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The Landscape



They were about to cross under the highway when a goose plummeted out of the sky. It landed with a thud on the trunk of the car and bounced to the pavement. Lydia gasped. She tapped the brake pedal in reflex and glanced in the rear-view mirror.

"Jesus," her husband Matt said. "What was that?"

Roxanne, strapped in her child's booster in the backseat, rotated her torso as far as it would go to peer out the back window.

"Looks like a goose." Lydia said. A chevron of geese, silhouetted against summer clouds thick as mattress ticking, had crested over the woods along the Harpeth River just before the bird's body struck. When Lydia pulled to a stop at the red light, she could make out, in the rearview, the reflection of its plump gray form from which the long dark neck curved like the top part of a question mark.

"Do you think it damaged the car?" Matt said.

Lydia shrugged. Her aging Toyota was so battered that another dent made no difference to her, as long as the trunk was staying shut, and it seemed to be.

"Go back!" Roxanne said. "We have to take it to the doctor."
Matt shook his head. "I'm afraid it's too late for a doctor."

"No way could it survive that," Lydia said.

"Turn around, turn around. The doctor can fix him." At five-and-a-half-years old, Roxanne seemed not to understand the finality of death. She turned so fully to stare after the bird that Lydia could see the part at the back of her head, her thick, wiry hair neatly cleaved into two tight braids.

"Oh, look," Lydia said, and she pressed the accelerator when the light turned green, "those people behind us are stopping." Sure enough, a jeep full of young men halted behind them. The passenger door opened, and a tattooed forearm reached out to grasp the goose's limp legs. "Maybe they're doctors."

Matt shot her a look.

Roxanne rolled down her window and shouted, "Make him better!" But there was no chance the boys could hear her over the rap music blasting from their stereo speakers, and besides, Lydia had pulled away, turning the car to climb the highway ramp. She raised the window with the driver's control and latched the child-lock.

"Wonder why it just fell like that," Matt said, twisting his wedding band, his habit—Lydia noticed—when perplexed.

"Something to do with the heart, I bet," Lydia said. "A coronary occlusion or clogged arteries, maybe. Heart trouble, birds have it, too." She merged the car onto Highway 40 East toward Nashville, neatly slipping between two semi trucks. Lydia turned to Matt, dropped her voice. "I don't understand why my cousin can't wait until she gets everything settled. I mean she's just out of that halfway house—"

Matt shook his head and put a finger to his lips. His thinning black hair, still damp from shampooing, clung to his smallish head in tight ringlets, and his sunglasses glinted,

reflecting two miniaturized Lydias back at her. But behind these, she knew his eyes were narrowed, fixed with a stern, censorious gaze. They must never, he'd said, speak ill of Lydia's first cousin Shirley, who was Roxanne's mother. A child identifies with her parents—to insult the parent is to damage the child's sense of self. Matt was a sociologist, so he knew such things.

Lydia lowered her voice a bit more. "I mean, what's the rush? She doesn't even have a place to live yet."

"Silly goose," Roxanne said, "silly, silly goose." She rustled paper in the backseat and dropped something that fell with a muffled thunk onto the floorboard.

Matt swung around to see what she was up to. "Careful with that painting."

Lydia tightened her jaw, longing to complain about that as well, but it was too early in too long a trip—Nashville to Atlanta and back—to bring up how she felt about transporting the damn thing. Matt's uncle, an art dealer, had asked them as a favor to take the piece to his ex-wife, another dealer in the exclusive Buckhead suburb of Atlanta, for her appraisal. Ordinarily, Lydia would begrudge this uncle no favor. He was a thoughtful, gentle man she respected, but this time, he had asked too much. The trip, taken to return Roxanne to Shirley after over a year of raising the child, was difficult enough on its own, without the extra errand. Besides, Lydia's small car was crammed with Roxanne's clothes, books, and toys, and now the little girl had to share the backseat with the three-by-two-foot painting that Matt had wrapped in plastic bubble wrap and then blankets. He insisted it was highly valuable, warning it should not be touched, not even accidentally. For Roxanne, no doubt, this spelled irresistible temptation. She likely wouldn't miss an opportunity to nudge and jiggle the thing whenever she sensed their attention to her flagging.

On top of this, Lydia had no especially fond memories of Matt's aunt, the Buckhead dealer, whom she'd met once before. The toad-like woman with flat straw-colored hair was so absorbed in recent acquisitions that she hadn't glanced at Lydia when they were introduced. Lydia, a college professor, was accustomed to deferential treatment from students and colleagues, no less from family members—hers and Matt's. But the woman barely even acknowledged Matt, her nephew whom she hadn't seen in years. They would have elicited a warmer welcome from her, Lydia was sure, if they had come in coveralls to clear out the rain gutters. She didn't even admit them to the house. Instead she maneuvered her large, pale body around the paintings stacked in her garage, straightening here and there, as though they'd arrived to a garage sale she was holding. It was a good thing the woman was an art dealer, Lydia thought, and art enables people to transcend self because if ever there was a self that needed transcending—

Another rumble from the backseat, a crashing sound and Matt said, "You're not touching that painting, are you?"

