

BOARDINGHOUSE

Lois Wolfe

Margaret Donahue held tight to the handrail as she stepped off the bus. The gravel slope on the shoulder of the road made sure footing a challenge. She'd been to town to see the doctor and could not escape the obvious. At sixty-two, her body was more than stiff and tired. It was turning on her. She felt laid low by the passage of time. The doctor said her kidneys were beginning to fail.

"Am I on my way out?" she asked him.

"Let's try this," he said, scribbling, which is the way physicians say, yes, you are.

She walked the dusty shoulder of the road to the yard of her boardinghouse and leaned on the sagging gate to fan herself with the newspaper she'd picked up free on the seat of the bus. Waste not, want not. She ignored the state of her pansies withering in pots on the porch and went straight upstairs without checking the kitchen. She knew which boarder was clanking the kettle making tea at this hour. The same one who had burned toast that morning. A whiff of cindered crust hung close to the ceiling in the stairwell.

Margaret's bedroom in the Heartsease Inn was painted dusty rose and took in more sunlight than any other on the second floor of the boardinghouse. That was only fair. She owned the business. She deserved something. She kicked off her shoes, turned on the radio and leaned back against the headboard, legs straight out, arms at her side like the pink-cheeked, stiff-limbed doll she neglected as a child.

Her four-poster bed faced an open window that gave her a view of the railroad bridge and rusty iron girders that crossed Mudson Creek. A dry, hot summer made the water run slow and sludge-colored. The creek bent an elbow behind her son Eggie's beer garden and the two-pump Esso station next to it. There, the water took a downward slope and gained momentum as it ran past the First Kings Volunteer Fire Hall and disappeared somewhere off the edge of a

weedy field of pigeon grass half a mile down the road, which was as far as Margaret could see.

She had accepted that her world would be small when she moved to First Kings, West Virginia, from Praeger Town, Ohio, long ago. Like most patch towns that grew up around the portals and tipples of coal mines, First Kings hid its larger self in pockets off the main road. Houses, histories and active animosities were tucked behind trees, on rocky hillsides, in winding creek bottoms, far from outsiders' eyes. After more than thirty years as a pleasant neighbor and self-sufficient woman, Margaret was still an outsider. Some things people just would not accept.

The radio by the bed took a spasm and created a buzzy, static field where Mr. Kennedy's election speech had been. She felt disrespectful turning him off, such a hopeful young man, but there were more important things in the world to decipher in 1960. The wind had gone strange. Four days and it hadn't made rain, turned cold, or whipped up a storm. It frisked dead leaves and whooshed in the window on the trail of something. Upset her sewing basket and blew Edgar Senior's picture off the mirror of the dressing table and under the bed. She could no longer see him because she could not bend. It was hard to believe. She had always been a limber woman, washing, cleaning, cooking, making her beloved boardinghouse a home, her home a business. It was the only financial legacy she could offer her son and she had begun to question whether she really owed it to Eggie when she died. He had stopped visiting her like a son should in '57, the same year that the sourwood trees along the Appalachian plateau stopped blooming. Showers of urn-shaped corollas, white and jaunty as fairy hats, were falling lifeless in the woodlands. Bees had a serious adjustment to make, from sourwood blossoms to clover and laurel, and Margaret had feared from that point on that Eggie would stop coming home to the Heartsease for breakfast. Sure, he was busy, having just bought a business a quarter mile down the road from her but, without sourwoods, she had run out of his honey. Clover gave a thin, easy, weedy honey. No dark, rich undertones to complement her bacon-flecked boardinghouse biscuits. Eggie seemed to accept the mediocre in many things, but apparently drew the line at a downgrade in his biscuit world. He stopped visiting once a week. He wouldn't admit to being persnickety. He said he just had a business to run.

“But you run a beer garden, dear. Drunks sleep late. You have time for breakfast.”

“My business is not your business, Mother. I know my business.”

Open rudeness. A sign of more distance and absence to come. Her niece, Anna, displayed it, too, though somehow, Margaret had always found discourtesy on Anna’s part less offensive. Anna rejected the things she could not tolerate in a mannerly way. Margaret liked to think that it was a legacy of her own good teaching, a manifestation of her maternal art. More likely it was because Anna was half a race other, already embodying more than one way of understanding.

Sophie, Anna’s mother and Margaret’s beloved sister, had died when Anna was an infant, as had her father, Cullin, a law student. Margaret had trained herself not to say bludgeoned or murdered but the thought picture never left. She worried that Anna could somehow read the image on her face, or hear the strain of withholding in her voice. However much had been read or heard, Anna as a child appeared to absorb Margaret’s missteps, the withholding and not knowing, perhaps because Anna held inside her essence an understanding of what genuinely constitutes a threat to human dignity. Thus, Margaret believed, Anna held a secret disrespect for the aunt who loved her as a mother. How else to explain Anna marrying a coarse, uneducated man and moving from First Kings to Odeen, a hilly town on the undrawn rim of a color line between the two communities.

Even so, it was Anna’s company that Margaret missed more than Eggie’s. Anna had six years of piano lessons, a year of university and a mind willing to entertain unfamiliar ideas. Margaret could talk with her. Eggie had barely earned a vo-tech diploma in high school and never spoke of his honorable discharge from the Army. He had been wounded in France. Eggie’s smile had changed coming home from war. It took the tilt of a grimace, as if, when she talked with him, he was discounting a joke only he could hear.

Her longtime boarder, Henry Wojcik, knocked on the door and brought her a bed tray of broth and dumplings.

“I hope you told Eggie I was going to the doctor,” Margaret said.

Wojcik leaned close to seat the tray across her lap. “I did let him know you were doing poorly.”

“He won’t come to see me. I know it.” She raised a handkerchief to her nose as if she felt a snuffle.

The hallmark of Henry Wojcik's hygiene was the waft of strong cologne made of raging spices that never quite hid the whiff of fermentation. He was a man who swam through life in a heavy brine, confiding early in their friendship that his birth sign was a fish. She couldn't fault him for trying to rationalize. She had her own guilt and social habits that could not be excused. For one, she had kept Wojcik as her handyman for twenty years when he could fix nothing, really, but chicken soup. He meant well without the ability to do well. It was an irony in hapless men which Margaret tolerated. The price was usually affordable.

