicile with four rooms downstairs and two above, connected by a steep interior staircase.

It is Friday morning and now Mrs. Parker admires the kitchen sink she has just scoured and hand-dried with a paper towel. She sighs with pleasure and hangs a cotton-weave dishcloth on the oven handle, turning her attention to the chicken soup that simmers in an orange enameled pot atop her sparkling white stove. The fragrant vapor fills her with the familiar satisfaction of fastidious home management. She's put every last scrap of the roasted chicken she and Mr. Parker enjoyed on Sunday to good use, even the tender bits of flesh she picked from the small bones of the neck. Mr. Parker loves his homemade chicken soup and he shall have it.

Mrs. Parker writes *Housewife* on any official form that solicits her occupation. There are none who surpass her. Every night, she enjoys a sound sleep, knowing

that every corner is dusted, every plate stacked, every object in its place. She balances their checkbook to the penny and carries a tiny three-ring binder of valid coupons tucked away in her big black purse. When she straightens a room, fluffs a pillow, or lays a steam-pressed sheet flat into its drawer, she says out loud, *There you go!* as if the house could hear her, as if she were sending a well-curated child off to whatever destination it is that children have.

They don't discuss it anymore, neither her secret relief nor his quiet disappointment. When they married, both on the cusp of thirty, she argued that children were an expense they could not responsibly afford. She used words his banker's mind would cleave to, like *cost-benefit analysis*, *liquidity*, and *long-and-short-term obligations*. She offered proofs: the costs of utilities, insurance, their mortgage; concerns about rising college tuition; and the relative prices of homes in their area. Finally, and in a low voice, she reminded Mr. Parker of his junior position in the corporate pecking order. Wide-eyed, he praised her careful thinking.

Seven years later, Mr. Parker was pulling in a neat salary thanks to satisfactory job performance and his wife could no longer deny they were comfortable. So, she endured Mr. Parker's workmanlike efforts to fix what was already perfect, their ordered life that ran with the regularity of European trains. She suffered his inquiries about her cycle, a biological fact that betrayed itself in the purchase of feminine hygiene products and the wild call of her pheromones. She received with only a slight compression of her lips the folic-acid tablets he placed like a memo next to her cereal bowl every morning and his insistence on scientifically-timed sexual activity. Mr. Parker marked his wife's rhythms with red crosses on the hardware-store calendar in the kitchen and, as indicated, he would present himself at bedtime without his ironed cotton pajamas, his usual sweet smell of fabric softener supplanted by the vinegary tang of male urgency (and anxiety), and he would do what Mrs. Parker called *his business*. When he was done, he would raise her hips onto piles of pillows so his offering of semen would funnel in and not out. In those dark and sweaty times, the indifferent moon would pierce their bedroom window and spotlight Mrs. Parker's pubis where it lay like a beached and fuzzy fish. While Nature held her breath, Mr. Parker would totter off to the kitchen to get a cool glass of water for his wife (a slice of lemon to prove his love) and lie down by her side, bestowing uncertain caresses and aiming hopeful gazes at her belly.

Mrs. Parker thought once you'd had sex a few times, it became a pointless repetition of the same conversation and, distinct from beneficial repetitions like laundry and sink-scouring, it was messy. She felt like a science project. But she permitted his penetrations and while he huffed and puffed, she distracted herself

by thinking about such matters as stripping the bed tomorrow or calling the man about the gutters. Sometimes, when she watched his pale and prematurely balding pate bead up with sweat and his thin shoulders execute the desperate push-ups for which his bank job had so-ill prepared him, she suffered a flutter of guilt about that tiny plastic umbrella she'd asked Dr. Levine to put inside. Against a rainy day, she had thought. But the passage of time made the matter moot. One morning, Mrs. Parker entered the kitchen where her husband was having his regular breakfast of two eggs, two strips of bacon, and one piece of whole wheat toast. She waited until he was looking at her and then emptied a nearly-full box of tampons into the garbage can. He paused mid-chew. Then he looked down again and kept eating. The pills and the red crosses disappeared, and Mr. Parker's plowings diminished until they ceased altogether.

Now, on this sunny Friday morning, Mrs. Parker stirs the fragrant broth with a wooden spoon and reflects on how things were a year ago, when she was dreading Mr. Parker's retirement. One bright February morning, he proclaimed his plans.

