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Something You Should Know

While Pearl Tull was dying, a funny thought occurred to her. It twitched her lips and rustled her breath, and she felt her son lean forward from where he kept watch by her bed. ‘Get . . .’ she told him. ‘You should have got . . .’

You should have got an extra mother, was what she meant to say, the way we started extra children after the first child fell so ill. Cody, that was; the older boy. Not Ezra here beside her bed but Cody the troublemaker—a difficult baby, born late in her life. They had decided on no more. Then he developed croup. This was in 1931, when croup was something serious. She’d been frantic. Over his crib she had draped a flannel sheet, and she set out skillets, saucepans, buckets full of water that she’d heated on the stove. She lifted the flannel sheet to catch the steam. The baby’s breathing was choked and rough, like something pulled through tightly

packed gravel. His skin was blazing and his hair was plastered stiffly to his temples. Toward morning, he slept. Pearl's head sagged in the rocking chair and she slept too, fingers still gripping the ivory metal crib rail. Beck was away on business—came home when the worst was over, Cody toddling around again with nothing more than a runny nose and a loose, unalarming cough that Beck didn't even notice. 'I want more children,' Pearl told him. He acted surprised, though pleased. He reminded her that she hadn't felt she could face another delivery. But 'I want some extra,' she said, for it had struck her during the croup: if Cody died, what would she have left? This little rented house, fixed up so carefully and pathetically; the nursery with its Mother Goose theme; and Beck, of course, but he was so busy with the Tanner Corporation, away from home more often than not, and even when home always fuming over business: who was on the rise and who was on the skids, who had spread damaging rumors behind his back, what chance he had of being let go now that times were so hard.

'I don't know why I thought just one little boy would suffice,' said Pearl.

But it wasn't as simple as she had supposed. The second child was Ezra, so sweet and clumsy it could break your heart. She was more endangered than ever. It would have been best to stop at Cody. She still hadn't learned, though. After Ezra came Jenny, the girl—such fun to dress, to fix her hair in different styles. Girls were a kind of luxury, Pearl felt. But she couldn't give Jenny up, either. What she had now was not one loss to fear but three. Still, she thought, it had seemed a good idea once upon a time: spare children, like spare

tires, or those extra lisle stockings they used to package free with each pair.

‘You should have arranged for a second-string mother, Ezra,’ she said. Or she meant to say. ‘How shortsighted of you.’ But evidently she failed to form the words, for she heard him sit back again without comment and turn a page of his magazine.

She had not seen Ezra clearly since the spring of ’75, four and a half years ago, when she first started losing her vision. She’d had a little trouble with blurring. She went to the doctor for glasses. It was arteries, he told her; something to do with her arteries. She was eighty-one years old, after all. But he was certain it could be treated. He sent her to a specialist, who sent her to someone else . . . well, to make a long story short, they found they couldn’t help her. Something had shriveled away behind her eyes. ‘I’m falling into disrepair,’ she told the children. ‘I’ve outlived myself.’ She gave a little laugh. To tell the truth, she hadn’t believed it. She had made the appropriate sounds of dismay, then acceptance, then plucky cheer; but inwardly, she’d determined not to allow it. She just wouldn’t hear of it, that was all. She had always been a strong-willed woman. Once, when Beck was away on business, she’d walked around with a broken arm for a day and a half till he could come stay with the babies. (It was just after one of his transfers. She was a stranger in town and had no one to turn to.) She didn’t even hold with aspirin; didn’t hold with depending, requesting. ‘The doctor says I’m going blind,’ she told the children, but privately, she’d intended to do no such thing.

Yet every day, her sight had faded. The light, she felt, was somehow thinning and retreating. Her son Ezra, his calm face that

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she loved to linger on—he grew dim. Even in bright sunshine, now, she had difficulty making out his shape. She could barely discern his silhouette as he came near her—that large, sloping body settling into softness a bit in his middle age. She felt his flannel warmth when he sat next to her on the couch, describing what was on her TV or going through her drawer of snapshots the way she liked to have him do. ‘What’s that you’ve got, Ezra?’ she would ask.

‘It seems to be some people on a picnic,’ he would say.

‘Picnic? What kind of picnic?’

‘White tablecloth in the grass. Wicker basket. Lady wearing a middy blouse.’

‘Maybe that’s Aunt Bessie.’

‘I’d recognize your Aunt Bessie, by now.’

‘Or Cousin Elsa. *She* favored middy blouses, I recall.’

Ezra said, ‘I never knew you had a cousin.’

‘Oh, I had cousins,’ she said.

She tipped her head back and recollected cousins, aunts, uncles, a grandpa whose breath had smelled of mothballs. It was peculiar how her memory seemed to be going blind with the rest of her. She didn’t so much see their faces as hear their fluid voices, feel the crisp ruching of the ladies’ shirtwaists, smell their pomades and lavender water and the sharp-scented bottle of crystals that sickly Cousin Bertha had carried to ward off fainting spells.

‘I had cousins aplenty,’ she told Ezra.

They had thought she would be an old maid. They’d grown tactful—insultingly tactful. Talk of others’ weddings and confinements halted when Pearl stepped out on the porch. A college education was offered by Uncle Seward—at Meredith

College, right there in Raleigh, so she wouldn't have to leave home. No doubt he feared having to support her forever: a millstone, an orphaned spinster niece tying up his spare bedroom. But she told him she had no use for college. She felt that going to college would be an admission of defeat.