"Maybe Eggie's afraid that I'm decrepit, ready to kick the proverbial bucket," she told Wojcik. "Just tell him I've hit a little trough."

"Trough? Two weeks of afternoons in bed, Margaret. That's an abyss for a woman your age. I tried to convey that to Eggie last night. I'm not sure he even heard. He had such a big, wonderful, noisy crowd. New pinball machine."

"I've lost him for good."

"Don't resort to fatalism, dear girl. Keep that sunshine spirit. Eggie's just busy, a serious proprietor, like yourself."

"He owns a bar, Henry. A beer garden that sells liquor without a license. I own a clean, respectable business."

"Margaret, be honest. There is no substitute for a good tavern in a town. It's the keystone of social welfare. Yes, this inn gives us safe, dependable shelter but that's a luxury. Safe, dependable inebriation is a necessity. Troubling, perhaps, but a valid law of human nature. Can't you just be proud of your boy?"

"Not today," she said. Her son knew she'd been sick and he didn't care. He was slipping away from her. Things could get worse. As a mother, she was slipping away from him.

Exhausting, this need to hold them all together. Eggie had seemed happy enough when he was small but developed a haunted tweak around the eyes by the time he was ten. He was a child so distractible and nervous that you could hardly count on his standing still long enough for you to say his given name, Edgarton Lee. He was a boy whose eyes flashed a lot of mischief, but his face didn't enjoy any of it. Edgar Senior had left them, Anna was still a toddler then, and the Depression had taken their cash and savings. All they had left was the boardinghouse and room rates that went down to thirty-five cents a day. She herself had felt haggard until 1941 when the war focused everyone in one forward direction. Coal production boomed, bringing laborers to town and more boarders

than she could handle. Then Eggie enlisted. Not what she had expected. On his return, he fought her expectations, begging off major repair jobs at the house, taking contract work far away in Ohio and Maryland, collecting veterans' benefits and questionable friends, saving his money, showing up with girlfriends whose names she needn't bother remembering. She prayed he would find a nice girl who covered her cleavage, was not already married and knew how to write thank you letters. More often she prayed that he would give up the beer garden before she died and become a man of substance and integrity. His father had, at least, managed one of two.

Odd that Henry Wojcik, a lost soul from an earlier war, a different religion and a more cultured background, had emerged as the touching constant in her life. He was hopelessly attentive and acknowledged her love of color, zest and art in the small ways he could. The bed tray he brought had a red-checkered napkin and a sprig of mint leaf in a bud vase. She fingered the leaves, raising the scent. "You are too kind to me, Henry."

He was a sixty-six-year-old boarder and he blushed like a boy at a dance. "The Teapot in Sagittarius is just past the meridian in the south tonight."

"No, thank you."

"Cassiopeia and Pegasus will be halfway up the sky."

"I'm afraid I'm not up to it."

He coughed to clear something. "I could perhaps save up to buy a second telescope, if you preferred your own viewing."

"I have quite enjoyed yours."

He straightened the foot of her bedspread a bit and looked out the window. "I would accuse you of innuendo if I thought it would do me any good."

"It wouldn't."

"I'll be back for the tray. Please eat something this time."

She had no appetite but fished out one small dumpling. Henry would have counted them beforehand. He was like that with details, aware that minute changes could make the difference between things that stood and those that fell. He had been some type of engineer in the army, a bridge builder, or one who blew up bridges, she wasn't sure. She felt like a falling object herself. Unable to cook, launder, collect rent, keep up with the bills, remember to order twenty pounds of flour, five slabs of salt pork, and a jumbo jar of fruit cocktail from Shanabarger's store. This was serious, for the boardinghouse was more than a livelihood to

Margaret. She sheltered coal miners, transients and souls at loose ends. For her, the Heartsease Inn stood for something. Life-long acts of nurture. The name itself begat love. Heartsease was what oldtimers called pansies, a blossom that represented memory and loving thoughts. Each spring she germinated pansies in planter boxes on eight front windows of the old three-story Victorian, hoping the tri-colored petals distracted notice from the splintery porch, sagging steps, and turret roof shedding its shingles. Pansies were reputed to cure the pangs of absent love.

Once, in a summer long ago, Margaret had recklessly taken the lives of a hundred pansies to make juice for a love potion that didn't work. She had found herself in her forties smitten by a handsome piano tuner from Philadelphia who had an extended stay at the Heartsease. He was a trained classicist contracted to repair and tune the pipe organ of a city church. Tobias. She still loved to say his name. He had refused to play her old upright in the parlor and only tuned it when she paid him. The petals she crushed produced juice that turned rank. The elixir separated. Tobias departed. The pansies' power to affect the heart had been corrupted, she believed, due to her intense shame in needing to produce it.

The dumpling Margaret had eaten to satisfy Henry unsettled her stomach. She belched immodestly, appallingly, twice. Wind whistled over the open sill and inflated the pale chenille bedspread so wildly it lost its grip and slithered to the floor. Margaret tried to retrieve it but fell back on the pillow, accepting the chill tightening her chest and throat.

There was movement on the bridge. A figure clutched the collar of a red sweater closed against the wind. It was Anna in a faded blue silk headscarf with her fine-curved hair barely visible, cropped close, cupping her face. Margaret had never known how to braid her hair, not really. Aching soft wisps haloed her head by the time Anna got out the door on her way to school, that long lonely walk to the black school. A petite child, Anna looked especially small bundled in a coat, holding her lunch bag and notebook, waving goodbye to Margaret watching from the window. At the paved road Anna began the two-mile walk to the one-room clapboard colored school in Odeen. Clusters of white children passed her walking the opposite direction to First Kings School, just half a mile from the Heartsease.

Margaret had worked hard to put the best light on her unconventional little family. She felt that if she was guilty of anything, it was hoping too much. When Anna left college to marry the wastrel, Gifford Rundel, Margaret felt bowed to the

ground by the loss of her hope. The waste of a girl like Anna on a popinjay like Giff. It was outright rejection of all Margaret had offered not only for the sake of her only sister, Sophie, but for the sake of the beautiful girl she loved as deeply as the son she'd borne.

Crossing the creek to the Heartsease, Anna had to walk miles in a stinging wind or else spend twenty-five cents on a bus ride, a sacrifice of time or money she could not afford supporting a man like Giff. Margaret struggled herself to a sitting position so that she could reach her housecoat.

