Voices

Barbara A. Rodman

"You ought to be grateful to be alive," Julia's mother's voice says.

Julia's mother has been dead now for more than sixty years, perhaps explaining the bitter tone of her sentiments. Undeniably alive, Julia nonetheless does not feel grateful, but edgy and a little defensive. She is not in the mood for an argument with a faded memory.

"Wasting the day away," her mother's voice continues, her tone the false-bright one in which she always couched her most serious criticism. "Not that it matters to *me*," she adds, insincerely, "as long as *you're* happy." She hurries over the "happy" as if it were foreign word, or a euphemism for something embarrassing.

Julia's mother never wasted a single moment of any day. Up at six a.m. or earlier, weeding the vegetable garden or cleaning bathrooms before anyone else was out of bed, she didn't rest until all the others were long asleep; she was often mending clothes or baking bread until nearly midnight. Still, she was barely fifty when she died; who knows how she might have spent the last years of her life if she'd lived as long as Julia has now?

Julia was working in New York City, rooming at a boarding house that catered to women, when someone called to tell her that Mother had died. Who? The voice comes to her now disembodied, distorted the way old radio broadcasts are, fragmented and broken by static. "I'm sorry to be the one... your mother... gone... quite unexpected. She was putting away the supper things."

Putting away the supper things. Apparently the others – Julia's father, one of her brothers and his wife, who lived in the same house – were in the living room when it happened. Or the men were. Hannah was most likely getting the children into bed. Women's work. Men's lives. The boundaries were more clearly defined in those days.

Was it Hannah who called? Quite likely. Julia's father and brothers would have considered the conveyance of such information fit work for a female, as if death itself were, like a woman's monthly menses, messy, vaguely embarrassing, possibly contaminating. In any event, it seems now to have been a woman's voice saying, "I'm sorry," offering the details of Mother's dying in the same uninflected voice that one might use to explain the significance of a geologic period, an event with no emotional significance. Long moments of silence fell into the conversation, pools into which grief, anger, fear might sink without being named, stones disappearing into murky depths. Or, no, it wasn't silence, really; in those days, even when no one was speaking, phone lines buzzed with an insistent energy all their own, a kind of whisper offering a different story than the one being spoken.

Julia had been summoned to the phone by a disapproving – or perhaps only worried – landlady. It must have been ten or eleven at night; they were both in bathrobes, but many of the women in that house had not yet gone to bed – one group sprawled around the dining table playing a card game and someone else was pounding a popular tune – "Stardust" or maybe "Singing in the Rain" – out at the piano. "Hush now," the landlady hissed at the pianist, and the music stopped. A long distance phone call was an expensive gesture; the landlady knew at once it was likely to spell disaster or some kind of loss.

Julia was self-conscious, her loud "Hello?" booming into the dark hall where the heavy black phone was kept, and it took her a moment or two to understand what she was being told. "There's no need to come home," the caller said after explaining what had happened. Travel was difficult and expensive, and Julia's family thrifty – returning for a funeral would be a waste of time and money, they all agreed. The Hubers distrusted rituals and their implicit mysticism, hurrying through them, awkward and stiffly self-conscious. At a funeral, they seemed stunned more than grieving – almost embarrassed – the ceremonies forcing an unwanted interruption into the regular business of their lives. No wakes or keening for them, but only a hasty potluck following the skimpy service, everyone in dark clothes and ill-fitting suits, the neighbors passing noodle casseroles, plates of sliced meat, cakes seasoned with raisins and nuts. Afterwards, they would all shift silently apart, avoiding each other as they found occupation for hands and minds, relieved the next morning to return to their usual tasks, child-tending, jobs, the repairing of fences and windmills.

She'd died so young, experienced so little, Julia's mother. And then she'd been so briefly and inadequately mourned. Why wouldn't her ghost-voice be critical, laden with advice and complaints?

"Mrs. Huber? Did you speak to me?" The Assistant Facilities Manager approaches, casting about for assistance if it is needed. She has the upholstered appearance of a well-made pillow, her solid color suits coordinated with appropriate blouses and shoes, the jackets buttoned tightly over hips and bust. She seems impermeable, battened down, well-protected – except for her face, which is pale and vulnerable, despite its layers of careful makeup. She is a woman more suited, in Julia's opinion, for a career as a Realtor or bank manager than work with senior citizens, who seem to frighten her.

