

AN ACT OF LOVE

“They’re coming!” Gretchen shouted, flinging open the bedroom door and charging in to assure herself that Paul, her husband, was made aware of the news.

“What!” cried Paul, aghast, sitting bolt upright in bed and dropping the book he had been reading to the blankets. “Oh, no,” he groaned, “how many of them?”

“The two boys. Don’t worry! It’s not going to be too hard. I’ll be doing most of the work, not you.” Gretchen Hastings was a tall, graceful woman who kept herself fit in her middle years and looked very well. Her grey eyes were one of her best features, except when they darkened like the Arctic Sea when she was displeased, as she was now in looking at her husband.

Paul emitted a moaning sound, like that of a forlorn beast. He fell back again on the bed, his face registering the exasperation he felt for the whole enterprise. It was the day before the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009. Two college kids were now, in accordance with Gretchen’s electrifying announcement, on the way to crash at their house in Reston, Virginia, as a base camp from which to attend the inaugural ceremonies in the District of Columbia. Paul, who had no interest whatever in the event, had dreaded the possibility of such an incursion from the moment that some old friends of theirs, at a party in New York, guiltily approached them to say that their son and his friend were “thinking of coming down from Massachusetts for it.” Gretchen, however, who reveled in visitors and found nothing in the subject ever too burdensome, effusively told them: “Oh, yes, please tell them to come down; we’d love to have them.” Paul, who was cringing behind her tall shoulders, weakly murmured something that

might have been encouragement, but was so indistinct that it might well have meant something else. Or nothing at all. Later, on their way home on Amtrak, Gretchen assured him “not to worry, they’ll never come down. It’s going to be a madhouse in DC., with the traffic and security checks.”

Paul loved his privacy, exceedingly, and thus deeply resented its transgression by anyone unless there was some emergency that common decency required his attention. He was as tall as Gretchen, and once was regarded as one of the handsomest men in his college class at Cornell, but now his fair hair had thinned drastically, his admirable physique had drooped wearily, he became round shouldered and pudgy, with a sheepish demeanor and a tendency to avoid another’s eyes that caused people to ignore him. He liked to paint in the warm, Virginia countryside, and now that he was retired and the kids living elsewhere, he was able at last to use his time for his art, and when he wasn’t doing that, he was either sleeping, going for walks, or eating out with his wife – also retired – at the numerous bistros in their neighborhood. With all of these modest activities calling upon his attention, Paul found himself always busy and lacking the time to take on someone else.

“When are they coming here?” asked Paul wretchedly, like one who must prepare for the worst.

“They left Massachusetts around four thirty this afternoon, and if the traffic isn’t too horrendous, they think they’ll get here probably around two to four a.m.”

“Oh, no, “Paul said, “I don’t...”

“They’ll hardly be here,” snapped Gretchen. “They just want to drop off their things, and go right on to the Metro by four o’clock in the morning to get into DC ahead of the crowd.”

Though he was prepared for discomfiting news, Paul was yet incredulous. “So we have to drive them at three a.m?”

“*You* don’t have to do anything,” said Gretchen with a light sneer. “I’ll drive them. You can go on sleeping.” She turned sharply away, and went into the guest bedroom to change the sheets in preparation for the kids’ arrival.

He watched with relief the long graceful back retreating across the room when suddenly, to his consternation, he found her bearing down on him again. “I have to cook!” she pronounced, her grey eyes flickering with excitement. “I’ll make...”, she broke off, letting her right hand float gracefully in the air, seeking to catch a passing idea as it drifted by, and then she paused, gazing upward meditatively, her mind a sumptuous dream of numerous recipes, of dishes rich and rare, and then brightening, she purred: “cauliflower soup, and – I think – chicken fricassee.” She smiled blissfully, as she often did in those exhilarating moments when her decisions simply confirmed to her how remarkable, how creative, a woman she was.

And then Paul, poor fool, blundered once again, as he had done all too often: he made the mistake of presuming too much. “These are college kids, you know,” he rashly informed her. “I bet they’d rather have some pizza; different toppings, pepperoni, sausage...”