"Aunt Margaret?"

She wished Anna would slip one day and call her "Mother." Even as a girl, Anna had been clear who Margaret was.

Anna took off her sweater. "How are you feeling?"

"A little chilled to tell you the truth," Margaret said.

Anna untied her head scarf and slid the window closed. "Fall's on its way."

They did not speak these days of books or music or artists they admired. Oh, the letters Anna had written in her first year at the university, exploding from the envelope in sheaves, unfolding in blossoms of curiosity and eager intent, all in bold and elegant script. Just the first year. After that, Anna went to a separate world to study.

It felt so good to have Anna with her that Margaret was nearly giddy. She grasped Anna's hand. "I need to dry pansy seeds for the winter. Could you help me today?"

"I'm sorry, I can't. Did the doctor say you could get back to work?"

"No matter how well-meaning, we are never compelled to accept ridiculous advice." Margaret rippled the cover off in three tiny motions, like a moth its casing, and grabbed the headboard with her free hand. She was woozy when she stood. Anna steadied her and helped her down the hall into the bathroom. Margaret ran water in the sink, avoiding the mirror. Waddles of loose skin drooped from her jawline. She was being emptied from the inside out.

"Do you need help?" Anna called from outside the door.

"I'm not an invalid, dear. I bathe myself." She barely had strength to wring the cloth. She needed to sound interested in life outside the confines of her unstable body. "How is Giff?"

"His back is better. He's on call for state road work now." Cleaning swales, spreading gravel, digging ditches. After piano lessons, etiquette study and a year of

college, she had married a day laborer. All that Margaret had done to make Anna a person of uncommon ability had come to naught. She lived in a little house with chickens in the yard, set high on a hillside like an alphabet block in a wad of modeling clay. Everything to naught, even unto religion, it seemed. Raised Wesleyan, Anna was now working for Catholics, a secretary in the parish office in Gillespie, the county seat. Margaret was relieved to find Anna still leaning against the wall in the hall as she opened the bathroom door. The walk back to her bedroom went better than the walk out. Margaret realized that her bed had become a cavern swallowing her one dreary thought at a time. She kept her shoes on and perched at the bedside, willing herself to sit straight.

Anna stared out the window. "You hear from Eggie?"

"He has a new pinball machine," Margaret said. She stood, wanting to lessen the distance between them. Anna had always been expert at not letting sadness show. Margaret long ago learned to read the tight chest and too-square set of her shoulders as signs of pain withheld. It was a struggle to cross the room to reach her. "Anna, what's wrong?"

"Giff's gone again. This time for good, I think. He found another woman."

Oh, blessed Lord.

Anna looked at her. "You happy now?"

Bitterness, slung so accurately, wields a raw weight we can't escape. Margaret would have fallen to the floor if Anna had not caught her and guided her backwards to the chair.

"No, Anna, I am not happy." A declaration was all she had energy for. She cupped her hands in her lap. "You know I can't be happy when you're hurt."

Anna wiped her eyes. "I'm not moving back here."

Margaret composed herself in order to lie well. "I didn't think you would."

"I have a job, commitments."

"Will you divorce him?"

"Don't get your hopes up." Anna put on her scarf.

"You know how cruel to me that sounds."

"You know it's not meant that way. It's honest. I'm always honest with you. That, we agreed." Anna paused a moment, leaned down and pressed her cheek to Margaret's, just a touch. "I have to go. I have a second job here in First

Kings. I just wanted to tell you about Giff in person. Before people started talking.”

Margaret tried to smile good-bye and found she could not control her face at all.

On her way out of the room, Anna stopped to straighten the antimacassar on the small stuffed day chair in the corner. “You do realize that boarders are leaving you.”

“Ridiculous,” Margaret said. “Henry would have told me.”

“You’d better start balancing the accounts.”

Margaret protested. “Henry may be a mooch but he’s not a thief, for heaven’s sake.”

“I’m not suggesting he is. Just check the accounts. The Connelly boy skipped out on you. Steel mills in Harrisburg, I heard. Seebolt is leaving for a railroad job in Marietta. And Kinneston’s moving out for cheaper rent in an outbuilding on the Adams’ farm.”

“That deserter. He’ll freeze. Anna, why are you telling me all this?”

“Woj is afraid to. He thinks you’ll worry.” Anna gathered her sweater. “And you should.” She faced Margaret. “You’re responsible here, aren’t you?”

“Who else would be?” Margaret called, irritated, as Anna’s footsteps creaked on the stairs.

What Anna had done dawned slowly. Dear God, how she knows me. She sees my fear of irrelevance. As clearly as I see her fear of believing in me. *Oh, yes, I’m the owner. My guests depend on me. This house depends on me.*

She reached for the thumping stick which lay cross-ways atop her night stand. Wojcik had fitted the stick with a rubber cup on its foot so the sound would be, as he said, declarative but not denting. He had odd worries about hurting the house, as if it had skin, nerves, organs, memories that required vigilance and preservation. Margaret thumped the floor beside the bed. Three times for thirsty. Pause. Two for food. After some delay, she heard one ding of the kitchen bell from below. He was sober.

Wojcik came up with a cup of tea. The cup tinkled in its saucer. He was getting jittery.

Must be close to four o’clock, Margaret thought. Happy hour at Eggie’s place. “Anna said she has a second job. Henry, is she working nights at Eggie’s? And you didn’t tell me?”

Wojcik would not look at her and would not say.

“That’s why she came all this way to see me,” Margaret said. “It was convenient.”

“Be easy on her, Margaret. She’s struggling.”

“So are we. I hear we have one deadbeat on the run and two reliable renters leaving momentarily.”

Wojcik ran an unsteady hand through a wild crown of gray hair and fell into the chair.

She calculated. “That means only four rooms let for the month?”

“Three,” Wojcik said. “Newt Ashby says his arthritis won’t make it through another winter here. Windows too drafty.”

“Henry, why didn’t you caulk the windows? You know how Newt likes fresh caulk.”

“Widow Nolin’s renting him her downstairs side room, close to the fireplace.”

“He’ll be sorry. Mildred Nolin has a loose tongue. She’ll tell everyone about that little toilet habit of his. Doesn’t he know what he’s risking? All of our discretion, our cleanliness. Tell him I’ll give him a monthly pro-rate.”

