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How Much Brighter the Stars

Minnie Marshall needed her son to drive her to the emergency room. Three in the morning, a Sunday in June; she had another migraine, a real monster that wasn't going to ease off without a Demerol injection. She hated to disturb Lee. In two weeks he would leave south Texas and return to St. Louis, return to the life she and the tumor in her lung had denied him for a year, and she wanted to let him rest. He'd already taken her three times in as many weeks, so to ask again meant asking for his judgment, his reticence or lectures. She made herself wait. She tried sleeping and then reading, but when her vision began to blur and narrow, she crept into his dark room. She sat on his bed, touched his shoulder. When she whispered his name, her voice banged around in her head like a huge, frantic bird.

"I need a shot," she said. "It won't take long."

He lay on his stomach, offering no response. Her head throbbed, the chaotic pain replaced momentarily by a dull and familiar chiseling behind her eyes. She was fifty-three but had suffered migraines since childhood. After having Lee, she'd had a hysterectomy because a neurologist promised the procedure would snuff out the headaches. Hardly. They continued for

years. During chemo and radiation, migraines had assailed her so frequently that the oncologist feared metastasis, but MRIs and CAT-scans assured her otherwise. Just unlucky, the doctors had said.

Lee rolled onto his back. "They'll admit you."

"I just need a shot."

"They'll keep you overnight, maybe longer."

"Please," she said. The last thing she wanted was to cry, but her eyes pooled and her throat clenched. Then suddenly she feared she would vomit, too, and maybe pass out. She said, "Please, baby, I'm sick."

The ER was overcrowded. She almost told Lee to drive to another, but at least here the staff would recognize her. They would smile tenderly when she entered, lead her to the first available room and let her lie in darkness while Lee registered; the doctors would consult her file, ask if this one differed from the others, then send a nurse with an injection. The nurses called her "Honey," asked about new Avon products, asked about Lee. If the nurse was pretty or especially gentle, Minnie would muster the energy to brag about Lee's teaching job in Missouri, his master's degree, everything he'd forfeited to come home and care for her; she

would manage to leak that he was single, too. Tonight a heavy-jowled woman behind the registration desk noticed Minnie and made an exaggerated frown—Again? the frown asked—to which Minnie shrugged. Only one chair was available, so she sat while Lee waited to sign in. Beside her, a father cradled his sleeping son. There was a man with his hand wrapped in a wet towel; a hunched, wheezing woman who had fallen; a young woman having contractions. Other people were just waiting, their faces wrinkled with worry. She felt sorry for all of them.

An hour passed before a room opened, then another before a doctor arrived. He was new, had bloodshot eyes and a Pakistani or Indian name, Rama. He spoke quickly and without humor while his cold hands examined her too thoroughly. “A little fresh,” she almost said, but refrained because neither Lee nor the doctor would have laughed. His manner was endearingly stiff; she’d always believed Lee would make a good doctor. When Rama left, she said, “I bet he’s nervous, but excited.”

She felt less generous when he ordered blood work and x-rays. Another half hour had slogged by. The migraine had its full claws on her now, and although the pain had put her on the verge of tears, news of the tests, which translated to more waiting, swept her over the edge. Lee tried negotiating with the nurse. He raised his voice, then pleaded and cited previous visits

with successful dosages, but she wouldn’t budge. It was only Rama’s second night, she said, so he was over-cautious. No one liked him—“Sheesh, we barely understand him,” she joked—but they had no choice. Wheeling the bed into the clattering, garishly lit hallway, the nurse whispered, “I’m sorry, Honey.”

When Minnie was finally returned to the room—how long she’d been gone was a mystery—Lee brought over a stool and stroked her hair. He rubbed her scalp, her closed eyes. His touch soothed her, as his father’s had. There was no one time when she missed Richard the most—a misconception of those who’d never lost a spouse—but on nights when their son assumed a husband’s role, Richard’s absence seemed especially unjust. She wasn’t angry, unconsciously or consciously, at him for dying—a misconception of therapists—she was angry she’d survived. If she’d died instead, Lee would be sleeping in St. Louis, maybe in his own house with a wife and children, and not in an antiseptic-smelling emergency room, kneading her temples at the crack of dawn.

“You’ll be glad when this ends,” she said. Probably he fretted over what would happen when a migraine seized her after he’d left Corpus Christi. She fretted over that, too. “You’ll make a good father.”