Oh, what was the trouble, exactly? She was not bad-looking. She was small and slender with fair skin and fair, piled hair, but the hair was growing dry as dust and the strain was beginning to show around the curled and mobile corners of her mouth. She'd had suitors in abundance, more than she could name; yet they never lasted, somehow. It seemed there was some magical word that everyone knew but Pearl—those streams of girls, years younger than she, effortlessly tumbling into marriage. Was she too serious? Should she unbend more? Lower herself to giggle like those mindless, silly Winston twins? Uncle Seward, *you* can tell me. But Uncle Seward just puffed on his pipe and suggested a secretarial course.

Then she met Beck Tull. She was thirty years old. He was twenty-four—a salesman with the Tanner Corporation, which sold its farm and garden equipment all over the eastern seaboard and where he would surely, surely rise, a smart young fellow like him. In those days, he was lean and rangy. His black hair waved extravagantly, and his eyes were a brilliant shade of blue that seemed not quite real. Some might say he was . . . well, a little extreme. Flamboyant. Not quite of Pearl's class. And certainly too young for her. She knew there were some thoughts to that effect. But what did she care? She felt reckless and dashing, bursting with possibilities.

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She met him at a church—at the Charity Baptist Church, which Pearl was only visiting because her girlfriend Emmaline was a member. Pearl was not a Baptist herself. She was Episcopalian, but truthfully not even that; she thought of herself as a nonbeliever. Still, when she went to the Baptist church and saw Beck Tull standing there, a stranger, glossily shaved and wearing a shiny blue suit, and he asked within two minutes if he might be allowed to call, she related it in some superstitious way to the church itself—as if Beck were her reward for attending with the Baptists. She did not dare *stop* attending. She became a member, to her family's horror, and was married at Charity Baptist and went to one Baptist church or another, in one town or another, her entire married life, just so her reward would not be snatched away. (Didn't that maybe, it occurred to her, imply some kind of faith after all?)

Courting her, he brought chocolates and flowers and then—more serious—pamphlets describing the products of the Tanner Corporation. He started telling her in detail about his work and his plans for advancement. He paid her compliments that made her uncomfortable till she could get off alone in her room and savor them. She was the most cultured and refined little lady that he had ever known, he said, and the best mannered, and the daintiest. He liked to place her hand to his, palm to palm, and marvel at its tiny size. Despite the reputation of salesmen, he was respectful to a fault and never grabbed at her the way some other men might.

Then he received his transfer, and after that things sped up so; for he wouldn't hear of leaving her behind but must marry her immediately and take her with him. So they had their Baptist

wedding—both of them out of breath, Pearl always pictured later—and spent their honeymoon moving to Newport News. She never even got to enjoy her new status among her girlfriends. She didn't have time to show off a single one of her trousseau dresses, or to flash her two gold rings—the narrow wedding band and the engagement ring, set with a pearl, inscribed *To a Pearl among Women*. Everything seemed so unsatisfying.

They moved, and they moved again. For the first six years they had no children and the moves were fairly easy. She'd gaze at each new town with hopeful eyes and think: This may be where I'll have my son. (For pregnancy, now, took on the luster that marriage had once had—it was the treasure that came so easily to everyone but her.) Then Cody was born, and moving seemed much harder. Children had a way of complicating things, she noticed. There were the doctors and the school transcripts and this, that, and the other. Meanwhile she looked around and saw that somehow, without her noticing, she'd been cut off from most of her relatives. Aunts and uncles had died while she'd been too far away to do more than send a sympathy note. The house where she was born was sold to a man from Michigan; cousins married strangers with last names she'd never heard of; even the street names were changed so she'd be lost if she ever went back. And it struck her once, in her forties, that she really had no notion what had become of that grandpa with the mothball breath. He couldn't still be living, could he? Had he died and no one thought to inform her? Or maybe they'd sent the news to an out-of-date address, three or four years behind times. Or she might have heard but simply forgotten, in the rush of some transfer or other. Anything was possible.

Oh, those transfers. Always there was some incentive—a chance of promotion, or richer territory. But it seldom amounted to much. Was it Beck's fault? He claimed it wasn't, but she didn't know; she really didn't know. He claimed that he was haunted by ill-wishers. There were so many petty people in this world, he said. She pursed her lips and studied him. 'Why do you look at me that way?' he asked. 'What are you thinking? At least,' he said, 'I provide for you. I've never let my family go hungry.' She admitted that, but still she felt a constant itch of anxiety. It seemed her forehead was always tight and puckered. This was not a person she could lean on, she felt—this slangy, loud-voiced salesman peering at his reflection with too much interest when he tied his tie in the mornings, combing his pompadour tall and damp and frilly and then replacing the comb in a shirt pocket full of pencils, pens, ruler, appointment book, and tire gauge, all bearing catchy printed slogans for various firms.

Over his beer in the evening (but he was not a drinking man; don't get her wrong), Beck liked to sing and pull at his face. She didn't know why beer made him tug his skin that way—work it around like a rubber mask, so by bedtime his cheeks had a stretched-out, slackened look. He sang 'Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen'—his favorite song. Nobody knows but Jesus. She supposed it must be true. What were his private thoughts, inside his spreading face, under the crest of black hair? She didn't have the faintest idea.