"No, I was trying to get my coloring book. I can't ... *reach* it."

"I'll get it." Matt reached behind his seat. "Where is it?"

"There, there, you're almost touching it," Roxanne said. "There!"

He jerked his arm back and howled like he'd been stabbed.

Lydia pressed on the emergency lights. "What happened? Should I stop?" They were about to veer onto Interstate 24, so there was no place but the shoulder to park.

"Keep going, keep going," Matt said, his voice taut with strain. "I pulled a muscle, that's all. I'll be okay in a minute." He clutched his shoulder, massaging it.

"You almost reached it, Matt," Roxanne said. "Just a little more that way."

"He can't get it now, honey." Lydia flicked off the hazard lights and sped onto I-24. "He hurt himself. Let's do something else."

"I know," the little girl said, "let's tell ghost stories."

They had timed the trip so as to depart just after lunch, hoping Roxanne, who grew cranky being confined in the car, would nap through most of it. Perhaps a long and tedious ghost story would be just the thing. If only Roxanne didn't insist on telling one herself. Her ghost stories always went the same way: People left their house, ghosts came in and helped themselves to potato chips from a blue bowl on the kitchen table, people returned and noticed the chips missing, they ate some themselves and departed again, the ghosts reappeared to devour more chips, and on and on in this vein. These were lengthy and repetitive, but instead of lulling Roxanne, as they stupefied Lydia and Matt, the tales excited her, triggering her appetite for chips and her grievance against Lydia for refusing to pack junk food in her lunchbox.

"Torvah gets potato chips in her lunch." Just the mention of ghost stories sparked Roxanne's grudge.

Matt fumbled for the insulated bag, in which they kept vitamins, bandages, and antiseptic cream. "Did you remember the aspirin?"

"No, I forgot," Lydia said.

"Even Daniel gets chips."

"I put them right on the counter for you. I said, 'Don't forget these.'"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. We can buy some when we get gas."

A rapping sound came from the back seat.

"You're not kicking that painting, are you?" Matt started to turn and yelped. "Man, that hurts like a mother—"

"I'll tell the first story," Lydia said. "Listen closely because it's very scary, and it's a secret story, you can never, ever, *ever* tell anyone." She dropped her voice to a stage whisper. "*It's a true story.*"

Matt sat in silence, twisting his ring.

"What's it about?" Roxanne asked.

"Well, there was this woman who was watching a house for some people who had gone to ..." Lydia paused to come up with a faraway place that Roxanne would know.

"Israel!" Roxanne said.

"Yes, Israel, they'd gone to Israel for a vacation, and they told her to take care of their house and feed the cat while they were away. And so she did. She moved into their house, a big old-fashioned house with lots of hidey holes and cupboards." Lydia was drifting into a story that once happened to her, so she hastened to change it some. "There was a big fireplace with an ugly painting hanging over it. A really yucky painting taking up the wall, crowding everything out, just a stupid, stupid painting—"

"We get the picture," Matt said.

Lydia winced, as she usually did when Matt made a pun. "Ha-ha—very funny."

"What's funny?" Roxanne asked.

"Nothing, honey, trust me," Lydia said. "Let me tell the story, okay? So after the couple left for Israel, and the woman was in the house alone, she decided to take that picture down and hide it in the basement while she was staying there in the house."

"What was in the picture, Auntie?"

Lydia thought for a moment. "It was a deep, dark, lonely room filled with shadows and cobwebs, and in it was a bony hag reaching out, like to *grab* someone."

Matt put his hand on Lydia's knee, squeezed it in a gentle, but warning way.

"Of course, it was just a picture, but it sure was ugly, so she took it down, just for while she was there. Well, that night, after she fell asleep, she heard noises in the house, like someone bumping around on the stairs and then scraping sounds."

Roxanne gasped, and Matt put a little more pressure on Lydia's knee.

"Now, the woman was scared, but she got up, grabbed a flashlight, and went downstairs to look. She didn't find anything. The house was silent again. Still, she searched every room, flashing the light over the furniture and the carpet. Finally, in the living room, she raised the beam over the fireplace, and there it was."

"What was it?" Roxanne's voice quavered.

"The painting, the ugly, ugly painting, that's what. Someone had put it back over the mantel. This was weird, but then she told herself, hmm, maybe I didn't really take it down. Maybe I just thought I did. She wasn't sure anymore, and besides the rest of the house was quiet, and she was sleepy, so she just went back to bed. The next morning, first thing she did was to take that painting downstairs and *lock* it in the basement."

"I bet a ghost moved it!"

"Maybe so." Lydia beeped the horn at a van that cut her off, causing her to brake. "Because the next night, the same thing happened again—noises from the stairs woke her up, and she went down to find the painting back in its place over the mantel. This went on every night until the couple returned from Israel. They'd taken an early flight home, so she wasn't expecting them, and she had the picture hidden away when they came through the front door. The first thing they said when they stepped in the house was, 'What happened to our mirror?'"