"It's not *Mrs*. Huber," Julia has told her more than once. Though she was married three times – divorced once and widowed twice – Julia never took any man's name, shocking her brothers and their wives back in western Kansas. Julia Huber: her name was on book jackets, articles, speeches; even today it is spoken with some respect by those who know the history of modern journalism and recent feminism. She's called out questions to presidents, to heads of state, to liars and cheats making millions from their movies and plastic products and armaments. But there's no point in repeating any of that to Miss Tremont; none of it means

anything to this thick twig of a girl. To her, Julia is only one more responsibility, a cross between a cranky child and a cumbersome piece of furniture. A cross to bear.

"I only wished you a good morning," Julia says. She knows her voice is given to the speaking out loud of words that she didn't intend to say. Bits of reflection, memory, inward commentary – she doesn't even know she's spoken until someone repeats a word or two, or responds in kind. Some of the old fools in this place rattle on all day long, of course, chatting with invisible companions or simply providing an almost painfully boring commentary to their own plans and activities. The worst cases are shipped off to a state hospital in Dallas; Julia does not want to join them. "It *is* a nice morning, isn't it?" she says, squinting up at Miss Tremont.

Miss Tremont's expression is that of a person who expects to be insulted, and she hesitates before she answers. "Yes," she says, a little doubtfully. "Quite nice." "Well, then." At least the flesh-and-blood woman has driven off the ghost of her mother. Julia lets her eyes droop closed, listening to the buzz of insects and mowers in the morning air until Miss Tremont marches back inside, the click-click-click of her high heels trailing behind even after the sliding door has opened and then closed.

When Julia peeks through her lashes to make sure the woman is gone, she sees only sunlight, filtered through the teasing branches of the live oak tree, chasing shadows over the patio. Soon it will be too warm to idle her mornings away outside the dining hall while the others putter at crafts or watch TV. But now, late June and the crepe myrtles just opening in shades of white and lavender and pink, the air is still soft and welcoming to one who has spent the night fretting, sleepless and filled with a kind of absurd anxiety.

"Miz Huber? Miz Huber? Are you all right?" A small black man bends over Julia, relief melting concern from his face as she blinks awake. She's not sure what his name is; something that sounds like "Arna" in the annoying Texan slurring of vowels, dropping of consonants that makes even familiar words strange and blurred. The air is hot and oppressive now, and the man's hand leaves small patches of dampness wherever he touches her. "They said you hadn't moved in a couple hours. They sent me out to check on you," he says.

"They" is undoubtedly Miss Tremont or one of the other staff members, a higher up unwilling to be drawn into what might be a time-consuming conversation with a confused resident. Or perhaps they feared she had died while napping in the morning sun. *You ought to be grateful*, her mother says again, with less conviction. Perhaps even the dead have their limits.

Arnett (surely that's his name, not "Arna") motions to someone Julia can't see inside the glass walls of the dining area.

"I'm fine," Julia says, trying – and failing – to be amused by fears that she might be dead, "but thank you for checking." She wobbles to her feet. "I was just ready to go inside anyway."

Arnett grabs for her elbow with one hand, moving the other to her back as a sort of human brace. Unlike many of the aides he is both supportive and gentle. "Let me just getcha a wheelchair," he says.

"No, no," Julia says. A wheelchair, a walker – she wants none of that. "I can make it on my own." Her dark green caftan, an airy cotton, billows out above her ankles in a sudden breeze and she feels her body waver, as if this gentle motion of the air has knocked her off balance.

"Are you sure?" Arnett asks, glancing again at the unseen face behind the sliding glass doors.

"Take my arm," Julia directs. She's never had servants or personal assistants, but she knows how to take charge when it's necessary. "Let's go around front, not through the dining area. They'll be setting up for lunch now anyway." If she hasn't slept through that meal. What time is it anyway?

Apparently Arnett is as willing to escape the hidden scrutiny of Miss Tremont or whoever sent him out as Julia is; he grips her arm and turns away from the glass. He is sturdy and well-mannered. "You were sleeping pretty soundly," he says.