Emily, I must tell you something important, he said, sitting at their kitchen table while she cracked his eggs into the sizzling skillet. He cleared his throat. His pension was fully vested, he told her, and he would be of retirement age this year. He preferred to leave of his own accord rather than wait around to be made redundant. She felt her insides go wobbly and cold. Her stomach cinched tight. She was not accustomed to Mr. Parker making big decisions without her. She returned her attention to his eggs seconds before they would have burned.

But . . . but what about our financial security? She lifted the golden yolks and crisp whites from the pan onto Mr. Parker's round plate. The eggs stared back at her, horrified.

Emily, I promise you, he said, tucking his necktie into his shirt as she had taught him to do when eating. We are in good shape.

But it was not concern about money that turned her legs to aspic. She sank into the chair across from Mr. Parker and smoothed nonexistent wrinkles out of a perfectly ironed white napkin. It was, rather, that their life would change, and his tone suggested there would be no debating it. She could not deny the mathematical truth of his age. Soon, there would be another body knocking around the house all day, making smells, creating messes, taking up space. He would retire at the end of the first quarter, he said. And that was in a couple of months.

Are you done? asked Mrs. Parker, a hint more stiffly than she had intended.

Yes, Mr. Parker said, patting his lips with his napkin, which he then refolded.

As always, she cleared the table and stacked the dishes neatly in the machine. As always, she said have a nice day, dear. As always, she waited at the kitchen window and waved goodbye with the fingers of her right hand as his car left the driveway. Then, she wept.

As the date of Mr. Parker's retirement party approached, Mrs. Parker's anxiety escalated to a fibrillating panic. Her customary eight hours of slumber disrupted, she wandered through the house at night seeking its counsel, breathing in its air, as neutral as the atmosphere of museums, that metered ambience that is the opposite of art's passion and evidence of its captivity. She felt as one does before going on a long trip, the pre-nostalgia for the thousand comforts and familiar contours of home. But she was not going anywhere, rather her home would change with her inside it, altered for the worse by the constant presence of Mr. Parker. Someday had arrived too soon. Now, the kitchen clock's pleasant *tut-tut-tut* sounded like the clucking tongue of regret. Sometimes in her insomniac wanderings, Mrs. Parker sat down in the kitchen wrapped up against the late-March chill and watched infomercials on the portable television Mr. Parker had given her years ago *to keep her company*. It soothed her to watch the almost-handsome and nearly beautiful spokespeople hawk exercise equipment, juicers, and other ingenious gadgets engineered to overcome every sort of domestic dilemma. Then, Mrs. Parker would return to bed, reassured enough about the rightness of the world to fall asleep.

She couldn't imagine what it would be like to live without Mr. Parker, nor could she fathom a life with him so very present. What if he took up a hobby? Started inviting friends over? Or, worse, tried to pitch in and help out? His dependable invisibility had been one of his greatest merits and she was horrified at the thought of him being underfoot, observing her. He would make unwelcome suggestions. She scanned her counters as if there might be a solution in plain view dangling from a pothook or laid amongst her collection of well-sharpened knives.

And yet she could not do without him. For if Emily Parker were to merit the superlative of best housewife, there must be—for the word's implication were perfectly clear—both a house and a husband. This was a necessary assumption.

She began to have nightmares.

One in particular burned itself into her hypothalamus with such clarity it felt to her as if she had lived it. The rooms of her house multiplied, and its stick-built frame became visible. Walls were disrupted and olive-dark, the floors were as flimsy as cardboard. Desperate, she moved from room to room trying to put things to rights. She knew the house should be condemned but she also knew it was all she had in the world. The nightmare-bed was a mound of sour-smelling sheets and dirty clothes and, as she tried to sort it all out, she became entangled in the soiled bedding and sank ever-deeper into it. Suffocating, she saw Mr. Parker standing there, but when she called out to him for help, he smirked at her with cold, sardine-gray eyes. Mrs. Parker awoke to her own muffled wail of terror, which fortunately was not loud enough to wake Mr. Parker, her heart leaping from her chest.

On his last day of work, Mrs. Parker ushered her husband out the door at 8:00 o'clock. As always, she handed him his plaid thermal bag containing a low-fat lunch despite his protests that colleagues were taking him out. Now, as she stirs the chicken broth, she remembers how she wrapped a blue scarf around his thin neck that chill April morning although he said he didn't want one and how he tipped his head back and grimaced when she knotted it a bit too tightly. She feared the next day when Mr. Parker would continue sitting at the kitchen table after breakfast. It made her sick to think about it. So, after he left, she swallowed a big white pill she'd squirreled away from his wisdom tooth extraction and slept until lunch.