"Well, the woman was surprised. She said, 'You mean the painting?'"

"Painting, what painting?" they asked. "We have no paintings—just our mirror."

Lydia took pride in this extemporaneous twist. "So they went downstairs to get it, and guess what, it *was* a mirror—not a painting, and guess what else, that hag in it—"

"Ooh! That was *her*, the lady!" Roxanne's voice was rich with satisfaction.

"Correct."

"But what if it was the cat, Auntie? What if the cat moved the painting?"

"Think about it. Could a cat move a painting?"

"Maybe with a step-stool," said Roxanne, who'd used her step-stool to reach butterscotch discs from the crystal dish on the mantel until Lydia caught her at it and replaced the candy with unsalted soy nuts.

"Well, if the cat did it, then it wouldn't be a ghost story. It'd be a cat *tail*, right?" Matt stroked his chin. "Gives one pause—get it? *Paws*."

Neither Lydia nor Roxanne laughed. Really, it was wrong to encourage him.

"I'll tell one now," and Roxanne plunged into an unabridged version of the potato-chip-eating ghost tale that lasted past Murfreesboro, Manchester, and almost to Monteagle, putting Matt to sleep—still holding his shoulder—just outside of Beech Grove and driving Lydia to bite the inside of her cheek to keep alert.

At the end of her story, Roxanne complained only briefly about potato chip deprivation before pulling a blanket—from the painting?—over her head and emitting muted snores from under it. They had just begun to climb the mountain toward Monteagle, the little car whizzing past the eighteen-wheelers

that had thundered by earlier. Stony ridges on both sides of the highway resembled the bristled backs of prehistoric creatures, and the dynamite-sheared rock, iron-stained deep russet, offset shady patches of loblolly and oak. Ordinarily, Lydia enjoyed such a drive. But this time, she barely glanced at the landscape, and when she did, it struck her as remote and desolate, nowhere she'd want to be stranded. Thunderheads crowded the sky, casting an inescapable umbra. She fixed her gaze on the highway and thought about the parts of the story she hadn't told.

It had been a doll, not a painting, a doll given her by a man she picked up in a bar and brought to the house she was watching for her professor and his wife while they were in South America. The man, an antique hobbyist, had presented her with a doll on their second date, a porcelain-faced baby doll. She'd thought it an insipid gift for a grown woman and left it in the trunk of her car. But in the night, somehow, it had gotten in the house, and Lydia found it when she went downstairs for a glass of water. She had been drinking that night and wasn't sure she'd left it in the car, only that she'd *meant* to leave it there. But the doll was out of its box, and she certainly hadn't removed it from the cardboard and cellophane casing—had she?

In the morning, clearheaded and caffeinated, she re-boxed it, placed it near the spare tire, and slammed the trunk shut. The next day, she woke to find the doll, again, in the house, seated in fact, at the dining table with a tea-setting laid before it. That was it. She packed her things and moved back to her apartment, returning to the house twice daily to feed the cat and turn lights off and on to make it seem inhabited. When she told the man who'd given her the doll about this over the phone, he made an unkind remark about her biological clock and broke off their next date. She never saw him again.

After the professor and his wife returned from Peru, they thanked her with a small woven rug, and she, in turn, gave them the doll.

"Our little ghost will like that," her professor had said with a wink at his wife.

"Ghost?" A chill raised the fine hairs on Lydia's arms.

"Yes, didn't we tell you?" the wife said with pride. "Our house is haunted."

"It's the ghost of a child, a little girl." The professor had cupped a hand over his mouth and whispered in Lydia's ear. "*She likes to play.*"

Lydia stopped for gas in Dalton, Georgia. She pulled the blanket off Roxanne and tossed it over the painting before Matt woke up, without much glancing at it, except to see that it was dark under the bubble wrap—a deep brown or blackish thing. She hoped it was an abstract. Still-life and landscape paintings struck Lydia as dated, even corny.

Roxanne grumbled, waking. "Are we here yet?"

"Sure are," Matt said, and he yawned.

"We *are*? We're at Mama's house!" Her excitement stung Lydia like a slap.

"No," she said. "We still have a ways to go."

"But Matt *said* we're here."

"Everywhere we are is *here*," he said. "Everywhere we aren't is there. We're here, and there is where we're going, but when we get there, it'll be *here*."

Roxanne groaned, and Lydia rolled her eyes. "Come on, then, pumpkin. Stretch your legs, while I get some gas. I'll take you to the restroom after we fill up." And to Matt, she said, "Do you still need aspirin?"

"In a big way," he said. "I think I've thrown out my frigging back." His angular face was clenched with pain, but when he

grimaced, the gap between his top front teeth struck Lydia as absurd, even comical.