“The apple from the tree, right?”

Yes, she thought, yes. She wanted to keep

talking, but a leaden drowsiness draped over her like a blanket. She lay in the blue-black haze between sleep and waking, and waited for one or the other to claim her. She concentrated on staying still and not aggravating the pain; she forgot where she was, lost track of time. A gauzy memory of a motel pool, Richard bellyflopping to amuse Lee. They are in Corpus, on Ocean Drive; no money for vacation that year. Richard bounces on the diving board, beating his chest like an ape. She could almost hear his voice, almost see his reddened stomach. Then, brightness: a harsh, piercing light flooded the room and a nurse charged in with the syringe. The woman hurried, as if administering the Demerol on the sly, and said an ambulance had arrived and two more were following: a fire at the refineries. Minnie realized she'd heard the sirens, but had believed them a dream, the nightmare sirens that spirited Richard away every night. The hospital needed the room, the nurse said, so the dosage had been okayed without the test results.

"Great," Minnie said, stepping to the floor. "Perfect."

She smiled at Lee—the thrill that they'd scored a secret victory bloomed in her breast—then she lowered her pants and leaned over the bed. After the last year, he no longer needed to leave the room, and they all knew it. The injection pinched and burned, the Demerol felt thick as glue. Soon, though, her veins tingled

pleasantly, her pain dissolving into velvet while the world's hard edges softened. She felt buoyant and roseate, as if floating in the motel pool, and as Lee signed release forms, the migraine faded, or her body did, and she became the turquoise water around her family. When Lee helped her to the car, the sun warmed her arms, and even with her eyes closed, she languished in a golden, benevolent light.

His mother's absence woke him like a blow to the chest. Lee was thirty-three but suddenly, inescapably, as frightened as a child. He checked each room, bracing himself to find her on the floor, fallen or hemorrhaging or catatonic from pills she'd swallowed to end the sorrow of living with cancer instead of a husband. Wednesday morning, she had no obligations. She'd slept most of yesterday, still sapped by the Demerol. Lately she spent mornings packing Avon orders, sorting mascara and powders on the backyard deck, but today it was abandoned. The house was empty.

He heard her trowel scraping the bricks outside. His first impulse was to upbraid her, to scold her for working in the sun when her skin could burn so easily. In truth, he wanted to punish her for worrying him, and he knew it. The year before, he'd walked away from his first teaching job and a volatile, makeshift relationship with the school's librarian to care for his mother as she underwent treatment; now

he felt like a prisoner awaiting parole. Watching her through the window, he tried to take her gardening for what it was, evidence she would live, evidence that in two weeks his life would resume.

"Someone was tired," she said as he stepped outside. Before he could reply, she added, "I'm wearing sunblock. SPF 30."

A bolt of shame; he felt transparent, overbearing. The smell of coconut lotion and damp, fresh-turned soil recalled for him how often he'd found her here throughout his youth. He said, "Do you want breakfast?"

"I already ate. Yours is in the oven." Then, wiping her brow, she said, "I'm planting cannabis. If Avon peters out, I'll start dealing."

Recently this was one of her favorite jokes, though he couldn't muster a laugh. His mother's arms, blotched and bruised because her platelet count remained low, were glazed with sweat. Just ten o'clock, but the oily humidity had already swamped the morning. No wind blew, a ribbon of smoke spiraled up from an ashtray in the grass. She wore one of his old baseball caps, and a loose, plaid blouse with a denim collar. He said, "What's on your plate today?"

"I'll drop off more catalogs for the nurses. They're getting antsy."

Each week she left Avon books at the cancer center, and on weekends, nurses and doctors' wives, patients and staff members phoned the

house. They asked for her with as much reverence as Lee had once asked for the oncologist. Who would have pegged Minnie Marshall for such a sly hawker? Her customers ordered cosmetics and jewelry, toys and handbags, and hearing her pitch jasmine-scented creams pleased Lee in ways he couldn't remember feeling. The thought of her immersed in the work helped diffuse the guilt that haunted him for wanting to leave. He encouraged her, inquired about new promotions, and doted over the products she stockpiled on his behalf; he would never again want for roll-on deodorant. If he circled a cologne in a catalog, three bottles came with the shipment. Usually, the after-shave arrived, too. "I thought maybe you'd missed it," she'd say.