She bristled like an outraged cat. “What are you talking about? I don’t mind going out of my way for people! These kids are our guests; I’m not going to throw them a

greasy pizza when that's all they've been eating for months at college. They'll love a home cooked meal and that's what I'll make for them. I want to show them some respect." The now familiar charge which he'd heard so often from Gretchen had its usual effect, and Paul was abashed; while he would have brought the boys specialty pizzas and not that wholesale stuff, still, he conceded privately, he was too lackadaisical, too diffident, to take the trouble to show the people he liked how much he valued them. As Gretchen's reproof implied, this was just another instance of his backsliding, his ineffectuality, his "taking the easy way out". So, his hands deep in his pockets, he waited morosely while Gretchen drew down her voluminous recipe collection from an upper cabinet, and flung herself down at the kitchen table to draft a very lengthy list of items which Paul was to bring back from the supermarket; in the meanwhile, she would be preparing the two bedrooms for the boys. "The fricassee will take time, Paul," she directed, "so get back right away."

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A few minutes later he was driving to the Safeway in his Chevrolet Malibu. "Damn it, the kids would rather have pizza," he declared in the silence of his car. He felt a rare pulsation of resentment force his fingers into fists. While he wasn't going to the mat with her about it, he was not going to hurry just for the pleasure of tamely plodding up and down the supermarket aisles in obeisance to his wife. No; he would first go to the old baseball field near the supermarket, where he had watched his daughter, Megan, play as a very small girl in Little League, where they had had such good times long ago. He had always retained a certain nostalgic fondness for the old field and always intended to visit it again. In fact, he thought for some time that it would make a fine subject for a

watercolor – when the late spring sunshine and flowers were abundant of course - but there would be no harm in beginning the process of composition by revisiting the ground now, even if it were very cold. He had the sketch book as always in the car. The thought was soothing and a tonic to his spirits, and so he drove directly over to it that afternoon.

It proved surprisingly difficult to find. It had been abandoned some years ago when a new modern facility had been constructed for the much larger population which had since moved into the area. But even so, Paul was surprised to find no reference to the field nor any evidence of a path that remained to guide the casual visitor. It was clear that no attention had been given by the county to the area in some time, and as a result, he had to beat his way through the dark enigmatic woods, force his way through the rough patches or circumventing those which seemed especially inhospitable, until, fatigued and irritable, he was about to give up the whole thing, when he found himself stepping on to the field itself.

He recognized it right away, notwithstanding the decay which time had inflicted upon it. The chain link fence was still there, and might have been a fine backstop if it were called into action again, if the rust could be removed and if the overgrown foliage were cut back. And the spectators' stands, they were just as he remembered them. Chuckling, he recalled how tiny Megan was then, sitting on the very lowest bench, eagerly waiting for her turn to bat, and how he had scrunched up next to her on the same little horizontal bench of wood, once proud in their shimmering green paint, now dull, furrowed by insects and weather, some even pulled out.

So lost was he in his dream of yesteryear, that he had not realized that someone else was there, had arrived before him. Sitting among the drifting shadows of the upper

benches was a girl, twiddling a stick between her fingers and looking quizzically down at him.

“What a funny looking kid!” he thought, startled. His painter’s eye glanced quickly over her; she seemed interesting, even dramatic in the dappled perspective. She looked to him about fifteen to eighteen, her face was liberally spattered with freckles, framed by a mass of red hair, wild and unkempt, and while her nose was small and pert, her mouth was much too broad, but its full lower lip seemed to suggest to him a generosity that he wish he’d received at home. While he wanted to speak to her, he thought it would be better not to approach her too closely, as he might alarm her. “Hi,” he said, gingerly taking a small step back. “I hope I’m not intruding on you.”

“I guess it’s okay.” She laughed, a high pitched girl’s laugh, finding the use of the unknown word amusing. “You’re the first person I’ve seen here except me.” A gust of wind suddenly surged up from the woods causing her to tremble and to hug her thin body close around her. She wore only a light jacket, black with a florid leopard design, to cover her dress which came down only to her bare knobbly knees.

“You must be really cold,” Paul said, alarmed at the girl’s exposure. “No,” she replied, apparently amused by Paul’s distress. “It’s just fucking cold, no big thing...”

Paul winced and briefly glanced away; he didn’t approve of girls who used such language. But he saw her shudder once again, her slight shoulders quivering, and it pained him to watch her. Impulsively, he started to twist open the buttons on his coat. The girl watched this in dismay and jumped up, prepared to flee in fear that he was going to assault her or commit some other unpleasant act, but she quickly changed her mind; there was no reason to run from this large, roly-poly man with the kindly eyes

who intended only to offer her his coat. “Here,” he said, as he struggled out of the garment’s massive folds. “Wear this for a while. I’ve got layers of stuff under this! See?” He eagerly displayed his second level of clothing, a thick woolen sweater wrapped comfortably around his ample stomach; his daughter had given it to him as a present from LL. Bean before she went to California, crying when she parted from him.