Roxanne hopped from the car, banging her knee on the painting. Lydia would have liked to give it a solid kick herself, but instead she shut the back door and leaned in the front passenger window to whisper, "Do you think we ought to phone Shirley on the cell? See if she hasn't changed her mind?"

"I'll call in a bit," he said, "to check the directions, see what she says."

"You want anything else?"

"Just the aspirin—please don't forget this time."

The gas station housed a souvenir/candy shop. Inside, Roxanne and Lydia wandered its full shelves and displays: mason jars filled with chow-chow and peach salsa, rubber snakes, Indian dolls in buckskin and dyed feathers, postcard displays, satiny pillows with embroidered sayings, shot glasses, ashtrays, and racks of candy—everything from orange marshmallow peanuts to divinity squares. Roxanne held up a lifelike cat novelty. "Can I have this?" she asked. The thing was realistically furred and cat-sized, but oddly flat on the bottom, like a doorstep.

A heavy woman, gray wisps straying from her rain bonnet, overheard this and said, "I bought me one of them fake cats, and the durn dog tore it to shreds." She laughed. "He thought it was the real thing."

"Please, can I get it as a souvenir to remind me of you?" Roxanne said.

"How would a fake cat remind you of me?" Lydia asked, disturbed by the idea.

"How about this then?" She held up a bag of salt-water taffy. This was a familiar tactic—to ask for something outrageous and settle for what she really wanted all along.

"Bad for your teeth," Lydia countered and reached for a small sack of pistachios. "Here, I'll get you these." She had a few strategies of her own.

"Thank you, Auntie. Every single nut I eat, I will think of you."

The older woman squinted at the two over the top of her glasses, and Lydia wondered if she'd ever get used to the looks she got from strangers puzzled by her relationship to the biracial child. She supposed not. No chance of it now that Roxanne was going home to her mother.

"Are you okay, honey?" the older woman asked, and she touched Lydia's elbow.

Lydia stepped back, fanning her face with one hand. "Allergies," she said. "Maybe I'm allergic to all these cats." She made herself smile.

"That's *not* the problem." Roxanne wagged a finger. "They're not even for real."

Back in the car, Matt reported that Shirley was anxious to see Roxanne and she'd given straightforward directions for when they hit Atlanta. Lydia pulled out of the gas station and headed back to the highway. As they sped up the on-ramp, Matt said, "Say, where's the aspirin?"

Heat suffused Lydia's face. "Shoot, we can go back."

"I can't believe this. You forgot?"

"I can turn back."

"*How?* How are you going to turn back? It's at least five miles to the next exit. You know what," he said, twisting his ring this way and that, "just forget it."

"Listen, if it's so bad, maybe we ought to head home, get you to the doctor in Nashville. I'm sure Shirley will—"

"No, no, no, no," he said. "You're not doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Using me to get what you want."

"I don't want to go back," Roxanne said from the back-seat. "I want to see my mama," and she started to cry.

Matt gave Lydia a sidelong glance.

"Hush, honey, hush," Lydia said. "You're going to see her. We'll be there in just a short while." The past year she had thought, had *wanted* to believe that Roxanne had no desire to return to Shirley. The little girl never asked when she would be going home or complained of missing her mother. She didn't even ask to call Shirley on the telephone. Now, Lydia understood that Roxanne—a four-year-old child when she came to live with Lydia—was just being brave, steeling herself not to cry for what she wanted most until now that her ordeal was nearly over. But had it been such an ordeal?

Being separated from her mother, that was the ordeal. Lydia remembered the way she herself would cling to the chain link fence of the kindergarten yard long after her mother had dropped her off, until the teacher pried her loose—one rust-stained finger after another—to carry her into the classroom. The other children teased her for crying, called her a baby, but Lydia couldn't help herself. She barely managed a half a day of separation from her mother at Roxanne's age. A year would have been unendurable for her. She would not have survived it.

But Roxanne had flourished during this time, grown taller, stronger, and smarter than ever. Shirley would hardly know her. Her wild mass of crinkly hair neatly combed and braided, her nails clipped and carefully painted shell pink, her brown eyes clear and wide—she would surprise her mother, Lydia felt sure. *If* Shirley noticed, that is, if she were sober—

"Shirley sounds good," Matt said, nearly reading her thoughts.

"I'm glad," Lydia said, looking straight ahead.

The house was a large two-storey with yellow vinyl siding, set in the middle of a smallish lot. It belonged to an aunt of that dooper—as Lydia thought of him—that Shirley had ended up marrying, the one she'd been arrested with a year ago. Supposedly, they were both straight, now, working, and living with the aunt until they found a place of their own. Lydia pulled into the gravel drive behind two other cars.

For all her eagerness to see her mother, Roxanne made no move to release her seat harness. Matt was the first to heave himself out, and this he did gingerly, favoring his sore shoulder and moaning. "I won't be able to help with her stuff," he told Lydia.

"I'll unload. Let's go inside first, visit for a minute," she said, meaning let's see if Shirley's actually here and what condition she's in before we bring in anything.