One Sunday night in 1944, he said he didn't want to stay married. They were sending him to Norfolk, he said; but he thought it best if he went alone. Pearl felt she was sinking in at the center, like

someone given a stomach punch. Yet part of her experienced an alert form of interest, as if this were happening in a story. ‘Why?’ she asked him, calmly enough. He didn’t answer. ‘Beck? Why?’ All he did was study his fists. He looked like a young and belligerent schoolboy waiting out a scolding. She made her voice even quieter. It was important to learn the reason. Wouldn’t he just tell her what it was? He’d told her, he said. She lowered herself, shaking, in to the chair across from him. She looked at his left temple, in which a pulse ticked. He was just passing through some mood, was all. He would change his mind in the morning. ‘We’ll sleep on it,’ she told him.

But he said, ‘It’s tonight I’m going.’

He went to the bedroom for his suitcase, and he took his other suit from the wardrobe. Meanwhile Pearl, desperate for time, asked couldn’t they talk this over? Think it through? No need to be hasty, was there? He crossed from bureau to bed, from wardrobe to bed, packing his belongings. There weren’t that many. He was done in twenty minutes. He drew in his breath and she thought, Now he’ll tell me. But all he said was, ‘I’m not an irresponsible person. I do plan to send you money.’

‘And the children,’ she said, clutching new hope. ‘You’ll want to visit the children.’

(He would come with presents for them and she’d be the one to open the door—perfumed, in her Sunday dress, maybe wearing a bit of rouge. She’d always thought false color looked cheap, but she could have been wrong.)

Beck said, ‘No.’

‘What?’

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'I won't be visiting the children.'

She sat down on the bed.

'I don't understand you,' she said.

There ought to be a whole separate language, she thought, for words that are truer than other words—for perfect, absolute truth. It was the purest fact of her life: she did not understand him, and she never would.

At the time, they were living in Baltimore, in a row house on Calvert Street. The children were fourteen, eleven, and nine. They were old enough to suspect something wrong, if she didn't take care. She took infinite care. The morning after Beck left she rose and dressed, piled her hair on her head the same as always, and cooked oatmeal for the children's breakfast. Cody and Jenny ate without speaking; Ezra told a long, rambling dream. (He was the only one cheerful in the mornings.) There was some disappointment that the oatmeal lacked raisins. Nobody asked where Beck was. After all, he often left before they woke on a Monday. And there'd been times—many times—when he'd stayed away the whole week. It wasn't so unusual.

When Friday night rolled around, she said he'd been delayed. He'd promised to take them to the Midget Circus, and she told them she would do it instead. Another week passed. She had no close friends, but if she met a chance acquaintance in the grocery store, she remarked that luckily, she wouldn't have to use any meat points today. Her husband was away on business, she said. People nodded, showing no interest. He was almost always away on business. Few had ever met him.**Copyrighted Material**

Nights, especially Friday nights, she lay in bed in the dark and listened to the gritty click of heels on the sidewalk. Footsteps would come close and then pass. She would let out her breath. A new set of footsteps approached. Surely *this* was Beck. She knew how hesitantly he would let himself in, expecting the worst—his children’s tears, his wife’s reproaches. But instead, he’d find everything unchanged. The children would greet him offhandedly. Pearl would peck his cheek and ask if he’d had a good trip. Later, he would thank her for keeping his secret. He would be so easily readmitted, since only the two of them knew he’d left; outsiders would go on believing the Tulls were a happy family. Which they were, in fact. Oh, they’d always been so happy! They’d depended only on each other, because of moving around so much. It had made them very close. He’d be back.

Her Uncle Seward’s widow wrote to wish her a happy birthday. (Pearl had forgotten all about it.) Pearl responded immediately, thanking her. *We celebrated at home*, she wrote. *Beck surprised me with the prettiest necklace . . . Say hello to the others*, she added, and she pictured them all in her uncle’s parlor; she ached for them, but drew herself up and recalled how they had been so sure no man would marry her. She could never tell them what had happened.

Her old friend Emmaline stopped by, on her way to visit a sister in Philadelphia. Pearl said Beck was out of town; the two of them were in luck; they could talk girl-talk to their hearts’ content. She put Emmaline in the double bed with her, instead of in the guest room. They stayed awake half the night gossiping and giggling. Once Pearl almost set a hand on Emmaline’s arm and said, ‘Emmaline. Listen. I feel so horrible, Emmaline.’ But fortunately, she caught

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herself. The moment passed. In the morning they overslept, and Pearl had to rush to get the children off to school; so there wasn't much said. 'We should do this more often,' Emmaline told her as she left, and Pearl said Beck would be sorry he had missed her. 'You know he's always liked you,' she said. Although actually, Beck used to claim that Emmaline reminded him of a woodchuck.

Easter came, and Jenny had a part in her school's Easter pageant. When the day arrived and Beck was still not home, Jenny cried. Couldn't he *ever* be home? It wasn't his fault, Pearl told her. There was a war on, production speeded up; he couldn't help it if his company needed him more now. They ought to be proud, she said. Jenny dried her tears and told everyone that her daddy had to help with the war effort. The war was so old by now, grinding on; no one was impressed. Still, it made Jenny feel better. Pearl went to the Easter pageant alone, wearing a rakish, visored hat that was patterned after the hats the WACs wore.