The first Monday morning of Mr. Parker's retirement, the weather was fine. He came to breakfast the same time as always. The only difference was that he was dressed in weekend clothes. After he ate, he cracked open the newspaper and began to read. Mrs. Parker felt breathless and unsure what to do, so she tip-toed around. She found herself setting the dirty dishes in the sink with greater care to avoid making clattering noises. Every time he finished a section of his newspapers (he read three), he picked up the next one and snapped it open with executive authority, a popping sound that made Mrs. Parker jump. She noticed that he used a tiny utility knife to slice out certain articles, laying them aside and writing the date and source in the margin with his silver ballpoint pen. This was how she learned her husband had his own rituals of which she had been entirely unaware.

Emily, I will have another cup of coffee, please.

He said it without looking at her like a man accustomed to having a secretary. The executive finance officer Mr. Parker had been at the bank was installed in her kitchen, supplanting the docile after-hours husband she knew. As she wiped the stovetop with a moist paper towel, Mrs. Parker began to feel like a cleaning lady *because he was sitting there*. How would he have felt, she fretted inwardly, if she had turned up one day and just sat in his office mending socks? As if his territory were hers? The last words slid out of her sotto voce: *as if my territory were yours...*

What, Emily?

It's nothing, she replied.

Golf became Mr. Parker's main activity outside the house. He had played before, just enough to accompany the bank's important clients around nine holes without embarrassing himself. This was how they had justified the expensive Club membership all these years and Mrs. Parker hadn't minded because she wrote it off as a business deduction. She archived his mediocre scorecards in case of audit. Now she continued to justify the membership as a small price to pay for her mental health. Mr. Parker played golf

Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday.

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Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday.

It was *like a job*.

Don't forget, you have a tee-time to make, she reminded him when he was slow to finish his breakfast.

Mr. Parker's golfing uniform was conservative. He favored cotton polo shirts in powder blues and butter yellows with pleated beige slacks. One day, however, he brought home a wide, shiny white belt he had purchased at the pro shop. He asked Mrs. Parker what she thought.

It certainly stands out, she said.

It's a Jack Nicklaus, he said.

I can see that, she said and pointed at the great man's signature embossed in

gold on the white leather.

Usually, Mr. Parker was home by lunch on golf days. He preferred to eat at home, he said, because the fried offerings at the clubhouse gave him heartburn.

But wouldn't it be nice to relax with your friends? I don't want them thinking I'm *forcing* you to come home. You don't tell them that, do you?

Of course not, snorted Mr. Parker. In fact, he had told them something like that on a few occasions.

I think you should pick a day to stay for lunch.

Mr. Parker picked Thursdays.

And so, they began to negotiate the outlines of their new life. On Tuesdays, as soon as he walked in carrying his golf shoes to keep from tracking what she called *his residue* into the house, Mrs. Parker pointed to his sandwich on the kitchen table and left to do the food shopping. On Thursdays, she had the house to herself until two. On Saturday afternoons, she ran errands upon his return. On the other days, she had no remedy for the strangeness of his constant presence. He tended to nap, take drives, or muddle around looking for something to do.

One afternoon, she found him sitting cross-legged on the basement floor sorting through a trunk of his personal memorabilia. Photo albums, notebooks, letters, Boy Scout binoculars and other evidence of his life before their marriage were fanned out on the cool concrete floor all around him.

I am considering writing a memoir, he said. What do you think of that?

That would be something, said Mrs. Parker.

That evening, when Mr. Parker was taking his usual after-dinner walk, she went down to the basement, placed her husband's past back into the trunk, and closed the lid securely.

One day, Mrs. Parker was in the kitchen getting ready to polish the silver. It was an annual task that gave her great satisfaction. How the sterling flatware they used only on holidays would sparkle when she was done! She arranged her soft cloths, the tub of polish, and a bowl of soapy water and laid all the utensils out by category on the newspaper-covered kitchen table. She had only just smeared a bit of pink polishing paste on a fork when Mr. Parker walked in, ambled around, and started opening and closing cabinets as if searching for something elusive.

Then he leaned on the edge of the sink just where she could see him out of the corner of her eye and gazed out the window. *Her* kitchen window. He sighed, the kind of sigh that is asking someone to say, what's wrong? The blood rushed to Mrs. Parker's head.

Stop lurking, she said. She gripped the fork harder.