She wonders if she was snoring, as she recently did during a lull in the music at the opera. Elizabeth nudged her with a sharp elbow, hissing, "Mother – " in a stage whisper that carried as well as any shout would have across the upper balcony.

At the front entrance, they pause, Arnett releasing her arm. "You all right now, Miz Huber?"

She nods. "Thank you, Arnett," she says. "I can make it the rest of the way myself."

He holds the door for her, nodding to two women in flowered dresses on the sofa in the lobby, patent leather purses cradled in their laps, looking for all the world like obedient school girls on their way to church until you glimpse their wizened faces. *Silly fools*, Julia thinks.

The cold air indoors hits her like a slap in the face. Why must they have the thermostat set so low? It can't be healthy – too much of a contrast with the weather outside – and it surely is wasteful. The staff who work at the front desk wear sweaters and jackets all summer and rumor has it that they keep a small space heater under the counter, sometimes running it even in July and August.

As Julia walks across the lobby, one of the women on the sofa looks a bit discomfited and asks, "What were you saying, Miss Huber? What's unhealthy?"

Julia hates the southern habit of addressing one's peers as "Mrs." and "Mr."; it seems old-fashioned and silly. Still it makes her uneasy to think she has spoken again without being aware of it. "I just asked about your health," she says,

struggling to remember the other woman's name. Something bland and yet exotic. "How are you doing, Blanche?"

Blanche brightens, launching into a lengthy narrative about her recent surgery, which Julia has forgotten. She ends with an invitation to join them on a shopping trip. "We're just waiting for the shuttle bus to come round," she says. "It won't be here for a few minutes."

Her companion, taking in Julia's crumpled and none too clean caftan, looks mildly appalled at the invitation.

"Oh, no," Julia says. "Not today." She has always hated shopping, despised the pointless searching for household gadgets and unnecessary clothes. "Thanks anyway," she adds, heading for the elevators, now open to emit a few other residents apparently aiming for the shuttle bus too. The bus makes several round trips a day into town, passing the local shopping mall, the county courthouse, the hospital and adjacent complex of doctors' offices, and a Senior Citizens Center recently funded by the City. Malls depress her; she visits them only under duress. All that conspicuous consumption, all those shiny, useless objects. What kind of world do we live in, she wondered, that people must go shopping for their exercise and entertainment? But if the bus is just now coming round, that means it's only 10:30 a.m.; she didn't sleep as long as she thought.

At mealtimes, Julia has the choice of fixing her own food in the galley kitchen of her apartment or joining the others in the dining room. The residents have all been issued a sort of credit card to use when they eat downstairs. It tallies the charges and adds them to her monthly rent payment. Usually she does breakfast and lunch on her own, but goes down for supper. It's easier that way. She can keep bread, milk, instant oatmeal in stock, but doesn't need to worry about meat and more substantial supplies.

Her apartment is stuffy, so she turns on the air conditioner, which she doesn't like to run because it's noisy and makes the air too dry. Elizabeth says she's just being obstinate about it. When Julia and Edward stayed with Elizabeth, briefly, before they moved in here, the settings on the thermostat were a constant battle. Elizabeth has lived in Dallas long enough that she's developed a taste for what Julia considers downright chilly temperatures.

She putters for awhile, organizing the bills so Elizabeth can help her pay them when she comes later in the week. Left to Julia's own devices, some bills get paid several times, others not at all. She knows she has plenty of money, but isn't sure when it must be transferred from savings or investments to her checking. Luckily, this is just the sort of thing Elizabeth excels at. Julia mentioned it only once and Elizabeth set up a system. She still signs the checks herself and isn't ready to give her daughter power-of-attorney: not quite that senile yet, thank you very much. But she knows it won't be long now until she must turn over all of her business and finances to someone else. It exhausts her, just the sorting and

marking of envelopes, the filling in of amounts, the writing of dates. So many numbers to remember by the time one is her age, and for what?