He opened Roxanne's door. "We're really here, sweetie. I can't help you out because I'm hurting too bad. Can you get yourself out? Now don't bang that thing."

Lydia stepped out of the car and brushed the wrinkles from her skirt while Roxanne unclasped the strap buckle and climbed down. "My mama's in *there*?"

"That's right," Matt said.

The little girl shuffled up the drive, Lydia and Matt trailing her. At the threshold, Roxanne waited for Lydia to press the doorbell. The door swung wide, and Shirley, plump and smiling, stood before them. "Oh, Roxie, you're so big!"

Roxanne smiled, looking shy, but pleased. They all stepped into the hall and from there into the living room. The carpet had been freshly vacuumed, Lydia could tell by

the stripes in the shiny beige pile, the coffee table polished and porcelain knickknacks dusted, but the house had a peculiar fishy smell.

Matt sniffed. "Is there a baby here?"

"Damien's cousin has a baby. They're staying here, too," Shirley told him.

Lydia wondered why Shirley hadn't embraced Roxanne, as she stepped forward to draw her cousin close. "You look terrific."

And Shirley did appear well fed—her pink cheeks filled out and her mid-section bulging over the waist of her faded blue jeans. She took Lydia's hands in hers and beamed. "I want you to be the first to know, but you can't tell anybody. I haven't even told Mama yet. Damien and I are expecting."

Lydia's smile ached as she waited a few moments for her cousin to finish the sentence—expecting *what*?—before she realized Shirley had finished it. Then she pulled away, wanting to stamp her foot like a child and shout: *But that's no fair!*

"Congratulations," Matt said, and he turned to Roxanne, raising his eyebrows. "You hear that? You're going to have a baby sister or brother. How do you like that?"

Roxanne, kneeling before a coffee table laden with ceramic angels, rabbits, and poodles, fingered these with care. Her spine was rigid and shoulders taut as she listened, but she made no answer.

Lydia breathed deeply and hugged her cousin again. "I hope things work out for you, Shirley, but if you ever need me to take care of Roxanne again, I will."

Lydia brought in Roxanne's suitcases and boxes from the car while Matt, still cradling his shoulder, made small talk with her cousin. Lydia overheard him telling Shirley how

well Roxanne was doing on the swim team. He liked that the little girl was athletic and competitive. Who'd go to the driving range to hit golf balls with him, Lydia wondered, carting in a crate of books and art supplies. Who'd toss the Frisbee with him now? Certainly not me, she thought.

Roxanne spent the whole time arranging and rearranging the figurines on the table. And Damien, if he was in the house, never showed his face. Lydia brought in the last load—Roxanne's carton of games and her backpack—and Matt excused himself for the bathroom. Lydia sat on the couch beside Shirley, struggling to unzip the backpack. From this, she pulled out a file sleeve. "Here are her medical records and a copy of her birth certificate. I had to send away for that, and you'll need it to get her in school. Her vitamins are in here—one a day of the calcium and two of the multi-vitamin with meals, okay?" She wanted to add: Roxanne's favorite color is pink, and she likes smoothies for breakfast—you make them with protein powder and frozen fruit, no ice cream—and she loves peanut butter sandwiches, and she's crazy about bowling and playing Candyland, though we changed up the rules some—

But Shirley's eyes glazed over, and she yawned.

"Oh, well." Lydia re-zipped the pack. "You'll see where everything is when you unpack." She set the bag down. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you for letting me—"

Her cousin flushed. "No, gosh, thank you. You were great to take her like that."

Matt reappeared in the doorway, flicking water from his hands, and Lydia rose. "We've got to do an errand in Buckhead," she said, "so we'd better get going."

Matt mussed the nimbus of hair that had escaped Roxanne's braids. Lydia knelt beside her. "You know what," she said, "I'm going to miss you." She kissed the girl's smooth forehead and embraced her, inhaling her strawberry-scented

shampoo and salty pistachio breath and locking the child's smell and warmth in a deep vault of memory.

"Bye-bye, Auntie," Roxanne said without looking up.

Matt, still too sore to drive, directed Lydia back to the interstate. Otherwise, they were silent, Lydia steering through dense but fast moving traffic and Matt staring out the window. As they neared their exit, Matt made a strange chuckling sound. Lydia thought he was laughing to himself, but when she glanced at him, she saw his head was bent and his hands covered his face. Was he weeping? They had been married less than a year. They'd hastily wed when they hoped to gain custody of Roxanne, and they hadn't dated but for a few months before that. Lydia had never seen him—or any man—cry before.

"It would be different," he said, "it would be different if we knew she was going to be well taken care of. Then I wouldn't feel so bad."

Lydia reached for a tissue from the console and handed it to him. "I know," she said, and she clicked on the signal and accelerated to pass a slow-moving trailer. She blinked rapidly, cleared her throat.

"They didn't even have soap in the bathroom or towels. I had to wash my hands with some shampoo I found under the sink."