Wojcik got to his feet and pulled himself up straight. “I’m so sorry, dear girl. It won’t matter. The Heartsease is too old and drafty for him.”

“Worthless, is what you’re saying.”

Very gently, he corrected. “They’re saying.”

She felt cut to the core. “Go on, then, Henry. Leave. Start another of your grand evenings,” she said in a tone that arched high to hit low. “Eggie needs your business and you need his.”

He admonished her gently. “Margaret.”

He was right. It was rude. Their exchanges took place in a realm of polite honesty she had never experienced with her husband, with anyone. A man as devoted, educated and interesting as Henry Wojcik might have filled the empty place in her heart if he had not so openly presented himself as desperate, damaged goods. Wojcik was the town’s most erudite drunk and committed alcoholic. To remain in the long friendship they enjoyed, he and Margaret played a game that gave them cover for missteps and painful realities. Margaret pretended she still mourned the death long ago of a husband less kind, less giving than Wojcik.

Wojcik pretended that he drank only socially and would wait as long as it took for her come to her senses.

She apologized then asked him to bring her the accounts box and stationery chest.

Any message for Eggie?" he asked.

"Nothing from me."

The next day, she leaned on the stick for balance going down the stairs and made her own breakfast. The kitchen was clean. Boarders wiped up crumbs and spills or Wojcik would nag them like a yellow jacket on orange Nehi. He took care of décor. It didn't matter if wallpaper was peeling, treble keys on the Beckwith piano stuck in warm weather or the tufted sofa in the sitting room was sprouting its stuffing. Wojcik wanted to preserve it all.

Margaret found Newt Ashby sitting on the rail of the back porch, sipping his coffee, watching the creek. She thanked him for his patronage, wished him well in new lodging and requested his help with some papers. She sat on the piano bench in the parlor in order to catch Seebolt before he went out the front door so she could square his account. Young Kinneston was in the kitchen packing a lunch of pickle loaf on Dandee bread, moving out next weekend, he said. Rich Cather, the insurance man, rushed through the dining room, cheap briefcase flopping against his leg, an actuarial book under his arm. No worries about Rich. The Heartsease sat at the crossroads of his sales territory and he paid on time. Eula Kerner, a post office pensioner who never married, sat on the front porch step with a jade ashtray in her lap, smoking, watching the road, not going anywhere. In the parlor, Fanny Wyckoff was curled in the corner of the couch, her day off. She was a part-time checkout clerk at Shanabarger's. A quiet, doughy kind of girl, people called her slow, mentally, but she could punch in prices on the cash register without even looking at the keys.

"Fanny." Margaret tossed her a magazine. "Stop picking the stuffing."

Morning sun caught a tiny reflective glint near the ceiling where the flocked blue wallpaper had flopped dog-eared down one wall. Wojcik had reattached it with a line of silver thumb tacks at precise intervals, like an upholsterer. Heavens. How tasteless and cheap. And how irresponsible of her. *I'm the owner*. She'd left it that way for three years? What else had she refused to see after Anna got married and Eggie bought a beer garden?

Margaret leaned on the Beckwith a moment. She tried a few bars of an old etude she had taught Anna long ago. The piano was still reasonably in tune. She was counting on that tonight

Fanny balled a wad of cushion fluff in her palm. "You look ready to keel over, Miz Donahue."

Light-headed, Margaret asked Fanny to bring her water and something to eat. Margaret settled in a rocker on the porch. Fanny brought a crumbly chunk of yellow cheese and a heel of stale bread in a tea towel. Margaret lay the meal beside a nest of fresh cigarette butts Eula had left in the ashtray. That was another reason she hated to lose Newt Ashby. He was a pipe man.

She rested a long time and went upstairs to bathe and dress. She came down late that afternoon in her second-best Sunday dress and least-worst paste beads. With her large flat pocketbook ready for the evening, she went back out to the rocker on the porch and watched the road.

Fanny leaned around the screen door. "What are you waiting for, Miz Donahue?"

"Chickens," she said. "They're coming home to roost."

Fanny came out and sat on a porch step, watching. She picked at paint flecks in the bannister. "We need the eggs."

Four o'clock sharp, a quarter mile around the bend from the Heartsease Inn, a strip of jittery blue neon flickered to life in the plate glass window of Eggie's place.

The bar had change hands so many times over the years that new owners didn't bother to put up a name. A big swinging sign over the front door said Beer Garden. That was all people needed assurance of. Everyone knew it was Eggie's place now. His name was on the bills. His home was upstairs in cramped rooms. He was a thirty-eight-year-old man who felt in control of the two things that mattered most to him at the moment, the business he owned below and the fine head of hair his father's genes had given him. Eggie still had hair like a paintbrush, thick and straight, a muddy kilt brown like his Scots-Irish father. He duck-tailed it most days, letting top strands flick down on his forehead as he worked, reminding him that, from the forehead up, he could be mistaken for James Dean.

He heard the back door stretch the spring and slap it shut. Wojcik. He had gotten sensitive about showing up at the front door six days a week so Eggie let

him come in through the back yard where there were a couple of warped card tables and extra chairs to serve black men and any coal miner too sooty from his shift to take a seat inside.

“Is Anna here yet?” Wojcik said. “Margaret knows you’re helping her out now.”

“Anna works here.” Eggie talked over his shoulder in a rush to get up front. “She doesn’t take charity. And I don’t give it,” he said. If it sounded like a warning to Wojcik about his bar bill, good.

In the next ten minutes, Eggie had mixed a double gin and tonic for Woj, popped the tops off eight bottles of Iron City, rung up a game fee for four pool players, slid a couple of Buds to Tiny Stropopovitch who drank two at a time, and made change for Heck James playing the new pinball machine. Eggie re-stocked Iron Cities, assessing the crowd. Too few quiet, needy drinkers. Too many rowdies. He had rules posted for them all.

Tab due first day of the month. No free drinks in your lifetime. Fall off your stool, you’re done. Watch your mouth when I say so. Pee where you’re supposed to. Rule six had been added by hand. Don’t dance dirty. That was for Rowena Langotti.

At six o’clock, Anna would come down with food from the kitchen upstairs. It was her idea to serve chicken wings and pepperoni rolls. Make them drink faster and stay longer after happy hour, she said.