The girl smiled gratefully at him, but held up a declining hand. “We can’t take things from strangers.” Though she was still wary, ready to run if need be, she was not really afraid of him, not the way she was of her own people. He seemed so harmless, his lumpy body like a comfortable pillow, a stomach well fed, which her people would deride but which seemed to her to reflect someone pleased with himself and thus not angry with the world, and his face pleased her too, lined slightly in the forehead and around his eyes, but still full cheeked and healthy. And she especially liked his eyes, behind his glasses soft, brown, and yet sad too. “I’m Kitty,” she said, descending several steps. “What’s yours?” *It’s the skinny ones that scare me.*

“Paul,” he said, with a shy smile. He was pleased that she really wanted to know his name, and it became more important to him to shield her frail body from the anger of the wind. “Please take it,” he coaxed, “I’m only lending it to you just for now.” He held his coat out to her again, invitingly, the way one tries to cajole a suspicious animal to accept something for its advantage. “Come on.”

“Nope!” Kitty shook her head amiably, waving the tempting coat away with the little twig she held. “I can’t. I live with the ‘Silent Ones’ – that’s the name of our group. Weird, huh? We’re not even supposed to talk to strangers. But I like to jabber,” she said, holding her knees to her chest. “They’re mad at me for that.”

Paul glanced uneasily behind him. “Are they here now?”

She laughed gaily. “They’re not here, doofus,” again finding Paul somewhat amusing. “They’re coming later to pick me up. In about” -she consulted a little watch on her freckled wrist – “two hours”.

He was astonished that anyone would abandon a frail thing like Kitty to so long a time in this weather. And how long had she already been here? He was already snuffling into his handkerchief. “Why so long?”

“I had to do some stuff; so I did it, and they told me to wait here.” She drew back a little, evidently not wishing to discuss the matter further. “So Paul, how come you’re here,” she asked, turning the questions back to him.

“I like to paint – pictures, I used to come here with my daughter, and I thought I’d sketch this place to remember it by.”

“You have a daughter?” Kitty asked with approval. “That’s good! Why didn’t you bring her with you?”

“She’s in college, in California,” he said shortly. *She would have been here, gone to William and Mary, if Gretchen had not praised the west coast to the skies, and bundled her away from me, she who I loved so much.* He didn’t want to talk about Megan, and bent down to remove his sketch book from his briefcase, to begin work. He looked up and met Kitty’s friendly blue eyes looking at him with curious interest. Why shouldn’t he sketch her? No one else would think of doing so, they would see nothing more than a peculiar looking girl, but she was more than that: an odd little face, out of all proportion, but somehow forming a unity nonetheless, so engaging, vivid, and high

spirited. He couldn't help but find her endearing. "Could I sketch you, it would be just your head?" he asked, in his mild way. "It's a drawing. It won't take long."

"A picture of me?" Kitty squirmed with pleasure and embarrassment on the bench. "No, I'm too ugly! Everybody says so."

"Not everybody! I wouldn't say it." He went on to encourage her. "You have a very interesting face, out of the ordinary, whatever your 'Silent People' might say." That was enough for Kitty. She was thrilled and it didn't take her long to take a place on one of the benches, sitting motionless for him, and with Paul's quick, knowing strokes of many years of practice, it was not more than an hour before the drawing was finished. The only difficulty she made was occasionally to burst out laughing, saying that the 'idea of having my face painted is wild!' He had also accomplished a coup by persuading her to put on his coat, under the pretext that her sudden trembling in the wind was distracting him from his work. When he finished it, he pulled the sheet from the pad and handed it to her. She screamed – a high "Eeeeeek!" of delight. "That's me!" She chortled. "Oh, me!" she screamed, her legs a blur as they pounded the bench. "Do I look this cool?"

"Super cool!" He broke into a smile; he did find her adorable. "You can keep it."