When Beck had been gone a month, he sent a note from Norfolk saying he was fine and hoped that she and the kids did not lack for anything. He enclosed a check for fifty dollars. It wasn't nearly enough. Pearl spent a morning pacing the house. First she went over his note in her mind, picking apart his words for underlying meanings. But not much could underlie *right good apartment with hotplate* and *sales manager seems to think well of me*. Then she considered the money. Around lunchtime, she put on her coat and her WACs hat and walked around the corner to Sweeney Bros. Grocery and Fine Produce, where a CASHIER WANTED sign had been yellowing in the window for weeks. They were tickled to death to hire her. The younger Sweeney brother showed her how to work

the cash register and said she could start the next morning. When her children came home from school that day, she told them she was taking a job to fill in time. She needed something to keep her busy, she said, now that they were growing up and going off on their own more.

Two months passed. Three months. Fifty dollars a month from Beck. When the second check arrived, no letter came with it. She tore the envelope apart, thinking it must have got stuck inside, but there wasn't a word. With the third check, though, he wrote that he was moving to Cleveland, where the company planned to open a new branch. He said it was a good sign they'd decided on this transfer—or 'invite,' he called it. He never called it a transfer; he called it an invite. An invite to this important expansion westward. He began the letter, *Dear Pearl & kids*, but Pearl didn't show it to the children. She folded it neatly and put it with the first letter, in a hosiery box in her bureau, where even that meddlesome Cody wouldn't think to look. In the fourth envelope, again, there was only a check. She saw that he was not in *communication* with her (was how she phrased it), but was merely touching base from time to time. Really, all he was doing was saying, *Please find enclosed*. It didn't occur to her to answer him. Yet she went on saving his letters.

Sometimes she had strange thoughts that surprised her. For instance: At least I have more closet space now. And more drawer space.

At night she dreamed that Beck was new and wonderful again, someone she'd just become acquainted with. He gazed at her adoringly, overturning some unfamiliar center deep inside her. He helped her cross streets, climb steps. His hand cupped her elbow

warmly or circled her waist or steadied the small of her back. She felt cherished. When she woke, her only thought was to sink back into her dream. She would keep her eyes shut. Superstitiously, she would play possum, not stirring, trying to persuade the dream that she was still asleep. But it never worked. Finally she would rise, whatever the hour, and go downstairs to make a pot of coffee. Standing at the kitchen window with her cup, watching the sky whiten over the rooftops, she would catch sight of her dark, transparent reflection—her small face and round chin that was taking on a dented look, these past few years; the worried tent of her colorless eyebrows; the pale frazzle of hair that failed to hide the crease across her forehead. That crease was not a wrinkle but a scar, the mark of a childhood accident. Oh, she was not so old! She was not so very old! But then she remembered the accident: she'd been trying to ride a cousin's bicycle, the very first in the family. A 'wheel' was what they called it. Trying to ride a wheel. And here it was 1944 and bicycles were everywhere, but so modernized they were hardly the same breed of beast. All three of her children knew how to ride and would, in fact, have had bikes of their own if not for the war. How had she come so far? She had just passed her fiftieth birthday. There was not a hope of Beck's return. He'd found someone younger, someone glamorous and merry, still capable of bearing children. They were laughing at her—at how she'd always been an old maid, really, always an old maid at heart. How she flinched when he turned to her in the dark, still startled, after all these years, by the concreteness of him—by his scratchy whiskers, salty-smelling skin, weighty body. How she had to have things just perfect, the linens on labeled shelves in the cupboard and

the shades pulled evenly in the windows. How she'd never learned to let go, to give in, to float on the current of a day, but must always fuss and pull at stray threads and straighten the corners of things; and worst of all, how she *knew* she did that, knew while she was doing it, but still could not stop herself.

He was never coming back.

It was time to tell the children. She was amazed, in fact, that she'd managed to keep it from them for so long. Had they always been this easy to fool? One good thing about telling them: they would rally around her better. She didn't like to admit it but she was losing control of the boys. Instead of supporting her—taking out the garbage, helping her in various manly and protective ways—they seemed to be running wild; yes, even Ezra. They didn't even do the chores they used to do, let alone take on new ones. Cody in fact was hardly ever home. Ezra was dreamy and forgetful and would like as not walk off in the middle of a task. When she told them what was what, she thought, they'd be horrified at how they'd let her down. They'd ask why she'd hidden it all this time, what she could have been thinking of.

Only she couldn't tell them.

She planned how she would do it: she would gather them around her on the sofa, in the lamplight, some evening after supper. 'Children. Dear ones,' she would say. 'There's something you should know.' But she wouldn't be able to continue; she might cry. It was unthinkable to cry in front of the children. Or in front of anyone. Oh, she had her pride! She was not a tranquil woman; she often lost her temper, snapped, slapped the nearest cheek, said things she later regretted—but thank the Lord, she

didn't expose her tears. She didn't *allow* any tears. She was Pearl Cody Tull, who'd ridden out of Raleigh triumphant with her new husband and never looked back. Even now, even standing at the kitchen window, all alone, watching her tense and aging face, she didn't cry.