Anna was business-sharp, too smart for a loser like Giff. Deep down, though, Eggie understood Anna’s choice. Her choosing Giff was like Eggie buying the beer garden. Both choices showed their independence from his mother. She couldn’t control them with guilt or force a future on them they couldn’t bear, like that damned boardinghouse. Here he was, making his way bartending, batching it, trafficking in loose lives, but it never seemed to be enough to keep his mother’s nose out of his life, nor to repay her for changing his. She owed him. She had brought Anna home and chased his father away. Eggie held Anna blameless. She had no choice. Neither had he. He told his mother that, one time.

She’d kept planting flowers in a window box. She could barely look at him. “My heart was bleeding, son. That’s not just an expression, you know.

“I bet Dad’s heart wasn’t.”

“No.” She sprinkled infinitesimal seeds in the dirt, delicate as salt. “His was already taken. Someone prettier, lighter, quieter.”

“Easier,” Eggie said.

“Yes. Easier than me.” She took off her gloves. “Easier than you.”

Wild laughter close to the jukebox drew Eggie from behind the bar to check. Just Jack Lasker sipping Seagram's and Coke with Rowena Langotti, who had a husband but she did not keep house with him except on Christmas and Easter when her mother-in-law came to town from Cincinnati on the Trailways bus to visit and bring them a company ham that Rowena had to bake. “I hate ham,” she had confided to Eggie once. “Always smells like a lie in the oven.” Rowena wanted to help Eggie close the bar a few times. He told her no, she was pretty but married and he respected that. He was not being truthful but neither was she. That was the way he preferred his truths. Equal to the lie.

Rowena slipped a quarter in the jukebox. Yep, B-11. Connie Stephens. As if a sappy, teenage song fit the way Rowena slow-danced with a man, like a consenting adult glued full front, she and Jack rising on bent balls of their feet, steering a pivot, then the dip.

Watching too long made Eggie aware that he didn't pivot anymore. He told himself folks didn't notice the stiffness in his knee as long as he walked straight. Wojcik was the one who noticed. He had a hawk-eye for disabilities, especially well-disguised ones. Woj had even tried to pull rank one time at the end of a long night when no one was left but Eggie and his broom. “I was in the Great War,” Woj told him. “You were in Number Two. I do not mean to sound superior, Edgar, but having a bum knee cannot top being blown up in the engineering corps.”

The hubbub around the pool table sounded loud but healthy. Little eeks of chalk on a stick, snap-crack of breaking balls, a spic-and-span gobble when a pocket swallowed the roll. Eggie loved the sounds of community in his place. Outside the front window in the gathering dusk he saw a pickup truck with a covered load pull into the parking lot then out of view. More customers. Good sign. He had two glasses seated in the palm of his hand, toweling them dry as he moved. The outline of the pickup truck loomed suddenly close to the glass. The guy had pulled up on the road shoulder, blocking the front door. Son of a bitch. Bar towel slung across his shoulder, he yanked opened the front door, ready to let loose.

There stood his mother looking powdered and pressed, ready for church. “Thank you, son,” she said, accepting the opened door.

Margaret stepped across the threshold, looked around at the quieting crowd and tucked her purse closer to her body. She moved deeper into the room, away from the door so that Newt could come in. “I brought you a gift for your opening, Eggie.”

Eggie slipped the towel off his shoulder, whip quick. “I opened three years ago.”

Newt stepped in. “Give me some help to unload,” he told Eggie. “Then a shitload of double-shots. I’m hurting.”

“God almighty,” Eggie said.

“Yes, he is,” Margaret said, surveying the faces and sobriety of the men at the bar. Woj sat beaming at her as if she were an angel alighted.

Heck James shouldered through, slipping between Jack and Rowena who had quickly separated into two people again. “Need help?” Heck said to Newt.

Newt nodded. “And Tiny, too.”

As the three men went out to unload the truck, Margaret looked for an appropriate seat. It was a disappointingly small establishment. She saw no discernible sense of style except, perhaps, Spartan. Bare and functional seemed more than enough for the thirsty and grasping. Margaret did not consider herself either of those, but here she was.

Tables and chairs were already taken. Wojcik came up, happily doffed an imaginary cap and offered her his arm. She walked as naturally as she could to his open stool at the bar. He held her elbow as she stepped up on the rung, smoothed the back of her dress and sat on the round red padding. She leaned forward onto the bar and scooted her bottom until she found a point of balance on the little circle.

“I’d like a Coca-Cola, please,” she told Eggie.

The fragrance of fried chicken wafted through the bar. Anna had come down the back stairs balancing a heavy tray of chicken wings.

The Bocasey brothers and the pool crowd quieted down. Eggie knew that word had gotten around that she was cooking for the beer garden now. Eats were a serious matter in the rhythm of drinking men. They knew that Anna was family to Eggie so he was hiring his own. That, in the testy world of color lines, was understandable or, at least, negotiable, when those in attendance accepted it.

Margaret interpreted the sudden muting differently. She sensed how acutely Anna’s presence raised the color guard of the Bocasey’s, as if they could

see a long line of black folks following her, sitting at the bar, and waiting to play pool at the only two pool tables in town. Integration had been the law of the land in schools since 1952 but segregation was the everyday reality. Civil rights faced uncivil resistance playing out house by house, business by business, town by town. There had been no sit-ins in First Kings. There were no diners or department stores and few Negroes resided knowingly inside the town limits. First Kings wasn't a city. It was a settlement that understood an anomaly like Margaret Donahue's adoption of Anna without any need to integrate it.

Margaret had experienced the Bocasey brand of uneasy staring through the years with some of her boarders. When she breakfasted early with Anna at the dining room table before school. When she made Anna practice piano in the afternoons. Margaret also knew the hubristic twin of that judgmental stare – a sheer ignoring of Anna's difference by pretending that her skin was white or that she was a background fixture, not even there.

She had never had the courage to ask Anna outright just what that quiet, that ignorance and pretense, felt like. Afraid of the answer then. And now, the risk was even greater. Margaret felt complicit in a way that was not, even at sixty-two years old, clear to her. The color mask had endured such a long time, she was not sure whether Anna would know her, or that she would know herself, without it.

Margaret recognized what a prim, ridiculous figure she cut atop the little red stool, purse tight and upright in her lap. Anna set the heaping tray of wings on a bar board next to Eggie and gave her aunt a surprisingly warm smile, as if Margaret's presence was not the aberration it was.