Her face suddenly assumed a very grave expression. "Oh, no," she said sadly, "I can't. That would be Vanity." She spoke as though the word carried an immense prohibition. "They'd beat me up real hard. We don't pride on ourselves." She frowned when she thought of their reprisals. "And they'd want to know about you. That would be real trouble." She came down and handed the drawing to him. "It's just like, cool! You keep it for me."

Horried, he noticed her hands for the first time. He realized she had kept them out of sight, either inside her jacket or shielded by her arms. They were hideously deformed; the knuckles huge and shifted from their proper place, the tips of her fingers flattened, their nails cracked and blackened. Seeing him recoil from her, Kitty pulled her hands behind her back. “I’m sorry. They’re real ugly, I know it,” she said apologetically. “I do a lot of work down there, where we live, and this keeps happening to my hands. But that’s good, you see?” she told him. “Then nobody wants to grab me,” she laughed at what she thought to be a great joke. “I’ll keep my ugly hands behind me so they don’t bother you.”

“No! don’t ever do that!” he cried, appalled that he might have hurt her feelings. “I was just surprised, you know.” He spoke the truth. After the first moment when he saw them, the sight of her hands moved him terribly; he would have asked her to show him her hands again but he sensed she would not, and would not understand. He felt a fierce pang sear his heart at the thought of leaving her abandoned in this bitter place. “Kitty, are you sure you don’t want me to stay here until they come?”

“Are you cur-razy?” She stiffened, her blue eyes were great globes of fear. “They’ll beat your head to pieces. They will.” She nervously consulted her watch. “Go away now,” she said, dismissing him. “They could come soon.”

He wanted to quarrel with her about it, to persuade her to let him stay, but he thought better of it. She would be adamant, he could see, and his persistence would just make her angry. “Okay”, he said, accepting with reluctance the return of his coat, and slowly putting it on. He looked at her strange face, and distressed though he was, he could not help finding this little waif so delightful. “Please take care of yourself, Kitty,

okay?” He suddenly had another idea, which he knew would be dead on arrival, but had to be tried anyway. “Can I give you my phone number, just in case you...” But she had already shaken her head, her eyes grateful but refusing. He nodded ruefully, and turned away.

“Hey, you missed a button!” she called. It was the second to the top of the coat, and with her damaged hands she managed to close it for him.

“I’m here lots of times”, she murmured. Her voice, ordinarily high pitched, now a huskiness holding back tears. “You’re very nice,” she said. “Like having a dad.”

“I like being a dad.” he said. *That was true, wasn’t it Megan?* “I’ll come back”, he said gently. “After all, I haven’t sketched the ball field yet.”

She laughed with that high squeak of good spirits. “Oh, that’s right!” He reached out for her hand, took it before she could react, and shook it firmly. She was so pleased, her face flushed a delicate red.

Paul!” she stopped him as he turned away. She said, “Do you want to see how I keep warm? Watch!” She brushed by him as she gathered speed rapidly, her head held down to concentrate, her arms and legs pumping ever faster, her red hair flying behind her like a flag representing her indomitable will to exist, she circled the field furiously, two times, and drew up in front of him, panting. See?” she said breathlessly. “That’s how.”

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“Where the hell were you?” Gretchen shouted when Paul finally arrived, his arms precariously clutching the large bulging bags she had requested.

“Accident on Route 7,” he said, looking for a place to set them down.

“Ohhhh, ohhhh, too bad, ” sang out Gretchen with mocking sympathy. He’s lying of course,” she thought to herself, watching his stooped shoulders as he put down the packages. She could sense his dishonesty; he radiated it. She knew his every incriminating gesture, every bodily concession and evasion. She had been of the view for some time that Paul was indulging in the vice of deceit more and more frequently, giving her another weakness for her to bear with. Such a shame, she thought, as he did have a few laudable qualities –though not easy to characterize – but these were hopelessly blighted by his slothful habits, which disgraced not only himself but tarnished her as well, as having to acknowledge that this dithering, pitiable man is the one she had chosen for her husband. But they’re all like that, aren’t they? Well, she sighed again, thinking of the long hours ahead for her fricassee; it was now time for her to roll up her sleeves.

“It takes three hours to prepare that fricassee, do you know that?” she said to him wearily. “And I have to get to bed early if I’m to take the boys to the Metro tonight.”

He was deeply embarrassed, having lied to her, and muttered something about the traffic being a nightmare, which only served to make him feel more ashamed. It was even worse because he had done her an injury, and once again he felt the usual pangs of remorse. He would avoid her now; would escape her presence. And then, he thought of Kitty.