Every morning, then, she went off to Sweeney Bros. She continued to wear her hat, giving the impression that she had merely dropped in and was helping out as a favor, in a pinch. As each customer approached (generally someone she knew, at least by sight), she would give a firm nod and then squint, implying a smile. She rang up the purchases efficiently while a boy named Alexander bagged them. 'Thank you, and good day,' she said at the end, with another shorthand smile. She liked to seem crisp and professional. When neighbors showed up, people she knew more closely, she felt she was dying inside but she didn't lose her composure. With them she was even crisper. She had a little rhythm between the key stabbing and the sliding of groceries along the wooden counter; it kept her mind off things. If she allowed herself to think, she started worrying. Summer had arrived and her children were out of school all day. No telling what they might be up to.

At five-thirty she walked home, past crowds of youngsters playing hopscotch or huddled over marble games, past babies set to air in their carriages, women perched on their stoops fanning themselves in the heat. She'd climb her steps and be met at the door with bad news: 'Jenny fell down the stairs today and bit her lower lip clean through and had to go to Mrs Simmons's house for ice and gauze.'

'Oh, Jenny, honey'

It seemed they greeted her with disaster, saved up all their accidents especially for her. She'd want to take off her hat and shoes and fall back on to the sofa; but no, it was 'The toilet's stopped up,' and 'I tore my pants,' and 'Cody hit Ezra with the orange juice pitcher.'

'Can't you just let me be?' she would ask. 'Can't you just give me a minute to myself?'

She'd make supper from tins she'd brought home, nothing fancy. She would listen to the radio while she washed dishes. Jenny was supposed to dry but was off playing tag with the boys. Stepping out the back door to heave her dishpan of water into the yard, Pearl paused to watch them—Cody and Jenny dark and quick, high-pitched, overcome with laughter; Ezra pale, a glimmer in the twilight, slower and more wandery in his movements. Sometimes there'd be neighbor children, too, but more often just the three of them. They stuck together, mostly.

She shampooed her hair and rinsed out a slip. Called to Cody to fetch the other two and come inside now.

Nights, she worked on the house. To look at her—an out-of-date kind of woman, frail boned, deep bosomed, as if those pout-fronted gowns of her girlhood had somehow formed her figure—you would never guess it, but Pearl was clever with tools. She patched a crack, glazed a window, replaced two basement stair treads. She mended a lamp switch and painted the kitchen cupboards. Even in the old days, she had done such things; Beck was not very handy. 'This whole, entire house is resting on my shoulders,' she would tell him, and she meant it as an accusation; but the thought was also reassuring, in a way. He knew that she was competent. From

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early in their marriage, from the moment she had realized how often they would be moving, she had concentrated on making each house perfect—airtight and rustproof and waterproof. She dropped the effort of continually meeting new neighbors, and she stopped returning (freshly filled) the cake tins they brought over when she arrived. All she cared about was sealing up the house, as if for a hurricane. She woke nights wondering if the basement were dry, and went down barefoot to make sure. She couldn't enjoy their Sunday outings because the house might have burned to the ground in her absence. (How vividly she could picture their return! There'd be an open space where the house used to stand, and a tattered hole for the basement.) Here in Baltimore, she gathered, she was thought to be unfriendly, even spooky—the witch of Calvert Street. What a notion! She'd known such witches in her childhood; she was nothing like them. All she wanted was to be allowed to get on with what mattered: calk the windows; weatherstrip the door. With tools she was her true self, capable and strong. She felt an indulgent kind of scorn for her children, who had not inherited her skill. Cody lacked the patience, Ezra was inept, Jenny too flighty. It was remarkable, Pearl thought, how people displayed their characters in every little thing they undertook.

Hammering down a loose floorboard, with a bristle of nails in her mouth, she would let time slip away from her. It would get to be ten-thirty or eleven. Her children would be standing in the doorway all sweaty and grass stained, blinking in the sudden brightness. 'Heavens! Get to bed,' she told them. 'I thought I called you in hours ago. But a while after they left she'd start to feel

deserted, even though they hadn't been much company. She would lay aside her hammer and rise and walk the house, smoothing her skirt, absently touching her hair where it was falling out of its bun. Up the stairs to the hall, past the little room where Jenny slept, and into her own room, with its buckling cardboard wardrobe streaked to look like wood grain, the bare-topped bureau, the cavernous bed. Then out again and up more stairs to the boys' room, a third-floor dormitory that smelled of heat. The trustful sound of her sons' breathing made her envious. She turned and descended the stairs, all the way down to the kitchen. The back door stood open and the screen door fluttered with moths. Neighboring houses rang with someone's laughter, a few cracked notes from a trumpet, an out-of-tune piano playing 'Chattanooga Choo-Choo.' She closed the door and locked it and pulled down the paper shade. She climbed the stairs once more and took off her clothing, piece by piece, and put on her nightgown and went to bed.

She dreamed he wore that aftershave that he'd used when they were courting. She hadn't smelled it in years, hadn't given it a thought, but now it came back to her distinctly—something pungent, prickled with spice. A swaggering and self-vaunting scent, she had known even then; but catching wind of it, when he arrived on Uncle Seward's front porch to pick her up, she had felt adventurous. She had flung the door open so widely that it banged against the wall, and he had laughed and said, 'Well, now. Hey, now,' as she stood there, smiling out at him.

She had heard you could not dream a smell, or recall a smell in its absence; so when she woke she was convinced, for a moment,

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that Beck had let himself into the house and was seated on the edge of the bed, watching while she slept. But there was no one there.