Grace, Margaret thought. Anna is grace. Eggie is not.

“Are you having an evening out, Aunt Margaret?”

“I think so,” Margaret said, frowning at the skinny ribbed bottle of Coca-Cola which Eggie had served with a paper straw.

“Where are your manners, Eggie?” Anna said. She raised the heavy lids of the chillers until she found an ice-frosted glass and poured Margaret a foaming glass of Coca-Cola. “Back in a minute. Pepperoni rolls in the oven.” She jogged across the room to the back and disappeared up the stairs.

How comported she is, Margaret thought, body and spirit. Eggie was glaring at his mother, indignant at her presence, and he hadn't even seen what she'd brought him. He was too busy to indulge the rise of his angry tide. The

chicken wings were inciting a hunger riot at the bar. Billy and Gib Proctor were fighting over loose change.

“Fifteen cents apiece,” Eggie said. “Two for a quarter.”

The front door flapped open wide. Tiny struggled to pull a massive cabinet over the jamb while Newt and Heck pushed from the other side.

Margaret saw that Eggie recognized the Beckwith immediately.

“No, no, no,” Eggie called. “Stop right there.” But the upright piano had already bumped over the threshold and was rolling like thunder across the wooden floor.

“Where you want it?” Tiny said.

“Back in the truck,” Eggie said.

Margaret pointed at the jukebox. “Next to that popcorn machine would be nice,” she said.

“Popcorn machine?” Eggie’s face reddened with a pressure surge. “That’s a ’54 model Seeburg Select-o-matic. It holds fifty records and makes change. Fifty 45’s, for God’s sake. I’m still paying on the damn thing. Who do you think you are? This is my place.”

“Of course, it is. I’m just a patron.” She sipped politely from her glass of Coca-Cola. “Anna can play more than fifty songs, you know.”

The boys at the bar barely noticed their conversation, clamoring for more wings and credit on the bar tab. Eggie got distracted. Newt took over from Tiny as piano-mover and kept the big cabinet rolling past the jukebox and the pool tables until he hit the back wall. He nudged it straight.

Anna walked by Newt with a mountain of pepperoni rolls on a large tray and stopped to stare at the piano.

“How do you set the brakes on this thing?” Newt asked.

Anna pointed with one foot but had to keep moving. The smell of fresh bread had reached the pool table and she was barely able to keep pool hands off the tray. Tiny casually grabbed two off the top as she went by.

“They’re going nuts,” Eggie said, pulling her aside. “This isn’t a good idea. They’re going to eat more than they drink.”

“Give us eight Iron Cities back here,” Newt Ashby shouted above the din of the pool table. “And a CC double-shot.”

“I’m going to throw in a cracked skull for you free of charge,” Eggie said, “bringing that monster in here.”

“You’re the one that’s cracked,” Newt said. “Making a woman like your mother come to a place like this to see a son like you. Get a grip and shape up. Hey, Anna. Throw half a dozen pepperoni rolls on my tab.”

Margaret noticed how the smell of yeast bread freshened the ashy pall of cigarettes in the air. Wojcik was at her elbow, jostling insistently, excited.

“Did you know it swivels, my dear?” he said. He took her arm and turned her at a stately pace full circle, like a courtier beginning a minuet.

“Oh, my.” She felt herself smile for no reason other than it was so childish and uncalled for. Fun.

Eggie pulled Wojcik away, off balance, and returned his mother to a face-front position at the counter. “Last drink, Woj. Go home.”

Wojcik’s face crumpled. “Edgar, it’s so early. That’s unfair.”

“Then pay your tab.” Eggie dried a beer glass so tight that it gave a warning squeak.

“But it’s a special occasion.” Wojcik's Adam's apple did a yo-yo. “You can extend my tab.”

Eggie shook out his rag. “Pay up or leave.”

Margaret winced. It was what Eggie’s father, Edgar Senior, had told Wojcik the first week he’d rented a room at the Heartsease. At that time he’d been a grand, not pitiable, drunk. Eggie was just six years old. Wojcik survived by developing an odd, tug-the-forelock way of getting along with Eggie’s father until Edgar Senior moved out of the rambling old house, taking his small optical office and brand new Model 600 lensometer all the way to Gillespie, the county seat. That was after Anna had been with them four years and it was clear that she would be there for good. Edgar Senior didn’t live long enough after his move-out to divorce Margaret and marry the new girl he’d trained to adjust nose pads on eyeglasses. He had a terrible stroke and couldn't move a muscle, only his eyes. Margaret remembered Edgar Senior’s eyes, filmy blue, a weak and watery color. No longer a strong specimen of a man at that point. Not much for a little boy to know and remember. More than enough to imagine and mourn.

Wojcik backed away from Eggie’s ire and went to the jukebox to rest his head against the lighted glass. His shirt took on the color of sunset. His face held the shine of sweating cheddar. Rowena Langotti stepped up to put in two quarters but Wojcik’s hand shot out, covered the slot and caught a coin. “I’ll sing for you instead,” he said.

Rowena was wobbly on her feet. She held onto one of his arms for balance and tucked the second quarter into Wojcik's shirt pocket. "You need it, hon."

Wojcik pressed his fingers to his shirt pocket as if the quarter was going to jump back out. "Allons enfants de la patreeeeeyeu..."

Eggie hated it when Wojcik got eerie. The man never did it quietly with manageable shame. He opened his gut and turned into somebody nobody knew. The French words rolled around Eggie's brain like echoes trapped in a canyon. Damp autumn, 1944. He had a three-day pass in Paris. On the third day he bought a bracelet in a market stall and tried to offer it to a young refugee named Miri from a country with a language even more strange than French. They worked a deal with paper money, hand signs and careful looks, and he didn't make her take off her dress all the way because she was shivering. Wojcik's French sounded like Miri's whispers, sad and quivery. The bracelet, he brought home.

Rowena leaned way over the bar and ordered a whiskey "I love it when Woj sings Italian," she told Margaret.

Eggie glimpsed a customer approaching outside in the blink of Pabst neon and yelled at Woj to shut up. Only one way to guarantee that. Eggie held a shot glass aloft and waved a stub-necked bottle of cheap scotch at him like a bone.