She eats a light lunch, tuning into National Public Radio for the news and a talk show she enjoys. The host invited her to be his guest once or twice, oh, several years ago. She liked the fellow; he was sharp and good-humored. The sort of man Elizabeth ought to have married, instead of wasting an expensive education and so much talent as she has. *Art*, she calls her pots and ceramic wall ornaments. Crafts is more like it. And she doesn't make enough to live on. Earning a living has been left to her husband, a nice enough man, Julia thinks, if that were any recommendation. Julia Huber's daughter could have done better.

Elizabeth's pots are pretty, Julia will give her that. And a few of her better pieces have been displayed in art galleries, occasionally museums. Elizabeth has a wheel and a kiln and walls full of paints and chemicals in what used to be her garage. "You don't need a garage in this part of the country," Elizabeth explained. "Really, this is much more useful." Straight A's the girl made, all through college and graduate school. She was nearly done with her thesis – a study of the community activism in a small manufacturing town in New England – when she met Scott. Twenty-three, she had been. Full of promise as a scholar. She claimed later, it was art she'd always loved but had been afraid to tell her mother. Afraid? Of Julia?

Elizabeth is nearly the same age now that Julia's mother was when she died. Yet she seems still a child to Julia, an obstinate one, secretive and willful. Julia wonders if Elizabeth is happy. It seems unlikely. Satisfied, perhaps.
Was I ever happy? Julia wonders. *I was. I was often quite happy*.

In mid-afternoon Julia awakes when Felecia comes round to change the sheets and clean the bathrooms. Elizabeth engaged Felecia when she noticed, she claimed, that the linens were odorous and dust layered every surface in the tiny apartment. At first Julia was irritated. "I don't want a cleaning lady poking around in my things," she said. "A little privacy, even at my age, is important. Really, Elizabeth."

But Elizabeth held firm, and now Felecia comes in once a week, polishing and tidying. But she also drinks coffee with Julia and gossips; she cleans for several tenants and picks up all kinds of useful tidbits. "They shipped off that one woman, you know, the tall one with the kinky hair. Like steel wool – you could scrub a pan with that head. That's right – Mrs. Benedict. Anyway, she's over at the Rehab Center now, learning to walk again. A stroke they say. They gave her apartment to a new couple, the Alvarezes. She'll go in the Assisted Living when she comes back. Mrs. Benedict, I mean."

Assisted Living is a euphemism for Almost Dead, in Julia's mind. That's where Edward had gone after the second heart attack. Not that she hadn't seen him every day, even then. She'd pack up in the morning and go down to feed him

breakfast and read the paper. Then he'd doze – they both would – and eat lunch together. The afternoons were long and sometimes tedious. Edward lost his interest in living in little ways, the life slipping out of him bit by bit, emptying from the inside out, so you didn't notice at first. But by the end he was little more than a husk of the man he'd once been.

His death was anticlimactic. Julia was sitting by the desk in his narrow room. She'd been asked to write an article for the *Atlantic* and she was working on the introduction to it, abstracted. Edward was doing a crossword or maybe reading a bit, more asleep than awake, she guessed; he couldn't concentrate much by then. He coughed or shifted in the bed, something that called Julia's attention to him, and she looked up. "What is it?" Julia asked, still thinking about the sentence she was writing. "Do you want a drink?"

He tried to speak, but only a sort of gobbling sound came out, a guttural emission utterly out of keeping with Edward's usual precision. He seemed surprised, she thought later, baffled by his own failure to articulate the idea in his head.

Julia didn't understand what was happening at first, didn't move to offer him a hand or even call the nurse. He drew in a deep breath, half sigh and half gasp, and sagged forward over the bed tray, and she didn't see the life drain out of his eyes. She felt guilty when she realized what had happened. Would he have lived a bit longer if she'd been able to respond more quickly?

Age-related causes, the doctor wrote on the death certificate. He was someone new, filling in for a colleague who was in Houston at a conference.

"Age-related? What does that mean?" Julia demanded.

The doctor shrugged. "We all die of old age if we live long enough," he said without humor. "Unless we're in an accident or contract some kind of disease." The nurse understood what was going on, tried to hustle him off, but he was obtuse. "Even the cancers, heart attacks – after a certain age, they're no more than nature taking its course," the doctor said. "Everyone dies of something."

Everyone dies of something. Indeed. Edward would have liked that line. The nurse rolled her eyes, just barely, in the doctor's direction and offered silent sympathy to Julia.