Dance? Oh, I don't think so, she said inside her head. I'm in charge of this whole affair, you see, and all I'd have to do is turn my back one instant for the party to go to pieces, just fall into little pieces. Whoever it was drew away. Ezra turned a page of his magazine. 'Ezra,' she said. She felt him grow still. He had this habit—he had always had it—of becoming totally motionless when people spoke to him. It was endearing, but also in some ways a strain, for then whatever she said to him ('I feel a draft,' or 'The paper boy is late again') was bound to disappoint him, wasn't it? How could she live up to Ezra's expectations? She plucked her quilt. 'If I could just have some water,' she told him.

He poured it from the pitcher on the bureau. She heard no ice cubes clinking; they must have melted. Yet it seemed just minutes ago that he'd brought in a whole new supply. He raised her head, rested it on his shoulder, and tipped the glass to her lips. Yes, lukewarm—not that she minded. She drank gratefully, keeping her eyes closed. His shoulder felt steady and comforting. He laid her back down on the pillow.

'Dr Vincent's coming at ten,' he told her.

'What time is it now?'

'Eight-thirty.'

'Eight-thirty in the morning?'

'Yes.'

'Have you been here all night,' she asked.

‘I slept a little.’

‘Sleep now. I won’t be needing you.’

‘Well, maybe after the doctor comes.’

It was important to Pearl that she deceive the doctor. She didn’t want to go to the hospital. Her illness was pneumonia, she was almost certain; she guessed it from a past experience. She recognized the way it settled into her back. If Dr Vincent found out he would send her off to Union Memorial, tent her over with plastic. ‘Maybe you should cancel the doctor altogether,’ she told Ezra. ‘I’m very much improved, I believe.’

‘Let him decide that.’

‘Well, I know how my own self feels, Ezra.’

‘We won’t argue about it just now,’ he said.

He could surprise you, Ezra could. He’d let a person walk all over him but then display, at odd moments, a deep and rockhard stubbornness. She sighed and smoothed her quilt. It seemed he’d spilled some water on it.

She remembered when Ezra was a child, still in elementary school. ‘Mother,’ he had said, ‘if it turned out that money grew on trees, just for one day and never again, would you let me stay home from school and pick it?’

‘No,’ she told him.

‘Why not?’

‘Your education is more important.’

‘Other kids’ mothers would let them, I bet.’

‘Other mothers don’t have plans for their children to amount to something.’

‘But just for one day?’

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‘Pick it *after* school. Or before. Wake up extra early; set your alarm clock ahead an hour.’

‘An hour!’ he said. ‘One little hour, for something that happens only once in all the world.’

‘Ezra, will you let it be? Must you keep at me this way? Why are you so obstinate?’ Pearl had asked him.

It only now occurred to her, under her damp quilt, to wonder why she hadn’t said yes, he could stay home. If money decided to grow on trees one day, let him pick all he liked! she should have said. What difference would it have made?

Oh, she’d been an angry sort of mother. She’d been continually on edge; she’d felt too burdened, too much alone. And after Beck left, she’d been so preoccupied with paying the rent and juggling the budget and keeping those great, clod-footed children in new shoes. It was she who called the doctor at two a.m. when Jenny got appendicitis; it was she who marched downstairs with a baseball bat the night they heard that scary noise. She’d kept the furnace stoked with coal, confronted the neighborhood bully when Ezra got beaten up, hosed the roof during Mrs Simmons’s chimney fire. And when Cody came home drunk from some girl’s birthday party, who had to deal with that? Pearl Tull, who’d never taken anything stronger than a glass of wine at Christmas. She sat him smartly in a kitchen chair, ignored his groans, leaned across the table to him—and couldn’t think of a thing to say.

Then Cody graduated from high school, and Ezra was a sophomore, and Jenny was a tall young lady in eighth grade. Beck would not have known them. And they, perhaps, would not have known Beck. They never asked about him. Didn’t that

show how little importance a father has? The invisible man. The absent presence. Pearl felt a twinge of angry joy. Apparently she had carried this off—made the transition so smoothly that not a single person guessed. It was the greatest triumph of her life. My one true accomplishment, she thought. (What a pity there was no one to whom she could boast of it.) Without noticing, even, she had gradually stopped attending the Baptist church. She stopped referring to Beck in conversation—although still, writing her Christmas cards to relatives in Raleigh, she remarked that Beck was doing well and sent them his regards.

One night, she threw away his letters. It wasn't a planned decision. She was just cleaning her bureau, was all, and couldn't think of any good reason to save them. She sat by her bedroom wastebasket and dropped in *looks like I will be moving up the ladder and litle place convenient to the railway station and told me I was doing mighty well*. There weren't very many—three or so in the past year. When had she quit ripping open the envelopes with shaking hands and rapidly, greedily scanning the lines? It occurred to her that the man she still mourned, late on sleepless nights, bore no relation whatsoever to the man who sent these tiresome messages. *Ed Ball is retiring in June, she read with infinite boredom, and I step into his territory which has the highest per capitta income in Delaware*. It was a great satisfaction to her that he had misspelled *capita*.