Margaret sat with a white handkerchief daubing her forehead. "Please, Eggie." She spoke softly. "He's not a dog."

Woj stumbled across the room toward the bar. Fingers jittery, Woj handed over Rowena's two quarters. Eggie could see the customer outside more clearly now. He pressed closer to the window, nape of his neck tingling. He felt Anna tense. She had seen him, too.

Her husband, Gifford Rundel, stepped through the front door, pushing it wide all the way to the wall, as if he was leading a band. Gifford was a tall, striking figure who wore his height with pride and didn't slouch. He had deep brown skin, a long oval face and a serious smile. Eggie found him humorless. Giff didn't drink. Not a good customer. A gambler, impulsive. He played dice he couldn't win. He left jobs he could've kept. Eggie didn't bother looking at Anna's face. He knew she was seeing another man entirely.

In the back, Jeb and Dale Bocasey laid up their cue sticks. Tiny settled his cap brim higher on his forehead like a man who didn't want to miss anything and perched his beer bottle upright on the mountain of his thigh. Newt Ashby sat nursing his CC and beer, back turned, smiling at the piano as if it was talking to

him. Next to the jukebox, Jack Lasker hitched his belt higher above the beer bloat in his belly and reached down as if he needed to free a pinched testicle. Beside him in a straight-backed chair, Rowena tugged her hem down to cover her knee and waved hello to Giff. “Anna’s here,” she said.

“I know,” Giff said.

Behind the bar, Anna turned away, trying to clean a glass. She gave up and leaned over the sink, shaking her head. Eggie came out, cheap scotch still in his hand. “If you’ve come to drink for a change, Giff, you can take it out back. If you’re here for Anna, she doesn’t want to see you.”

“You don’t speak for my wife. She speaks for herself.”

Anna threw down the bar towel. “Yes, I do,” she said, so softly that only Margaret heard. “What’d she say?” Giff asked.

Eggie answered for her. “She said for you to leave.”

“After we talk, Annie,” he said, then louder. “After we talk.”

Jeb Bocasey shoved a chair out of his way and let it fall. “Don’t you raise your voice in here. Get on out back.” Dale Bocasey came up beside his brother.

The look that Gifford gave Jeb wasn’t angry or warning, Margaret thought. Not fearful, either. Giff looked cold of soul, the kind of tired that no longer gives a damn. He took a step toward the Bocaseys. “I’m not going out back.”

“You think you’re that King fella?” Dale said. “This ain’t Alabama, Giff. Nobody’s marching into our town.”

“Am I marching?” Giff looked at his feet. “I’m walking where a man walks.”

Anna ran out from behind the bar and reached her husband before the Bocaseys did. “We’re talking. What we’re doing here is talking. Me and my husband. We’re not in your face here,” she said, “and don’t you pretend we are, Dale Bocasey. I have a right to talk with my husband.”

“Let’em hash it out, for God’s sake,” called Newt, leaning on the piano in the back. “Matrimony’s one helluva contract. Let’em negotiate. Someone bring me a beer. It’s hot back here.”

Anna turned to Giff.

“Hear me out, Annie. It’s all I’m asking.” When she nodded, he took her hand and turned to leave through the front door.

“Gifford,” Margaret interjected. “Wait.” She slid with difficulty off of her stool.

“Mother.” Eggie’s voice was ice-pick thin.

“Giff, why don’t you and Anna sit here and talk?” Margaret said. “Henry?” She tapped Wojcik insistently on the arm. “Your stool.”

Wojcik jerked as if he’d been asleep. “Oh. Of course.” He vacated his stool. “My pleasure.”

Anna tried to pull Giff toward the door. He wouldn’t move.

The Bocasey’s got restless. One picked up a cue stick but it was Margaret who moved first. She barged straight past Jeb and Dale, pocketbook flapping against her arm like an unhinged wing, and she planted herself in front of Giff. “Truth is, I have a job for you, Gifford Rundel. But I’d like to buy you a drink first.”

“I don’t drink, Miss Margaret.”

“I know. I can only afford Coca-Cola’s myself.”

Giff looked past Anna at the Bocasey’s. “Seems I been invited to have a drink at the bar,” he said. “Wouldn’t want to be rude.” With reserve and no sudden motion, Giff made sure his wife was seated first, then took the other stool. He took Anna’s hand and they sat clasped like that, waiting.

The room was silent.

One by one, the men sitting at the bar slipped away. Popeye Cox went first. Then old man Buskirk and the two Proctor boys. Heck James was younger and reluctant to leave until a Bocasey jerked his arm.

Margaret leaned forward across the bar. Her voice was firm and it carried. “Can we be served, Edgar?”

“This is my place.” Eggie glared. “My business.”

“Yes, I am in your place, son. I’m happy to accept that, whatever it means.”

Eggie towed a clean glass a long, quiet time. Finally, Rowena Langotti’s petite high heels clapped odd thunder as she crossed the floor. “Better feed those boys,” she said, hoisting the tray of pepperoni rolls.

Eggie turned to Anna. “It’s your fault Giff’s here.”

Anna’s eyes were bright, looking at Giff. “I suppose it is.”

Eggie faced Giff and braced palms flat on the bar. “One question tears at me.” He leaned close. “You going to treat her right?”

Giff released a breath.

“Answer, damnit.”

Giff eyed him. "You're like a brother to Annie. You got the right to know. I do have some bad habits but laying a hand on my wife in anger is not one of them. Never."

Eggie looked at Anna.

"Never," she said.

Eggie set the clean glass in front of her, got another for Giff, popped the caps off two Cokes and served them up. "I'm not like a brother to her. I am the brother. Anna says she's good with you, I'll be good with you."

Hubbub in the back of the room suddenly got louder. "Shut up," Eggie yelled, then clanged the big red bell that hung on the wall beside the phone.

Closing time. A cut-off warning to them all. Eggie rang it again.

Wojcik went wild in protest. "No, Edgar, no. You can't close early." He jumped off the stool pleading. "Anna, Giff, tell them it's okay. Please. Tell them." He turned to the pool group clustering tighter around the table. "We don't have to close for this."

Giff glanced behind him and started to get up.

"No." Anna jerked his hand. "Stay here."

"Annie--"

"If you want us to talk, really talk, don't you move. Stay right here." Anna got up with her drink and made her way to the back.