“I’m going down to paint,” he told his wife.

“Now?” she said incredulously. “ So you’re not going to take the boys to the train when they get here. I knew it.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ll be ready,” he said mildly, opening the door of the basement.

“You’d be better off going to bed,” she warned. “You never finish those paintings anyway.”

“Maybe I’ll finish this one,” he said. He closed the door behind him, entering the comforting atmosphere of his oils and alcohol, where his paints were laid neatly out ready for his hand. He decided it was going to be a likeness of Kitty’s hands. He would call it “Stigmata”.

And though he slept only a few hours after painting most of the night, he did wake up when the kids arrived around three o’clock in the morning. He carried out his part sufficiently, if not nobly: going to sleep in his clothes, leaping out of bed with a welcoming smile at three in the morning (they were nice kids, after all), advising them of the methods of using the Metro subway, providing them with sandwiches and fare-cards for the train, exchanging cell phone numbers, helping Gretchen serve out her special cauliflower soup and fricassee – and then the climax - driving through the dark to the hulking Metro station, where (over the boys’ objection) Gretchen insisted on accompanying them into the station, directing Paul to drive around the clogged streets in and out of the police lines until she emerged.

Now that the boys were on their way to the inauguration, Paul hoped he might get some sleep, but the night’s adventures left him too stressed to do so, and too dulled to paint. He stumbled about the house barely conscious until, in the afternoon, around five o’clock, he at last was went to bed, about to fall luxuriously asleep, but not before he told Gretchen to wake him up so that he could go with her to pick the boys up when they return to the Metro station. “I want them to know they’re important to me.”

It was the clashing sound of dishes and the murmuring, low voices from the kitchen that shocked him into consciousness, to roll over in bed, twisting in the sheets, as he grasped the fact that the boys were back, and that the low, female voice was Gretchen's. *She had gone to pick them up without him.* What would they think of him now – a bloated indolent figure, unable to think beyond food and a stall to sleep in.

And now, he thought, it would be awkward to face them. He had nothing to say; the truth was that he had not been there to seek out the boys in the dark, to find them shuddering in the cold at the Metro station and bring them home. It was Gretchen who would claim the honor, she alone. But he did come down stairs nevertheless, after quickly dressing and shaving to look clean and distinguished, not apologizing, but welcoming the boys with genuine warmth because he did like them and hoped that their generous spirit would keep them from thinking too harshly about him.

The kids planned to leave that same night, to lie down and rest in the house no later than midnight, and then start off on their return to Massachusetts, the early departure being necessary because they were to pick up a classmate in New Jersey who had to submit a paper that morning to her professor at Boston U. or face incalculable punishment. So, after expressing their gratitude in their boyish, engaging way, they went right off to bed, leaving Gretchen and Paul alone in the kitchen.

Paul was watching her as she was energetically clearing off the dishes, smiling to herself, her fine grey eyes gleaming brightly. How well the day had proceeded! Her back was to Paul, and he knew from many years experience that she could not imagine that he was furious with her failure to awaken him to meet the boys. She'd no doubt bridle with indignation at his charge of unfairness when she had acted only out of her concern for

him. There was no point in challenging her, he knew that. But it rankled sorely. *If she thought of me it was to embarrass me.*

But there was soon to be more, the planning for the kids when they awoke for their return to Massachusetts. As Gretchen had to teach a class in “Geometry for the Novice” at the community center in the morning, and needed to go to bed “immediately”, she assigned to Paul the task of remaining awake until 11:30 or 12 at night (“you don’t have anything to do”) at which time he was to be sure to wake the boys up. She had arranged a dinner for them on waking, maps, notes of farewell, with directions to Paul for microwaving where necessary. Through all of this Paul refused to speak to her; he could not stand her dictatorial orders any more. He sat scowling at the table, ostentatiously turned away from her, humming over her words whenever she mentioned some detail she thought he should know, or even suggested something that might please him as well. She went to the refrigerator and withdrew what remained of a key lime pie which she knew he loved, and placed it by him. Paul recoiled from it as though she had released a cobra. “You eat it,” he said, thrusting it away from him. “You’re the only one who exists here.” She stood before him, unmoved and motionless, as though she hadn’t heard him, but for her grey eyes hardening like ice. Silently, her lips drawn tight, she turned and left him to go upstairs.