Her children grew up and embarked on lives of their own. Her sons started helping out financially, and Pearl was glad to accept. (She had never been ashamed about taking money—from Uncle Seward in the olden days, or from Beck, or now from the boys. Where she

came from, a woman *expected* the men to provide.) And when Cody became so successful, he bought the row house she'd been renting all these years and presented her with the deed one Christmas morning. She could have retired from the grocery store right then, but she put it off till her sight began failing. What else would she do with her time? 'Empty nest,' they called it. Nowadays, that was the term they used. It was funny, in her old age, to look back and see for how short a period her nest had *not* been empty. Relatively speaking, it was nothing—empty far longer than full. So much of herself had been invested in those children; who could believe how briefly they'd been with her?

When she thought of them in their various stages—first clinging to her, then separating and drifting off—she thought of the hall lamp she used to leave on so they wouldn't be scared in the dark. Then later she'd left just the bathroom light on, further down the hall of whatever house they'd been living in; and later still just the downstairs light if one of them was out for the evening. Their growing up amounted, therefore, to a gradual dimming of the light at her bedroom door, as if they took some radiance with them as they moved away from her. She should have planned for it better, she sometimes thought. She should have made a few friends or joined a club. But she wasn't the type. It wouldn't have consoled her.

Last summer, she'd been half-awakened by a hymn on her clock radio—'In the Sweet Bye and Bye,' mournfully sung by some popular singer just before Norman Vincent Peale's sermonette. *We shall meet on that beautiful shore . . .* She'd slipped into a dream in which a stranger told her that the beautiful shore was Wrightsville

Beach, North Carolina, where she and Beck and the children had once spent a summer vacation. They were meeting on the shore after changing into swimsuits, for the very first swim of their very first day. Beck was handsome and Pearl felt graceful and the children were still very small; they had round, excited, joyous faces and chubby little bodies. She was astounded by their innocence—by her own and Beck’s as well. She stretched her arms toward the children, but woke. Later, speaking to Cody on the phone, she happened to mention the dream. Wouldn’t it be nice, she said, if heaven were Wrightsville Beach? If, after dying, they’d open their eyes and find themselves back on that warm, sunny sand, everyone young and happy again, those long-ago waves rolling in to shore? But Cody hadn’t entered into the spirit of the thing. *Nice?* he had asked. He asked, was that all she thought of heaven? Wrightsville Beach, where as he recalled she had fretted for two solid weeks that she might have left the oven on at home? And had she taken into account, he asked, his own wishes in the matter? Did she suppose that he wanted to spend eternity as a child? ‘Why, Cody, all I meant was—’ she said.

Something was very wrong with him. Something was wrong with all of her children. They were so frustrating—attractive, likable people, the three of them, but closed off from her in some perverse way that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. And she sensed a kind of trademark flaw in each of their lives. Cody was prone to unreasonable rages; Jenny was so flippant; Ezra hadn’t really lived up to his potential. (He ran a restaurant on St. Paul Street—not at all what she had planned for him.) She wondered if her children blamed her for something, sitting close at family gatherings (with

the spouses and offspring slightly apart, nonmembers forever), they tended to recall only poverty and loneliness—toys she couldn't afford for them, parties where they weren't invited. Cody, in particular, referred continually to Pearl's short temper, displaying it against a background of stunned, childish faces so sad and bewildered that Pearl herself hardly recognized them. Honestly, she thought, wasn't there some statute of limitations here? When was he going to absolve her? He was middle-aged. He had no business holding her responsible any more.

And Beck: well, he was still alive, if it mattered. By now he'd be old. She would bet he'd aged poorly. She would bet he wore a toupee, or false teeth too white and regular, or some flowing, youthful hairdo that made him look ridiculous. His ties would be too colorful and his suits too bold a plaid. What had she ever seen in him? She chewed the insides of her lips. Her one mistake: a simple error in judgment. It should not have had such far-reaching effects. You would think that life could be a little more forgiving.

One or twice a year, even now, his letters arrived. (Though the money had stopped when Jenny turned eighteen—or two months *after* she turned eighteen, which meant he'd lost track of her birthday, Pearl supposed.) It was typical of him that he lacked the taste to make a final exit. He spent too long at his farewells, chatting on the doorway, letting in the cold. He had retired from the Tanner Corporation, he wrote. He remained at his last place of transfer, Richmond, like something washed up from a flood; but evidently he still traveled some. In 1967 he sent her a postcard from the World's Fair in Montreal, and another in '72 from Atlantic City,

New Jersey. He seemed spurred into action by various overblown occasions—when man first walked on the moon, for instance (an event of no concern to Pearl, or to any other serious person). *Well!* he wrote, *Looks like we made it.* His enthusiasm seemed flushed, perhaps alcohol induced. She winced and tore the letter into squares.

Later, when her eyes went, she saved her mail for Ezra. She'd hold up an envelope. 'Where's this from? I can't quite make it out.'

'National Rifle Association.'

'Throw it away. What's this?'

'Republican Party.'

'Throw it away. And this?'

'Something in longhand, from Richmond.'

'Throw it away.'

He didn't ask why. None of her children possessed a shred of curiosity.