He said he was sorry and left the room. Minutes later, she heard the front door close, and his car left the driveway. Where was he going? Why hadn't he told her goodbye? Mrs. Parker tried to settle back into her pleasant task, but to no avail. Her mood was ruined. She returned the flatware, unpolished, to the dining room sideboard.

Mr. Parker came home hours later carrying several bright, shiny shopping bags. He had wound up at the mall, he said, and took it into his head to do some window-shopping. He stopped for a coffee and found himself looking across the atrium at Bobby's Hobbies. This, he said, was not some toy store. It was a serious craft shop for adults. He had decided to take up building historically accurate models of famous ships. Mrs. Parker's eyes widened, and her scalp prickled as her husband excitedly unveiled the colorful shrink-wrapped box containing all the pieces of a 1:84 wooden scale model of the *Cutty Sark*, as well as a variety of specialized tools he had bought to put them together. He had also subscribed to a club so that he could access online forums and get advice from fellow modelers, something he saw as a prudent investment, lest he run into any difficulties with his expensive builds. How expensive? With taxes, nearly \$650.00. Mrs. Parker's hand flew to her mouth. Yes, that seems like a lot, dear, but it's not that much when you think of the many hours of quiet enjoyment it will provide me.

The glue! The paints and lacquers! The multitude of tiny pieces! The smell! The cost! Mrs. Parker became aware her hand was still clasped to her mouth and removed it.

This will keep me out from underfoot, Emily. Then his tone turned wistful. You know, as a kid, I used to love building scale models with Dad. I had always hoped I might build models with my own son one day.

Unfair, Mrs. Parker thought, unfair.

She took a deep breath and imbued her next words with as much warmth as she



could muster. Well, this really is a new chapter! Where are we going to set you up?

Now on this brilliant Friday morning, Mrs. Parker smiles as she reaches into the cupboard for a soup bowl, which she places in the center of Mr. Parker's tray. All's well that ends well. Goodness, she thinks, what a silly-billy I was back then! What a fusspot! It's been almost a year since Mr. Parker's retirement and her household is running as smoothly as ever. Perhaps even more so! Mr. Parker in retirement is, if anything, a more well-integrated part of the household than he ever was during in their thirty-seven years of marriage. Now Mrs. Parker takes off her flowered apron and hangs it on a hook next to the door. She places a crisp napkin, a straw, and Mr. Parker's little bottle of liquid vitamins on the tray. She fills the bowl with two ladles of rich, hot chicken broth and, as she contemplates her work, she purses her lips with pleasure. She lifts the tray.

At the bottom of the stairs, she looks up. The stairwell is as narrow and dim as a grain chute. They added the windowless companionway when she and Mr. Parker turned the attic into a full second floor with a small bathroom and two bedrooms.

Just in case, he had said.

To enhance our home value, she replied.

For family and guests, he said.

It will be a mess, she cautioned.

Back then, Mr. Parker was still longingly envisioning himself putting at least one child to sleep every night in that renovated attic. Mrs. Parker, however, was bracing herself for the invasion of carpenters, plumbers, and painters. She fretted as they bored screws into fresh wallboard and laid down bright new floors. She made them hang thick plastic everywhere as if it were an asbestos abatement. She mandated paper booties. Now, as she gazes up the stairwell's long barrel, she wonders if the lack of a handrail is a code violation, and she makes a mental note to research the matter. Mrs. Parker's sneakered foot feels for the first carpeted step. She climbs, one riser at a time, careful not to slosh broth onto the square of yellow placemat. How she had resented the vertiginous angle! But the architect who drew up the plans proved to them it was *the only way to get from here to there*. Mrs. Parker reflects now on the backaches she's endured over the years because of these stairs, which require regular vacuuming like any other part of the house despite the scant use they received

for so long. But now, she thinks as she ascends huffing and puffing, she knows their value.

Mr. Parker turned one of the two upstairs bedrooms into his modeling workshop. He did not consult with Mrs. Parker before he dismantled the four-poster bed and rolled up the thick blue rug to make room for his new enthusiasm. He left all the furniture huddled in one corner of the room in one drop cloth-covered lump. He purchased a large industrial worktable. A new steel goose-necked lamp with a wide honey-comb base became populated by glue and paint tubes, tiny brushes, clips, toothpicks, and rolls of fine wire and twine. A sleek wooden box held his array of crafting knives. He attached a jumbo LED-lit magnifying glass to the table with a C-clamp. He removed the blue draperies from the windows and tossed them all willy-nilly on top of the furniture pile. He said his work required light. Lots and lots of light.