Judging from the flowerbed she'd worked most of the morning. Probably she'd toiled for his sake, offering her concerted efforts as further proof she would function without him. The garden was flourishing. He was admiring the marigolds and crepe myrtle when the phone rang and she started pressing herself from the ground. His heart flattened. Her balance hadn't yet recovered; she struggled slowly and awkwardly to stand, like a newborn colt. Her hair and energy had returned with her remission, but she still teetered after closing the refrigerator and had to fight to free herself from sofas with deep cushions. She was an old woman who wasn't old.

"Sit tight," he said. "I'll get it."

And although answering the phone seemed right, he was dismayed in the kitchen for not ushering her out of the sun. Why, he wondered later, hadn't he? And why, when the man asked for Linda Marshall—not Minnie—did Lee say she wasn't home? Maybe he half-recognized the accent, or maybe he couldn't face watching her stagger again.

"You are her son, correct?"

Lee said yes.

"I am Dr. Rama. I treated Mrs. Marshall for a migraine in the emergency room."

Lee said yes, okay.

"She must see her physician. Test results show . . ." Rama paused.

Lee felt himself breathing, heard the blood pulsing in his ears. He wanted to speak, but was suddenly certain his voice would ruin something. He'd coiled and uncoiled the phone cord around his hand; he noticed the smells of bacon and toast that had lingered for hours, and his eyes locked on the refrigerator, banana magnets holding his mother's grocery list: detergent, flour, butter, olive oil, chicken breasts, wine. His mouth tasted sour, like copper.

Rama said, "The tests are not good. There is aggressive metastasis to the brain."

Outside, his mother clapped soil from her gloves and picked an insect from a leaf. She inspected it, then lowered it to the yard. A

cigarette dangled from her lips, the baseball cap swallowed her forehead and ears. She looked as he must have looked as an adolescent, bony and pale and vulnerable. He turned his back to her.

"I'll send results to her doctor," said Rama. "He will advise."

"Thank you," Lee said, though saying it struck him as strange.

He unwrapped his hand from the cord and hung up. *Not again*, he thought, reeling. He concentrated on the yellow magnets and his mother's grocery list—probably ingredients for Chicken Marsala, a dish she believed he liked more than he did—then he leaned his forehead against the refrigerator. Save where his head rested, he lost all sense of himself. He tried deciding what to do, for the first real decision of his life seemed upon him, but his mind blanked. He tried focusing himself with a question: *What should I do now?* Nothing came. The pressure to act bore down, as it would on a surgeon or soldier, a paramedic or murderer. Still, nothing. Until, finally, he steeled himself and aimed only to step outside and praise the work she had done this morning. If nothing else, he could grant her a last day in the sun.

The Demerol had knocked out the migraine, and Minnie had spent the last two days gardening and shopping and filling the goodie package she wanted to have waiting for Lee in Missouri. She'd neglected her Avon duties but

looked forward to getting back on track. The work contented her as nothing had since losing Richard. Before the diagnosis, she'd worked as an accountant, a dull job that came easily, but such unfulfilling labor seemed fitting. For six years, she'd thought enjoying herself would contradict how she missed her husband's body, his voice; joy felt akin to infidelity. But her remission seemed to have changed everything. She relished this new life, realizing that all along Richard would have endorsed her happiness and that she'd been disappointing him. He deserved a widow who did more than fall to pieces when the sink clogged; Lee deserved a mother who managed more than withering in front of late-night infomercials; she herself deserved refuge from her grief. Sometimes when she visited with customers or cooked dinners for Lee, she thought, *So this is what I've missed*. She felt like someone back from war, awed by the changed country and how eagerly the crowds embraced her.

Undoubtedly, Lee worried she would unravel without him. She had put him through so much, taking too many or too few pills when he wasn't home to supervise, not eating or sleeping, walking when she knew she would fall. Now she devoted herself to allaying his fears, to proving her world would not crumble when he left. The goal was to send him back to St. Louis—she imagined it a bustling, sophisticated city in the shadow of the great Arch—and to get

him back to his classroom and his half-finished dissertation on, what, eighteenth century labor codes? His imminent departure had ennobled her. She smiled and worked and pretended she was not terrified of being alone.