She dreamed her uncle hitched up Prince and took her to a medal contest, but she had failed to memorize a piece and stood onstage like a dumb thing with everybody whispering. When she woke, she was cross with herself. She should have done 'Dat Boy Fritz'; she'd always been good at dialect. And she knew it off by heart still, too. Her memory had not faded in the slightest. She rearranged her pillow, irritably. Her edges felt uneven, was how she put it to herself. She slept again and dreamed the house was on fire. Her skin dried out from the heat and her hair seemed to sizzle in her ears. Jenny rushed upstairs to save her costume jewelry and her footsteps died away all at once, as if she'd fallen into space. 'Stop!' Pearl

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shouted. She opened her eyes. Someone was sitting next to her, in that leather armchair that creaked. ‘Jenny?’ she said.

‘It’s Ezra, Mother.’

Poor Ezra, he must be exhausted. Wasn’t it supposed to be the daughter who came and nursed you? She knew she should send him away but she couldn’t make herself do it. ‘I guess you want to get back to that restaurant,’ she told him.

‘No, no.’

‘You’re like a mother hen about that place,’ she said. She sniffed. Then she said, ‘Ezra, do you smell smoke?’

‘Why do you ask?’ he said (cautious as ever).

‘I dreamed the house burned down.’

‘It didn’t really.’

‘Ah.’

She waited, holding herself in. Her muscles were so tense, she ached all over. Finally she said, ‘Ezra?’

‘Yes, Mother?’

‘Maybe you could just check.’

‘Check what?’

‘The house, of course. Check if it’s on fire.’

She could tell he didn’t want to.

‘For my sake,’ she told him.

‘Well, all right.’

She heard him rise and shamble out. He must be in his stocking feet; she recognized that shushing sound. He was gone so long that she began to fear the worst. She strained for the roar of the flames but heard only the horns of passing cars, the clock radio’s electric murmur, a bicycle bell tinkling beneath the window. Then

here he came, heavy and slow on the stairs. Evidently there was no emergency. He settled into his chair again. 'Everything's fine,' he told her.

'Thank you, Ezra,' she said humbly.

'You're welcome.'

She heard him pick up his magazine.

'Ezra,' she said, 'I've had a thought. Did you happen to check the basement?'

'Yes.'

'You went clear to the bottom of the steps.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'I don't much care for how that furnace sounds.'

'It's fine,' he told her.

It was fine. She resolved to believe him. She soothed herself by wandering, mentally, from one end of the house to the other, cataloguing how well she'd managed. The fireplace flue was shut against the cold. The drains were clear and the faucets were tight and she'd bled the radiators herself—sightless, turning her key back sharply the instant she heard the hiss of water. The gutters were swept and the roof did not leak and the refrigerator hummed in the kitchen. Everything was proceeding according to instructions.

'Ezra,' she said.

'Yes, Mother.'

'You know that address book in my desk.'

'What address book?'

'Pay attention, Ezra. I only have the one. Not the little red book for telephone numbers but the black one, in my stationery drawer.'

‘Oh, yes.’

‘I want everybody in it invited to my funeral.’

There was a thrumming silence, as if she had said a bad word. Then Ezra said, ‘*Funeral*, Mother? You’re not dying?’

‘No, of course not,’ she assured him. ‘But someday,’ she said craftily. ‘Just in the eventuality, you see . . .’

‘Let’s not talk about it,’ he said.

She paused, assembling patience. What did he expect—that she’d go on forever? It was so tiring. But that was Ezra for you. ‘All I’m saying,’ she said, ‘is I’d like those people invited. Are you listening? The people in my address book.’

Ezra didn’t answer.

‘The address book in my stationery drawer.’

‘Stationery drawer,’ Ezra echoed.

Good; he’d got it. He flicked a magazine page, said nothing further, but she knew he’d got it.

She thought of how that address book must have aged by now—smelling mousy, turning brittle. It dated back to long before her sight had started dimming. Emmaline was in it, and Emmaline had been dead for twenty years or more. So was Mrs Simmons dead, down in St. Petersburg, Florida, and Uncle Seward’s widow and perhaps his daughter too. Why, everybody in that book was six feet under, she supposed, except for Beck.

She remembered that he took a whole page—one town after another crossed out. She’d kept it up to date because she’d imagined needing to call him in an emergency. What emergency had she had in mind? She couldn’t think of any that would be eased in the slightest by his presence. She’d like to see his face when he received

an invitation to her funeral. An ‘invite,’ he would call it. ‘Imagine that!’ he would say, shocked. ‘She left me first, after all. Here’s the invite to her funeral.’ She could hear him now.

She laughed.

The doctor came, stamping his feet. ‘Is it snowing out?’ she asked him.

‘Snowing? No.’

‘You were stamping your feet.’

‘No,’ he said, ‘it’s just cold.’ He settled on the edge of her bed. ‘Feels like my toes are falling off,’ he told her. ‘My knee bones say we’re going to have a frost tonight.’

She waved away the small talk. ‘Listen here,’ she said. ‘Ezra called you over by mistake.’

‘Is that so.’

‘I’m really feeling fine. Maybe earlier I was under the weather, but now I’m much improved.’

‘I see,’ he said. He took her wrist in his icy, wrinkled fingers. (He was nearly as old as she was, and had all but given up his practice.) He held it for what seemed to be several minutes. Then he said, ‘How long has *this* been going on?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Where’s the phone?’ he asked Ezra.

‘Wait! Dr Vincent! Wait!’ Pearl cried.

He had laid down her wrist, but now he set his hand on hers and she felt him leaning over her, breathing pipe tobacco. ‘Yes?’ he said.

‘I’m not going to any hospital.’

‘Of course you’re going.’