Lydia clucked her tongue, her throat thick and burning, and she wished Matt would go back to gazing morosely, and silently, out the window.

"And that medicine cabinet had everything from Percocet to Valium—all prescribed to Damien's aunt, but still. It's going to be hard to stay clean with all that—"

"Did you find an aspirin?" asked Lydia, remembering his back.

Matt shook his head. "No soap, no towels, no aspirin."

"We'll stop at a drugstore in Buckhead," she promised.

"No need. I took a couple Oxycontin."

"What?" Lydia turned to face him.

"I took some Oxycontin. I was curious. You hear all that stuff in the news."

"You're not supposed to take other people's medicine. What if you're allergic? What if she's counting pills and thinks Shirley or Damien took them?"

"Relax, will you? Anyone who's popping all those pills doesn't have the wits to count them, believe me." Matt rotated his shoulder. "My back feels better already."

Matt's aunt had fixed up her place to look like a French *maison* with pale yellow and orange paint marbled on the exterior walls of the house and a trellised courtyard that had a fountain. But a *faux maison* in Atlanta, Georgia, of all places, struck Lydia as phonier than vinyl siding. She lugged the bundled painting over the pebble-strewn walk. Matt, no doubt already high on Oxycontin, stumbled after her. "We're *not* staying long," she hissed over her shoulder, and she rang the doorbell.

Matt's aunt—Lydia struggled to remember her name—cracked the door open a few inches. "I'm not sure how much this will open," the woman said. "We've got paintings everywhere." But she managed to pull it a few more inches wide, and Lydia handed her the framed canvas and slid in after it. Matt followed. Lucky, thought Lydia, they were both thin, or they wouldn't have been able to fit through the opening.

"Good to see you, Aunt Belinda," Matt said and gave a loopy, Oxycontin grin, his eyes still red-rimmed from weeping.

"Is this the painting?" Belinda asked, holding the framed canvas. She wore a dingy turquoise running suit and her large rough-looking feet were bare.

Lydia nodded and helped Belinda unwrap the blanket and plastic covering the picture. The woman didn't even bother to offer them a seat, let alone a glass of water. True, in addition to blocking the door, paintings leaned against every piece of furniture. The one chair that propped no artwork was occupied by her current husband, who sat at a computer in an adjacent room. He hadn't troubled to glance up from the monitor at them.

When she and Belinda finally unveiled the painting, dropping the blankets and bubble wrapping to the floor, Lydia managed a sideways view of it. It was darker than she'd thought.

"Uncle Ben's trying to sell the thing. He just wants to know what you think it's worth," Matt said, squinting at the canvas himself.

"Oh, I don't know." Belinda bit her lower lip and peered through her goggle-style glasses. "Will you and she hold it, so I can get a better look?"

She! The woman didn't even know Lydia's name.

"I can't, Aunt Belinda. I threw out my back this afternoon and—"

"Let's just put it against that group of paintings there, then." She pointed to a stack leaning against a wall, and they set the picture down.

They stood back to regard the work. It was a landscape after all, a shadowy rendering of some body of water—a swamp?—surrounded by morbid-looking trees under a dull sky. A feeble light emanated from the center, but the darkness threatened to overtake this as surely as death punctuated life. The painting was so dismal that it disgusted Lydia.

Gloom for gloom's sake, she thought, gratuitous gloom. She'd never seen such a depressing view.

"Here's some crackling." Belinda fingered the canvas, "and flecking."

Lydia flashed on Roxanne's nudges and taps.

"And it's unsigned," Belinda said.

Of course, it is, Lydia told herself. After finishing it, the artist probably threw up his hands, saying "What the hell have I done? I'm not putting my name on this thing" before he set it out on the curb. She couldn't imagine what would inspire anyone to capture such dreariness, let alone to share it with others.

"I don't think it's worth much." Belinda shook her head. "Maybe five or six hundred dollars tops. *We* don't want it. Tell Ben we don't handle anything less than—what does our cheapest piece go for, hon?"

"Forty-eight hundred dollars, love," piped her husband from the computer.

"Well, he just wanted your opinion," Matt said, but surely his uncle had hoped Belinda would buy the painting and get it out of his sight. "We'll take it back to him."

Belinda made a hasty move for the door, and then somehow remembered her manners enough to stop herself. "What brings you to Atlanta?"

"We had to drive Roxanne back," Matt told her.

Lydia doubted Belinda had any idea who Roxanne was, but the older woman looked, for the first time, into Lydia's eyes. "*Oh*, how was that?"

Lydia tried a smile, but her lips quirked and her cheeks flamed.

"Are you okay?" Belinda asked her. "You look—"

"Fine, I'm fine." Lydia pulled the keys from her purse.

"We'd better go." She wound the wrappings over the painting in a clumsy way.

"I'm learning all I can about art and art dealing," Matt told his aunt. "You know I'm taking an appraisal course this fall to get certification."