He did, in fact, fail to rise from the couch in the study to wake the boys at the hour stipulated. He must have fallen into a deep sleep and not have heard the feeble alarm clock he had placed there (he did not invoke the larger one so as not to awaken Gretchen). He had awakened suddenly when he heard the boys talking quietly in the kitchen. Fortunately, Gretchen still seemed asleep and to his delight he found that the

boys had taken care of everything themselves. Their wristwatch alarms awakened them on time, and once awake, they took care of everything with rapid efficiency. They greatly admired the quiche that Gretchen had prepared and went through it like an express train, meanwhile talking deferentially but volubly to Paul. He enjoyed their company immensely during the short time that they remained with him; and it was with genuine regret that he watched their car's meager red tail lights disappear down the street in the darkness.

He poured himself another cup of coffee and waited nervously in the kitchen for Gretchen to come downstairs. She did so, silently and solemnly, an attitude deepened by her grey cardigan over a black turtle neck sweater; she turned to him, pale and composed. "You were very mean to me last night," she said softly. Paul's effort to reply was quickly silenced by her raised palm. "You have to think about other people once in a while, Paul." She was still speaking so softly she could barely be heard. "You can't always think of yourself. And that's in fact the only person that you care about."

"That's not fair, Gretchen..."

"Yes it is. You have all the time in the world to do whatever you want. Once in a great while you're asked to do something for others, as it was here, when your oldest friends – yours, not mine - asked you to look after their son and his friend when they came to a new city, You are so selfish, you couldn't even do that. You slept through the time you were supposed to wake them up, didn't you? Believe me," she laughed sourly. "I'm not surprised."

Paul, hideously caught, (*how did she find out?*) could do no more than make some odd ineffectual gestures with his hands and to mumble something about "the alarm..."

As she was about to reach into the closet for her coat, preparatory to leaving for her class, she turned to look again searchingly at him. “You know,” she said, “it’s very hard to see someone who is so self absorbed, and so lacking in concern for others as you are. And I don’t deserve your abuse after trying as best I can to take care of these boys when they came down in the freezing cold in the night and needed some care.”

“I thought I did a lot,” he said defensively.

“Not much, let me tell you,” she snapped. “And with such reluctance! I hope they never saw how you couldn’t wait to get rid of them”. Gretchen gathered up her notebooks and put them in her tote bag. “I don’t want to talk to you right now,” she said coldly. “You can go to sleep now – what you do best.” She was gone.

Paul was wretched. He knew that there was no denying its truth. She had painted him to the life, in all its unrelieved shame. But he needn’t stay at home in the very epicenter of his pain – he would take his sketch book and go to the field, the bleak woods, the bitter cold. “And that girl?” he thought scornfully. What was he doing with a kid like that? He hoped he could be alone there, among the dead things.

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But she was there. Her hands fluttered in greeting from the top of the benches as he stepped into the glade. In a moment she rushed over to him, her broad smile glowing upon him.

“Oh, you’re here, you’re here!” she cried. “I was hoping!” She suddenly flung her arms around him, and then, abashed, drew back.

He was pleased to see her, of course, the little gamin in want of a father. She was wearing the same black jacket, with the leopard design threaded into it (probably the only

jacket she had) and a man's khaki pants, too baggy for her, sheared roughly off at the ankles. He couldn't see her blouse. "How are you, little friend?" he said gently. "I came here yesterday, hoping to see you."

"I wanted to call you on the phone," she said, jumping up and down, all excited. "but I knew I couldn't. And even if I could, I didn't know your last name."

He wasn't going to give her his last name. *I don't have a name! I'm no one.* "But that's dangerous for you, isn't it?" once again finding her so cute and endearing.

"That's why I couldn't do it!" He suddenly realized that she was trembling, and gently removed his coat. She smiled happily and quickly put it over her shoulders. "C'mon, Dad", she said. "We'll share." She led him to the benches and they sat wrapped together. "This is so warm," she sighed happily.

He squeezed her hand affectionately and then, like a blinding shaft of lightning that stunned him, she shrieked horribly in pain. "What's the matter?" he shouted, pulling his hand away and finding a bright crimson smear wetly on his palm. He threw off the coat and gently took her arm. Blood pooled slowly from a ragged gash at the upper part of her hand.

"They wanted me to do something I didn't like, so I didn't do it." Kitty said, her voice quavering, as she fought back her tears. "They found out and did this."