Mr. Parker spent one entire day unpacking the *Cutty Sark* and inventorying all the pieces in its eighteen assembly packs. Then he spent a couple more days studying the manual cover to cover before beginning the actual assembly. Between his golf and his modeling, he became busy. So busy and enthusiastic was he that he started to excuse himself quickly after dinner.

Off to the poop deck! he declared, taking his dessert with him.

One morning, anxious about crumbs, Mrs. Parker went upstairs to clean while her husband was golfing. She dusted his worktable, re-ordered all the little pieces by size and into nice straight lines. She ran the vacuum. She retrieved a fork and a crumb-laden pie plate. She tried to avert her eyes from the sad, curtainless windows and the forlorn pile of abandoned furniture. She had decorated the upstairs bedrooms herself and with such care. She had loved the persistent whiff of unspoiled newness, a perfume that had never faded because no one was ever there to spoil it. Thanks to Mr. Parker, this room was now dismembered and smelling of glue — and of Mr. Parker. It had become unhomely.

That afternoon, Mr. Parker, who was not at all happy to see that his worktable had been *organized*, spent several frustrating hours searching for a couple of missing mast-hole gaskets and finally determined they must have disappeared into Mrs. Parker's vacuum. He had to sort through a heap of wet refuse in the kitchen bin to located the tiny pieces. From then on, he prohibited the use of *your machine* past what he now referred to as *my threshold*.

In that case, there will be no more snacking up there, said Mrs. Parker.

We'll see, said Mr. Parker.

Mr. Parker completed the *Cutty Sark* in six weeks. It was his first project and as such had a few obvious irregularities, but the overall effect was good. So, he mounted it on an oak block and had a brass plaque engraved with the name of the ship and *To Emily, my wife*. He presented it to her on their 36th anniversary. She said thank you very much, dear, and after a day or two she placed it back in his workshop. There was really no suitable spot for it elsewhere in the house, she explained to him, and she thought it best to display it where it would provide him with inspiration. He agreed with her, secretly pleased that he would not have to part with it.

Encouraged by his success, Mr. Parker started in on the *HMS Sovereign of the Seas*, an early 17th century British ship of the line. Because of its great size and detail, it was significantly more expensive than the *Cutty Sark* and he was excited about the 102 bronze guns and the quantity of gilding that he would have to apply. At dinner, the Parkers' companionable silence was replaced by Mr. Parker's spontaneous lectures on the Anglo-Dutch wars and engineering matters, such as how reducing tonnage in the upper works of a large war ship increased maneuverability on the high seas. He was becoming *a history buff*.

I see, Mrs. Parker replied. Yes, I see. Although she did not see at all.

Mr. Parker continued to play golf with increasing enthusiasm, especially after that fine September day he came within an inch of hitting a hole-in-one on the par 3 eight hole. He returned home late and a bit tipsy because he had felt obliged to accept the drinks his golfing buddies bought him in celebration. A *rehearsal for the real thing*, they said to him. *You'll be buying next time!* Mrs. Parker debated with herself about whether his scorecards were worth archiving anymore, since greens fees could no longer reasonably be claimed as a business deduction. But as she was in the habit of keeping them, she continued to do so. Mr. Parker acquired a tan and began to sport a carefully clipped beard and moustache, both of which grew out very white, making him look even swarthier.

Are you growing a beard? she asked him, although it was perfectly obvious that he was.

Every man should grow a beard once his life, said Mr. Parker, a bit defensively.

You look like an Italian fisherman, said Mrs. Parker.

Mr. Parker had no reply for this observation.

Now that Mr. Parker was using the upstairs bathroom every day, it required more careful attention. So, she went upstairs with her bucket of cleaning supplies and, as she passed the closed door of the workshop, she heard an unusual sound: it was Mr. Parker laughing. A chuckle at first, it became an unrestrained howl of laughter. At dinner that night, she asked him what had been so funny earlier. He didn't remember, he said, why it could have been anything! His circle of friends in the online modeling forum had grown extensive, even international. His group, he added with a wink, included some *very interesting characters*.

Oh, really?

*They* appreciate my historical knowledge, he said.

Changes of routine are riddled with occult dangers. Improvisations are fine in jazz, thought Mrs. Parker, although if she were to be honest, jazz was not her cup of tea. But in real life, method and repetition are the engines that allow life to continue from one moment to the next.