"Listen to this, dear. He wants to be an appraiser. This from a sociologist," she said, meanly.

"I think he finds it diverting," Lydia said, "from his *real* work. Besides he wants to help out his uncle, who hasn't been well lately. It's a good hobby for someone like Matt who does so much important work that is meaningful to others." Take *that*, she thought, glancing around at the paintings as though they were trifles, worthless extravagances. This hardly reflected the way Lydia felt about art, but she had to defend poor, stoned-looking Matt, who stared at her now as though she'd spoken in tongues.

"My," Belinda said, clearly satisfied for having struck a nerve here. She was free to usher them out now, and so she did, saying with insincerity that Lydia found appalling, "You must come and visit us again."

"Oh, we will," Lydia said, her voice edged with threat. "You can count on it."

Back on the interstate, Lydia hit a wall of traffic. Minutes trickled past, and no car moved. Matt sat mute, but he wasn't sleeping. He was twisting that wedding band so vigorously she felt sure he'd chafe his finger. Lydia resisted observing that they might have missed this congestion if they hadn't had to stop at his aunt's. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel lightly and thought to turn on the radio, but they never agreed on stations. He liked classical music and

inflectionless discussions about politics or the economy, while she preferred raucous garage-band music. Lydia thought of Roxanne. Lately, the little girl insisted on listening only to women vocalists. Lydia would set the system on scan, searching for female singers to please Roxanne and finding them most often on country-and-western stations. Roxanne—what was she doing now? Lydia checked her watch: dinner time. She hoped Shirley would put some fresh vegetables on her plate. Broccoli, steamed broccoli was Roxanne's favorite. She ought to have mentioned this. Maybe she could slip Matt's cell phone from his belt—

"You don't seem to care much for my aunt," Matt said.

Lydia snorted, but then said, "I have nothing against her. In fact, I like her more than ever now. Today, she actually made eye contact with me."

"I was very uncomfortable to see you like that with her," he said.

"Like what?"

"Like you couldn't wait to get out of there."

Lydia regarded her husband out of the corner of her eye, amazed she could feel such tenderness towards him as he wept not an hour ago, and now, wonder why on earth she'd ever dated him in the first place—that bony face, those thick glasses. Matt was a slight man, and Lydia was on the small side herself, so if they ever had children, they'd be dwarfish, spindly things, nothing like the splendidly tall Roxanne. Like him, they'd no doubt be legally blind, and they'd inherit that gap between his teeth that made it so hard for her to take him seriously. How would she ever be able to love them?

Finally, traffic flowed around a knot of squad cars and an ambulance. When a lane freed for them to pass, Lydia caught sight of a mangled gray sedan, the front end smashed accordion-style nearly into the backseat. "Surely, no one survived that."

"But they did." Matt pointed out an ashen-faced man and woman, wearing blankets and holding onto one another, as they perched on the median divider. "Look."

Matt fell asleep just before they crossed into Tennessee, and Lydia's seatbelt pressed against her full bladder so uncomfortably that her eyes teared. She knew there was a rest stop just past Lake Nickajack—all that water!—so she unfastened her seatbelt and aimed for it, driving as fast as she dared. At the rest stop, Matt still slept, undisturbed by the slammed door and the heat filling the car in her absence. Back in the car, she pulled out her checkbook—she and Matt still kept separate accounts—and scribbled out a check to Uncle Ben for six hundred—no, make that six hundred and *fifty*—dollars. Then, she pulled the painting from the back seat, propped it against the drinking fountain, returned to the car, and drove off, feeling lighter than she had in weeks.

Matt roused himself about twenty miles from Murfreesboro. "Where are we?"

"Not too far," Lydia said, "but we need to get gas."

"How long have I been asleep?"

Long enough, Lydia thought, but she said, "Not that long. We're coming up on Luv's—that gas-station/fast-food place. Are you hungry?"

"I don't know. I suppose I should be."

"Maybe we can get a salad or something there." She veered for the exit and was soon bumping the car up the drive to the pumps. As she fueled the car, Matt staggered across the blacktop. "Whoa, there," she said. "Can you manage by yourself?"

"I'm okay," he said. "I'm headed to the restroom. I'll meet you inside."

He took slow deliberate steps, like a careful drunk, all

the way into the store. As she waited for the tank to fill, an elderly black couple pulled a powder blue Cadillac alongside her car. The man, who was driving, rolled down his window and said, "Thank goodness we caught up with you. I didn't think we'd make it."

"Are you talking to me?" Lydia asked.

"Why, yes, ma'am, I am." He smiled broadly, revealing an uneven row of longish yellowed teeth.

A thin woman with a cap of blue-rinsed curls stepped out of the passenger seat and rapped on the roof of the Cadillac. "Open up the trunk, Seth." She was wearing a navy blue and white polka dot dress with a white collar.

"Forgive me for not stepping out," the man said, after pulling the trunk release. "My knees are bad."