Elizabeth and many of the staff – that twit Miss Tremont, for example – expected Julia to be relieved. They offered condolences like sour cough drops. "It's better this way," and "He wouldn't have wanted to go on as he was." As if they had any idea what kind of man Edward was, what he might want. That Elizabeth might think Edward's death was a relief to Julia said a world about Elizabeth's own marriage.

Julia misses Edward still, every day. She knows his absence the way she knows the aches in her joints and the stiffness in her limbs. She would give anything to be able to do over his dying, to leap up, call for assistance, perhaps

prolong his existence just one more day. And to hear his raspy voice telling a joke, offering a bit of advice about her writing, commenting on the President's peccadillos. A word of tenderness, a word of love. Her own name spoken clearly. Her own name. That would be enough.

By the time Edward died, he'd been in the medical care unit for months, but even then Julia would sometimes lie on the bed beside him, both of them wanting the comforts of the other's flesh. The staff frowned on such arrangements, but only too often the staff wasn't around. Lord knew what they were up to. Julia got in the habit of spending most of the day at Edward's side, helping with his feeding, changing the TV channels, reading aloud from books, buzzing – repeatedly – for an aide when Edward needed help to get to the bathroom or to be turned in his bed. She insisted they keep him clean, that his room was lined with plants and books, that the aides treat him with respect. "He was a professor all his adult life," she told them. "Call him Dr. McIntosh, please." He was "Edward" only to Julia.

When they finally attached him to all those tubes – tubes to feed, tubes to remove the "waste" – she had to give up those delicious, forbidden afternoons napping side by side in his bed, his breath jagged but familiar, his arm no weight at all across her breast. He'd been a large man when she met him, but at the end, he was shrunken, his skin loose over the bones it held within. He remained good-humored and affectionate up to the very end. She is sure it was her name he meant to speak in those last moments, his face bright with interest even as death came upon him. *Julia*, he was starting say. And then what? What words had he meant to leave in her keeping?

Felecia calls out, "I'm about done now, Miz Huber. You want the fans down from your storage closet before I go?"

Julia much prefers the soft purring of fans to the racket of the air conditioner, but Elizabeth put them all away during the winter months. "Yes, I would like them down," Julia says, and helps Felecia wipe them off and arrange them at key places in the small apartment. One of the aides has mentioned that soaking her feet in a lavender bath just before bed might help her sleep, and she repeats this to Felecia.

"You want me to find some packets for you? I'll look at the Drug Emporium. They carry a lot of stuff like that." Julia offers her a five dollar bill, but Felecia pulls away. "You just wait till I find them. They can't cost much. You pay me back then." She seems to worry that someone will accuse her of stealing from her elderly clients. Julia suspects the staff has used such tactics in the past to get rid of "outside" help who developed friendships with the residents. She can just imagine Miss Tremont, grimly pleased, confronting a small, colorless woman like Felecia with real or imagined transgressions. "I'll bring the receipt," Felecia says as she leaves the apartment. "See you next week."

When Felecia is gone, Julia makes her way to the bathroom, pulling off the caftan and giving herself a spit bath. In her youth, that was routine. They didn't shower and bathe every day. Even your hair was washed, thoroughly wetted and scrubbed with soap of some kind, only every week or two. Girls brushed it in between, sometimes using talc to take away the oil. They would have thought it wasteful to stand in the hot water every morning and night, pouring soap and shampoo and all those conditioners down the drain. Now it is simply too difficult for Julia to climb in and out of the tub, even though hers is fitted with bars and supports to make her stall safer. She saves her baths and showers for her Agood" days or afternoons when Elizabeth is in the living room, able to come to her aid if she were to fall.

She pulls on elastic-waisted pants, a loose-fitting top, and her Rockports. Every day she takes a walk, though when it is hot, she stays inside the buildings. They know her on every floor, in every hallway. "You could go to the mall in the mornings," Miss Tremont has reminded her. "With the others."

Julia ignores her. The shopping mall. Too depressing. Not to mention the awful conversations she'd have to endure with Blanche and her ilk, still concerned about white shoes and patent leather and the arrival of Easter. That's all so many of them have now, she admits, the occasional pleasure of wearing a new dress to church or out to dinner. A few of them still have husbands or "keep company," as they call it, with one of the old men. Julia didn't like dating even when she was younger, though she always liked men. All that polite conversation, the avoiding of anything serious – religion, politics, sex. All that pretense.