One afternoon in August, Mrs. Parker thought these things as she vacuumed her way up the stairs, breathing hard and suffering the heat that accumulated in the ventless space. She settled the heavy cannister on a step and then passed the nozzle over the two steps above her. Then, resting the long, ribbed hose carefully to one side, she lugged the cannister up another step and repeated the process. This was her invariable method and, though it was slow, it was also prudent. She did not wish to have an accident. But when she reached the top, a wave of dizziness overcame her. She lowered herself down and sat on the second-floor landing, her back to Mr. Parker's closed workshop door. She extended her legs down the stairs and closed her eyes, bowing her head and breathing deeply until the world stopped spinning. Phew, she said to herself. You're not a kid anymore, Emily. The skirt of her dress spread around her bare, plump legs, which stretched down the top stairs. As a little girl, Emily used to sit just like this at the top of the staircase in her parents' house on those evenings

when they had their smoky, noisy cocktail parties. From her safe perch, she listened to the music, the loud talking and laughter that later, after everyone had left, became just her parents, often yelling at each other, saying cruel things, throwing objects, and slamming doors. Then, Emily would crawl into her bed and cover herself up and if someone opened the door to check on the little girl, which they rarely did, she would curl up tight and pretend to be asleep to avoid the proximity of smoke-saturated clothes and sour breath, the feel of a wet, alcoholized kiss on her face. The next morning, while her parents were still sleeping, she would creep downstairs to the living room in her moccasins and nightgown to begin the methodical, solitary work of putting her world to rights. *What would I do without you?* Mother would say, lighting up her first cigarette of the day as Emily brought her a coffee, black with lots of sugar.

The sound of Mr. Parker laughing broke into her recollections. It was a spontaneous, barking laugh there on the other side of the door that was closed tight against her. She did not know that laugh. She did not trust it. That bearded and suntanned man who built small boats and almost got holes-in-one was changing in ways that made him a stranger to her and made her feel extraneous to him. She pulled her legs up and flipped over until she was on all fours. Then, using the wall for support, she struggled to her feet. Dizziness threatened again, a darkness closing in from all sides. So, she moved down the short hallway to the second, still-perfect guest bedroom where no one had ever slept or dreamed or made love and she sunk down on the bed. The clean smell of the chenille bedspread and the gentle whirring of the ceiling fan calmed her, and within minutes, she was asleep.

While Mr. Parker's present situation is not a gift by any measure, there is good to be found in all adversity, thinks Mrs. Parker now as she balances the tray holding his bowl of chicken broth. She prepares her smile, and, with one well-padded hip, bumps open the door to the room they still call *the workshop*. This door is never closed tight anymore.

She is still surprised at how, while she slept off her bout of vertigo just down the hall and darkness fell, Mr. Parker kept working on *HMS Sovereign of the Seas*, unconcerned that she had not called him down to dinner. Excited to have applied the last delicate touches of gilding to the forecastle, he had leapt up, intending to run downstairs and tell her. Who could blame her if just that once she had failed to put away the vacuum and its clear, ribbed hose? How could she have known it would uncurl itself like a snake across the top three steps? You might as well blame the architect who had failed to light the staircase properly or install a handrail. You might as well blame Mr. Parker himself, though of course she never

would, for insisting on the whole folly of the second-floor renovation in the first place. But none of that matters anymore. What matters is that she, his wife, dedicates herself to his care. What matters is the light. So much light! And that is why she keeps him here.

"Lunchtime!" Mrs. Parker trills to the ashen man with the perpetually shocked expression who lies strapped to a hospital bed. Ironical, said his friends from the Club about poor Mr. Parker's terrible accident so soon after retirement, though few of them took the trouble to visit. We will miss him, typed his pals from the modelers' forum after she wrote a goodbye message and logged him out for the last time. Now the sunlight makes the smooth white walls gleam and lends an atmosphere of cheer and good health. The *Cutty Sark* and the *HMS Sovereign of the Seas* sit on a low white bookshelf where he can see them always, dusted and polished. Now the blue curtains belly inward with a fresh spring breeze and the double-wedding-ring quilt she made for him drapes a body whose motionless contours barely disrupt the plane of the mattress.

Mrs. Parker hums as she deposits the tray on the adjustable hospital table, lowers the side gate, and raises her husband to a sitting position. The doctors say they have never seen someone take such exquisite care of a family member and they marvel at her cheerful acceptance of his condition. I was made for this, she says.

Here I am, dear, says Mrs. Parker, stroking his smooth, pale cheek. It's your favorite chicken soup. And Mr. Parker's thin neck quivers as his wife approaches him with a silver spoonful of steaming broth.





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