Jeb Bocasey centered the eight-ball in a new rack and steadied a break cue. "All you got to do is take it out back."

"I could." Anna watched. "But I've been thinking about what you'd really like me to say."

"How's that? You don't know me." He broke the rack with a hit off-center. "Don't know us."

"Oh, that me and us stuff, everybody knows. So I know you'd like me to say, don't worry. We're no-trouble Negroes you don't need to worry about. Not interested in crossing a line, protesting, agitating. Quiet and calm here in our place, not talking about rights and lives. Otherwise, you'd have to instruct me in what's obvious about our rights, our lives."

Bocasey raised his chin to say something.

"Hold up." Anna stopped him with a just-a-minute finger raised as she sipped from the glass of Coke she'd been served at the counter. "Don't have to say a word. I know the obvious, dear God, I know. Fact is, minds don't change

the way we want, when we want. One human being drinking soda pop from a glass like yours on a stool like that will not change the world. All of us, we're such small and simple instruments on this earth. Giff and me, we're just a husband and wife working out how to live with respect, like you and yours. We're trying to grow whatever is meaningful between us," she said. "All the while protecting each other from all that threatens us. There's no color to facts like that. Only nature. Human nature."

Jeb parked the cue stick upright. "You're playing a game here you shouldn't."

"It's not me playing," Anna said. She looked tired. "Giff and me, we're seriously married, for better or worse."

"Oh, Jeb's an expert on that." Rowena called out from across the room. "He's been married twice. Thinking about number three."

Jeb swore. Tiny hid a snort in his beer.

The scoot and clatter of an overturned chair made Anna startle and everyone turn toward the piano corner where Newt Ashby stood unsteady beside the Beckwith. "Giff Rundel, you better get on back here."

Giff dropped his hand from Anna's back and motioned her to the door.

"I'm tired of waiting," Newt said. "I know you play. Heard you last spring in that little bar by the grange. Folks were dancing their asses off. I busted a gut getting that piano into the truck so, for God's sake, play something, Giff. Me and my hernia, we're asking."

Margaret's eyes widened. "Giff plays piano?"

Giff was watching the Bocaseys. Bocaseys were watching him.

"Piano is how Annie and I met," Giff said, loud enough for them to hear. "I was a preacher's son, once."

"Kind of lapsed now?" Jeb Bocasey said.

"Like everyman," Giff said. He called to Newt. "I'd love to play something for you." He headed for the Beckwith in the far back corner.

Anna caught his arm and stopped him

He squared her to face him. "I'll be back."

"A little light Mozart?" Margaret said.

Tense, Anna watched her husband move past the pool crowd. "He can play anything. Only plays what he likes. Giff trusts music. I trust the way he makes it."

They heard a few testing bars of a swing number that brought the Beckwith to life and the backroom crowd with it. Margaret pulled Anna to sit at a table with her because her back could no longer handle the cruel assumptions of a backless stool. She told Anna about her idea for changes at the boardinghouse. “Eggie hates the business. I need you to handle the Heartsease, Anna. Please, you and Giff.”

Anna kept her eyes on the crowd in the back of the bar. “I’d never put Giff in that position.”

“Shouldn’t you ask him what he wants to do? Dig ditches for State Road or build a family business. You and Eggie are my heirs, my equal heirs.”

Anna gave her a long look. “I’m not your daughter.”

Really, there was no easy way to be a mother. Children wanted you whole-ways or no ways, never for the parts you’re able to give. “Of course, you are. My Sophie’s beloved child and my beloved, too. Equally.”

Anna turned away a moment, holding something in. “Aunt Margaret, you’re not dying, you know. You’ve had a rough patch, that’s all. You’re not dying.”

“Of course not.” Margaret couldn’t smile. Something ineffable was hurting. She tried a lighter tone. “I’m just changing.”

“Aren’t we all?” Anna said.

“Don’t worry.” Eggie came up and put a hand on Anna’s shoulder. “I’ll watch out for any goofballs,” he told her, winding a bar towel around a beer bottle as he headed back toward the din.

Margaret impulsively grabbed her hand. “You and Giff can make a go of it in this town. I know you can. You can make the Heartsease something special.”

Anna got up and gave the top of Margaret’s head a kiss soft as a benediction. “You have a sweet dream.” She moved away. “It’s just not mine. Not ours.”

Margaret got to her feet. “Well, it’s not a dream when you share it,” she called. “It’s got a heart and mind and feet, goshdarnit.” But Anna had already blended into the crowd around the piano.

Margaret felt oddly abandoned, as if she had been left holding a massive white elephant nobody could carry. It was shifting all of its weight against her chest. Suffocating. This was no dream. Her life story had no fairy tale qualities, no fabled lesson. She had one rash, glorious, intuitive decision to take Anna in and it

changed all their lives. In that act of familial love, she had exuded a will of union that seemed much deeper than a marriage, more visible than the colors we believe we perceive. Oh, for colors unseen.

Margaret laid her big purse flat on the table. The purse held her newly-changed will, written by hand, notarized by Rich Cather, the insurance man, witnessed by slow Fannie and hard-eyed Eula who stubbed out a cigarette without being asked. It was that serious an occasion, Margaret bequeathing the Heartsease equally to both children.

She was surprised to find Eggie at her elbow, steadying her at the table. She hadn't sensed her balance tipping. She slipped the pocketbook strap to a certain midpoint on her left forearm.

"You look like the Queen of England when you do that," Eggie said.

"Don't be sarcastic, Edgar."

"I'm not. That's our problem. You don't know when I'm teasing and when it's true."

"Then let me tell you what's true. I've had a very good time tonight, son. You have a very nice place here. You're a smart businessman, like your father, but fairer. A man of substance. A man of integrity."

Eggie looked down, strangling emotion. He nodded and tried to say something then had to turn away. His mother clasped his arm. "I need to step out for some air right now," she said. "Stars are rising, as Henry says. I'm always close, son. Just down the road."

Nightfall in First Kings was no friend to aging dreamers. The town had no sidewalks. Lamp posts were few and far between. Margaret wore sensible shoes that, nonetheless, slid on roadside rubble when she had to step off, then back onto, the two-lane road to let a car pass. Short of breath, afraid of falling, she stayed on the smooth asphalt for stability. When she rounded the turn she could see a dim yellow glow ahead. The porchlight of the Heartsease.

Almost home.