Julia wanted engagement, a man who could argue, a man who could think. That had been the appeal of Jack, Elizabeth's father. He was a reporter, a "trouble-shooter" who specialized in war, in violence. Not that he'd been violent himself, though he had a nose for trouble. It was an accident, really, that he'd left Julia a widow and not a divorcee. He'd been gone for years, more absent than present through most of Elizabeth's childhood. *Perhaps that explains the attraction of Scott*, Julia thinks. *A man who would stay*.

Jack died of something like dysentery or food-poisoning, far from home in Columbia. Pig-headedness, that's what had killed him when it came down to it. "He wouldn't see a doctor," the woman explained. That was another late night call, but by then they weren't unusual. Elizabeth was asleep and Julia was working on a piece for *Harper's*. She remembered the woman who called; she was well-known, a photographer. The lines between New York and Bogota were so clear you might have thought the call came from the apartment next door. "He was feverish, dehydrated," the woman said. "I tried to keep fluids down him, but – "

Julia understood. "He was impossible," she said.

"Yes," she agreed. "Impossible."

The insurance bought them a house, Elizabeth and Julia, and gave them a few years of something like a normal life. Julia never told her daughter the whole truth, but maybe the girl guessed. She wanted what she thought other girls had – brothers, a canopy bed, matching sweater sets. It was a hard time for them both; Julia was nearly forty when her daughter was born, and motherhood had not come easy to her.

Elizabeth is better at that than she was, Julia knows. Three children, though it is only the girl, Karen, that Julia feels close to. The boys are too much like their father, good-humored, successful, and essentially shallow. Karen, the youngest, is prone to melancholy and outbursts of anger, but she is also compassionate, easily shamed, and eager to please.

Julia thinks about Karen as she walks, noticing little about her surroundings as she troops from one end of each building to the other, top to bottom. Karen is nineteen, confused about her future, skittish with her parents. Julia's set up a trust for her – she has similar ones for the boys – that she won't inherit fully until she's thirty-five. At the time, Julia's financial advisor convinced her that too much ready cash at too young an age could spell disaster, but now she wonders. Would it be better to let the girl have full control of her inheritance even at a rather tender age? It might be a vote of confidence in her abilities, an opportunity to take charge of her life.

Not that Julia intends to die quite yet. She speaks to the staff and others she meets without paying much attention to them. So few of the younger ones really know how to deal with the elderly; they become patronizing and inappropriately familiar – "Hello, Julia. You're looking nice today. New lipstick?", smiling at her as if she were a dog trained to jump through hoops B or they avert their eyes, like Miss Tremont, frightened by what they see as the ugliness of aging.

Oh, they may smirk and say, as Elizabeth's friend Susan Burnham does, "I want to be just like you when I grow up, Julia, feisty and independent," but they don't see her as a real human any more, just an Elderly Person. Secretly, they are horrified by the wrinkled skin, the age spots, the sagging breasts. Julia doesn't blame them, not really. She herself was as bad as the rest when she was their age. You might say you don't mind getting older, claim to be relieved by the arrival of menopause, but it isn't true. One day you look in the mirror and a stranger stares back, a woman like your mother, who'd been old when she was only thirty.

That loose skin like wattles on the underside of your arms, those thighs, the thickening waist. No one is ready for that, Julia thinks. The movie stars fight it with plastic surgery, endless exercise, painful diets. The rest of us give up, sooner or later. A man like Edward might help, of course. They met when Julia was in her fifties, Elizabeth quite mortified when he began to spend the night. She thought her mother was too old for sex, or maybe for love of any kind. But you're never too old, Julia knows. Never.

She paces the halls steadily, imagining Edward waiting for her back in what was once their shared apartment. It wasn't that Edward was so good in bed, but that he loved Julia so completely, taking her in, mind and body both, as if she were all of a piece. Her best work came after that union, she believes, her energy at its peak. Elizabeth went away to college, Julia gave up on daily housekeeping. They wrote together, took walks, traveled around the world. Edward was much in demand; his specialty was the Middle East, but unlike Jack, he was devoted to the making and keeping of peace.