"Those fucking bastards!" he shouted, jerking out his handkerchief ("always a clean one," Gretchen had admonished) and gently tied it around the wound. He moaned for her. "I'll take you to the emergency room."

"No, no, it's not so bad!" Her voice came rapidly, stumbling over the words as she sought to explain. "I was lucky, Paul. I was. They could have done a lot worse." She

was so thrilled to find, close against her, a friend, like a father who really cared about her. *This is my dad!* That was why she came! To find him today, when things were so scary and so bad. He can't help her, she knew. But his being here, someone who cared – that was enough. But she could see that Paul was very angry and she wanted to calm him; she would have to tell him the rest, so that he would have to understand what she had to do and that he could not be of any help to her.

"I'll come back, soon, I promise. But I have to go now", she told him evenly. "I have to make my way back to them, all on my own, they said. That's my punishment, they said."

"If you have to go back that rotten place," he said, very upset, "I'll drive you anyway."

"No, you can't," she implored him. "I just waited here, just for a while, because I hoped I'd see you. But you can't come with me, Paul." She hesitated, and then she told him. "They'd kill us. I mean it."

"Ah, Kitty," he demurred with a superior smile, the older man's cynical way of the world. He patted her shoulder. "They're just frightening you, that's all."

"No!" she cried. Looking wildly at him, she pressed her lips closely to his ear and whispered to him. "I've seen them do it."

He drew back from her, the knowing smile slowly fading into incredulity and horror. He saw in the contortion of her face and the wide-eyed fear in her eyes that it was true. She had seen it. He tried to speak but found that his throat had dried up as though in a sand storm, reducing his voice to a whisper. "All right. Let's go to the police."

“Oh, no, they know how to talk their way out of anything! They’d put the blame on me. And then they’d wait, and when they had a chance to get me alone... No, I’m only safe if I go back.”

He knew he should let her go, it’s what she wanted to do. He had no responsibility for her. She was not his family. But the thought of her, wounded, in the streets and in the dark, groping in midnight to survive. How could he leave her, when she thought of him as her father? And he could hear Megan, appalled: *Dad, how could you let her go like that!*

“Where is this place?” he murmured.

She hesitated, and then answered him reluctantly. “Clifton.”

“No! No! That’s miles!” he protested, his full voice returned. About ten miles away, the town of Clifton was not rural, but isolated, with its large houses, heavily wooded, separated by remote acres of land. He cast about frantically for answers. Briefly, he thought of taking her away with him, to Florida for example. But he’d need money; his card was about maxed out –Gretchen’s expenses – and he’d need to get to his bank to transfer funds – but where? And if Gretchen became involved, she would want nothing to do with the girl, she’d demand that the police take charge of her. No, he could see now there wasn’t enough time to construct this grandiose arrangement. But then he was brought up short by a great revelation.

“Listen,” he said, exultant in what he believed to be solution. “Let’s just stay here as long as we can. Then, we’ll go out to the car and I’ll drive you out to Clifton. It’ll be dark by then, and I’ll just drop you off and you can just show up in the morning.”

It did seem to Kitty that the plan was a good one, but she was not wholly convinced. “I don’t know, Paul, if they see us...” she said anxiously.

“But they won’t! And this cold out here is really bad; and you’re bleeding.” He smiled and chuckled her gently under the chin. “You want to get there in one piece don’t you?”

He was right; the cold was fierce, thought Kitty, and she didn’t want to part with “her dad” who was willing to suffer in the cold just for her. No one had ever done that for her. But still, she was afraid. Sighing ruefully, she yielded to him. “Okay,” she said, “we’ll just wait here.”

They waited in the stands as long as they could, the coat giving them what warmth it could provide. They didn’t risk going back to sit in Paul’s car, as they might encounter the Silent Ones entering the woods. During that long vigil on the benches, during their time alone, Paul told her everything about himself, about Gretchen, about his own selfishness – everything. Kitty was astonished that these terrible conflicts and hostilities would arise between people on such trivial grounds, when they should be so happy with all that they had together! And she told him how she had had several foster parents –she never knew her natural father and her mother had abandoned her – and her last foster father had beaten her with whatever was at hand, once with a frying pan that left her unconscious for days. She ran away, and the Silent Ones found her sleeping in the street and took her in.