The old woman struggled to pull the familiar blanket-covered bundle from the trunk. No, thought Lydia, not the painting, but of course, it was.

"You left it behind at that rest stop in Nickajack," Seth said. "We tried to stop you. I honked and honked, but looked like you had something else on your mind."

Lydia hurried around to help lift the thing.

"I had a look at it," the woman confessed. "Not real cheerful, is it?"

"We were headed for Monteagle, the chapel up there, you know, but I told Alma we'd better follow you and give this thing back. Looks valuable," Seth said.

Hearing that the woman found the painting none too "cheerful," Lydia realized there was no way she could offer it to them for driving a good hour or more out of their way. She glanced over her shoulder toward the station before shoving the painting into the back seat. "I don't know how to thank you. This is so nice of you."

"Random axe," the man said.

"Excuse me?" Lydia said.

"Random acts of niceness," the old woman explained with a grin. "The Lord sees them. We ought to thank you. You're helping us get into heaven."

"Well, I'm sorry you went out of your way, but I'm very grateful." Lydia hoped they'd be satisfied and leave before Matt came out to see what was going on.

"Save your gratitude for the Lord," Seth told her, as the woman slammed the trunk and climbed back into the car. "He's the one works through us." He rolled up the window, and both waved at her as the blue Cadillac pulled away from the pumps.

Lydia locked the car, stuffed the gas receipt in her purse, and made her way into Luv's. The shelves, like those in the souvenir shop earlier, were laden with cheap toys and mementos. As she strode past an aisle of dolls wearing frilly, feathery umbrella dresses in neon colors, she nearly stopped to point these out to Roxanne before she remembered where the little girl was. The store was filled with customers, but no one seemed to notice her. That is, no one looked at her the way Roxanne did—the intensity of that attention missed now like a phantom limb. This is what the dead would feel, she thought, if they walked among us.

She found Matt standing in line behind a family of overweight tourists, all in wrinkled khaki shorts, at the fast-food counter. "Who were those people?" he said. "Those people you were talking to outside?"

"Just some folks who wanted directions." Lydia stared at the posted menu.

"Oh, really," he said. "Then what were they doing with the painting?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Matt glared at his ring, as though it mocked him, daring him to twist it—come on, just once—and he was doing

everything he could to resist. "I saw them take my uncle's painting out of their trunk and give it to you. That's what I'm talking about."

Lydia wondered if she could get away with blaming the vision on the Oxycontin, but decided that would not be fair. "Oh, that," she said.

"Yes, that. What the hell was that about?"

The heavy woman in front of them turned to give Matt a curious look.

He dropped his voice. "How did they get hold of the painting?"

"Listen, this is very complicated," Lydia said. "I can't possibly explain it here." She shook her head, frowning, and to her horror, she heard a great choking sob tear from her throat. She inhaled noisily, struggling to force it back, but it was too late. "I hate that fucking landscape! It's ugly and lonely, and it's depressing, and I can't bear it another minute!" She bolted for the women's restroom, where she sat in a locked stall, blotting her eyes with toilet paper and blowing her nose, until Matt, from the door, coaxed her out, saying, "Come on, honey. I didn't know you felt that way. Let's go home."

The rest of the drive home, Matt refrained from mentioning the painting, and in fact, when she glanced over her shoulder, Lydia saw that it was missing from the back seat. Maybe he had thrown it out. She hoped so, but after they pulled into their garage and he opened the trunk, he removed the blanket-wrapped parcel, saying, "Now, I'm going to put it in the basement, okay? I'm going to lock it down there until I can drive it back to Ben's. Unless you'd rather I take it right now."

"You can take it later, I guess. I don't have to look at it in the basement."

They'd left the house in a disheveled state that afternoon. Now Lydia gathered newspapers and collected cups and glasses, while Matt washed the dishes. The night was moonless, deep and dark. Lydia started, catching sight of her reflection in the living room window as she moved about the house tidying up. She looked like a hologram image in the shadowy glass, like a wraith. Lydia yanked the curtain shut. The phone rang, and she jumped, spilling water from the overfull glass she was carrying to the sink.

She set it down to pick up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Lydia, it's me Shirley."

"What's wrong?" Lydia asked, peering around for the car keys.

"Nothing, nothing's wrong. Roxanne asked me to call."

"Is she okay?"

"Roxanne's fine, really fine. She just wants to talk to you."

After a long conversation with Roxanne, Lydia finally said goodnight to the little girl, replaced the phone in its cradle, and finished straightening the house. Then she curled up on the couch with Matt to watch a movie on television. It followed a complex plot—full of twists and turns, betrayal and reconciliation and more betrayal. It was a love story that ended in a tragic way. Lydia had seen it before, but watched it again with the comforting satisfaction that at least she knew how this one would play out in the end. And though the movie ended sadly, the flickering images on the screen were much less haunting to Lydia than Roxanne's whispered words to her before they said goodbye on the telephone: *Auntie, when are you going to pick me up? I want to come home.*