They gave him a Chair in Peace Studies and he spoke to rooms crowded by earnest students and Quakers and young women who didn't shave under their arms. He and Julia were a Famous Couple, in their own way. They both were grateful to have found love again, but not surprised, she thinks now. They were physically active, able to hike and swim if they wanted, though neither was really an athlete. They grew old and soft together, not a bit jealous of those who were younger. What do Elizabeth or Miss Tremont or Susan Burnham know about love and the satisfaction of being able to sit in silence together, looking up at the same moment to see a girl in a red dress, bows in her hair, pirouetting, and then meeting each other's eyes with a smile?

In the evening, Julia brews a cup of licorice tea, another cure someone has mentioned for sleeplessness, and opens the windows in her bedroom so she can feel the slight breeze waft through. Another week or two, and it will be too hot, even at midnight, for that. The North Texas climate has always seemed vindictive to her, muggy and comfortless most of the year. But after Edward's first heart attack, Elizabeth encouraged them to move closer to her and Scott. "Who would be there to help you if Edward became an invalid?" Elizabeth said. Edward's only child had died years before, with Edward's second wife, in a horrific car accident.

Edward agreed. He wouldn't mind Texas, he claimed. He said he'd had enough of New York winters and the crowded streets. Julia thought he was adventurous, and he really did like Elizabeth and her children. She smiles even now thinking of him playing on the floor with the boys when they were small.

A few of her neighbors come and go as the evening wears on, none of them knowing she watches from the darkened frame of her window. A cat cries out, scampers across the patio below. Finally she is tired enough, she thinks, to fall asleep in bed. Pushing aside the covers, not disturbing the piles of books and journals and magazines on the other side, she wonders if she should get rid of this old queen, buy a little daybed like the one Karen has, wider than a twin, but meant, clearly, for only one person. Susan Burnham claims that you sleep better in a bed meant only for sleep. She always looks askance at the mounds of written material on Julia's bed, intimidated, no doubt, by both the academic journals and the leftist politics they represent.

Julia misses Edward the most at night. It isn't just the sex, though she misses that enough. But the smells of a man's body, sweat and garlic and the sharp-edged scent of grass and sunshine if he'd been working in the yard. Julia always had a man to spend the night with, if she wanted one. Elizabeth was hurt, shamed, by her mother's profligate loving. She wanted a respectable mother, and, lord knows, Julia never meant to be one.

Julia's loves have not always been wise ones. She spent some nights in tears, a few with men she wanted to leave. She lived once with a man who would strike at her, who once drove her to the emergency room and then moved out of her apartment. She was more hurt, at the time, by his leaving than the broken arm. She's made mistakes, remembers a few nights when she said, "What the hell," and went to bed with a man she didn't really like.

But what she remembers now is the reaching out in the dark on a night such as this and being able to touch the skin of man who might sigh and move closer, who might turn in his sleep and pull her to his chest, who might take her hand and place it on the sharp bone of his hip, topping it with his own. Flesh to flesh, her breasts against his spine, warm breath, maybe boozy, whispering, "It's all right now. Go to sleep," when she awoke with a cry from a frightening dream. All her memories merge into one, a man with Edward's face, Jack's spine, the voice of her first husband, and her own body, young again, moving with grace and welcoming energy.

She wakes in the middle of the night, not sure what time it is. The clock's gotten turned somehow so she can't read it clearly, but she can't hear any cars outside, and the quality of the silence makes her think it's two or three a.m. The night is slipping by more easily than many; she's relieved.

She turns to get more comfortable and notices a light from down the hall. The bathroom? Or perhaps the kitchen? For a moment, she feels a rush of panic, then it eases. Edward must have gotten up and gone into one of the other rooms to read, not wanting to disturb her. That's what woke her, no doubt. And it would explain the clock; he must have turned it to check the time as he pulled out his robe from the closet.

Julia curves her body around the space Edward will occupy when he returns to bed, chilled and wanting to her to warm his back and buttocks. "Edward?" she calls out, her voice dense with sleep. But he does not answer before she drifts back off to sleep.