However, the relentless cold was gathering around them, and in several hours time, it took them into its grip. They were able to say less and less, until they both fell silent. Finally, trembling and exhausted, they were forced to their feet, compelled to

struggle through the woods to the car, and did so safely. Paul started the Malibu up and turned up the heat of the little car to its maximum level. It was not long before the warmth spread through their bodies like a benediction and they could look at each other with that delightful relief that only a respite from the cold can give.

But it was only about 3 pm, and they had planned to begin driving after dark. But Paul knew enough about the Clifton roads, his job had taken him there occasionally, and he was confident that he could drive Kitty to a safe place even in daylight. Kitty told him that the house was out in the farm land well beyond the sprawling Clifton area, and he planned to drive on local roads but not to pass beyond Clifton proper. He would stop about halfway and find a good stand of wood in which he could put the car, and wait there with her until nearly dawn, at which time she would leave the car and make her way to the farm house or to the nearest town and go on from there. It would save her, he figured, about six to ten hours of walking.

As they drove on, Kitty was growing more and more agitated as they proceeded down the lonely roads, grey and bleak in the January weather, and she would crouch moaning under the dashboard when cars passed them in the opposite direction. She urged Paul to let her leave the car and continue on her own, but her hand had started to bleed again and she was tired, and she reluctantly agreed with him that it would be better to park the car in the first stand of woods that would do.

It was almost dusk when Paul thought that he had found the woodland that they were searching for; it was at the top of a sweeping hill, alone and isolated. Eagerly, he drove to it, but found it disappointing. On the other side was a farm house, close by, not suitable for concealment. Irritably, becoming fatigued, he drove past the house and down

the road, which, like so many others he had seen, vanished around a bend. He had just swung around the curve when Kitty suddenly gave a cry and seized his arm. "Stop!" she cried. "Oh, God! There it is!"

Horried, Paul brought the car to a shuddering stop, and for a moment, stared open mouthed at what he saw, and then panicking, cursing, he threw the car into reverse, hurling the car back and beyond the bend and out of sight. What he had momentarily seen had transfixed him with fear. It was less than a hundred yards away. The late afternoon sun had fled from the house, leaving it enshrouded deep in shadow. It was a large ramshackle place with immense gables and a great battered roof that ran down to the second floor as if to blind it. The walls were weakly supported and sagged deeply into the interior of the structure. But it was the front portico that chilled his blood. It was immense, the shadows under it seemed immeasurably deeper than the darkness of the rest of the house; it was a void, a cavern, a gaping maw of something hateful.

Kitty was muttering frantically to her self. "Oh my God, I pray they didn't see us!" she gasped. "They'll kill me if they did - to bring strangers out here!" In her terror, she started gnawing at the sleeve of the coat which he had given her during their drive.

"They didn't see us"! he said with a vehemence he could not wholly justify. "There was no one outside, and we went right back."

"Omigod! Omigod! I hope so. I hope so." She repeated the words again and again as she convulsively reached for the door handle.

"Please let me go with you," he implored. "Let me do this with you."

"No! they'll kill us both! I told you secret things about them!" She looked angrily at him and shook off his arm.

“I can explain,” he begged. “I’ll tell them it was my fault! Please!”

“No, leave me alone!” Her face was distorted with fear. “We’ll die! You don’t know them!” Frantically, she forced the door open with her good hand and clambered from the car, staggering briefly as she tore the coat from her body and hurled it from her.

“Wait!” he shouted. But she did not hear him. She ran, demented, her hair like a red flame torturing her as she fled down the road. Paul scrambled clumsily out of the car, the cold slamming him in the face and body, maliciously blinding him in a mist that streamed over his glasses. Cursing, he wiped them on his shirt, and stood in the empty road, desperate and indecisive as she disappeared around the bend. He struggled to find a course of action. Maybe he should comply with her appeal to him, that he should not go with her, that he would endanger them both. “Sure”, he said, mocking himself. “My first thought is to run away!” Gretchen’s sardonic smile rose before him. “Come home,” she would say. “This is not for you.” He waved her image violently away. No, this time he would not fail. Kitty was only a child. His place was with her, to explain to them that it was all his fault. He could hear Megan’s cry of approval, of her pride in him. *She needs you, Dad.* Yes, that was it. It was the only way. “I have to do it!” he said aloud. “I have to do it! I have to go!”

He broke into a shambling run and followed after her.

END