"You weren't very hungry," she said at the kitchen table. At most, he'd eaten half of his Chicken Marsala. Maybe she'd botched the recipe or he'd already eaten; both possibilities threatened the same hurt. "Do you want something else? I can order out."

"It's delicious. I'm just not feeling well tonight."

"Good news, then," she said, "I've got something to raise your spirits."

She sipped her iced tea, dabbed her napkin to her mouth. The parcel had arrived yesterday, but she'd kept it a surprise because he'd gone out last night. Withholding the news had been difficult but electrifying; all day she'd tried to imagine his reaction. She said, "I'm the district's top seller for this campaign."

"Well, gosh," he said, like a boy. He refilled her glass.

"Isn't that something? They sent me a plaque and a bonus check, and my name goes into a drawing for a Hawaiian vacation."

Lee looked shocked, uncomprehending. He said, "When did they send—"

"It's inspired me. I'll pass out more catalogs, more samples. Next year, we'll have an Avon empire!"

He cut another piece of chicken, then another, started eating again. "I'd say you've earned a rest. Why mess with the formula?"

"You're sweet," she said. "I feel just grand lately."

He finished his helpings, then spooned seconds onto his plate and polished those off. She knew he was proud of her, but still she could feel his dreariness and thought to fix a solid breakfast in the morning. She'd done as much when he was young, if he had a test or soccer game. He'd preferred strawberry jam to syrup on his pancakes. Did he still?

She said, "The Hawaii trip isn't until next summer. I doubt I'll win, but who knows. Our luck seems to be turning."

"I don't think luck has much to do with it," he said, and dolloped mashed potatoes onto his plate.

She felt herself glowing: *So this is what I've missed.*

The test results hadn't reached the oncologist by Thursday. When Lee explained the situation to Dr. Wood, she reacted with such skepticism that he briefly let himself think he'd misunderstood everything. He'd been waiting for the dementia to expose itself, but his mother split ferns and distributed catalogs and hung the Star Seller plaque over the television. Almost hourly he decided to confide, then as quickly reversed his decision and thought it best to spare

her the fear and anguish. The knowledge made him ornery, queasy and constipated. While his mother delivered perfume, her affliction festered in his gut like an ulcer.

On Friday afternoon, he called Dr. Wood again and felt ambushed, then contritely validated, when she said the results did indeed indicate a rapid spread to his mother's brain. Her tone was solemn and regretful, and stricken, as if by the cancer's audacity; she said, "This never happens." She ordered more tests for the coming week, then outlined further treatments. Lee knew his mother would refuse them—"When pigs fly," she'd said when Wood previously suggested prophylactic radiation—so he asked the doctor, who suddenly seemed in his debt, what would happen without treatment. Her answer came quickly: death. Before that, his mother might live a few months, perhaps six or eight, though her motor skills and her ability to care for herself would shut down. Her sight and hearing would diminish, muscles would atrophy. She would become incontinent, bedridden. She would forget the most fundamental information: her name and his, how to chew, swallow and speak.

Lee asked, "Will she know what's happening?"

"I'm not sure I follow," Wood said.

"If no one explains it."

"Oh," she said, then paused. "Lee, she's a trooper. More radiation could slow, or possibly stop, the metastasis."

He imagined his mother turning to him upon receiving the news, her eyes clouded with disbelieving panic; or would she hide behind a veil of smug morbidity? No matter, however she heard the diagnosis, it would only rip the rug out from under her. She was not one for surprises. She was not a trooper.

Wood's voice softened: "And you don't have to tell her, Lee. As her physician, I'm obligated to when I see her."

He caught himself wrapping his hand with the phone cord again. How peculiar that his thoughts went to the librarian in St. Louis; a week before he'd learned of his mother's tumor, the woman had come into his classroom and accused him of a dour, secretive spirit and of being unable to accept kindness.

On the phone, he cleared his throat and asked the doctor, "What if you don't see her?"

Minnie didn't understand why the insurance company needed another MRI, or why Lee had mentioned the appointment only the night before. She had started to argue, then relented. Lee had been distracted and addled lately, given to an absentmindedness that reminded her of his first days of grade school. She had tried to bolster him then—the good breakfasts, afternoon popcicles, trips to the toy store his father didn't know about—as this past year he had tried to rally her. In their last week together, she welcomed her role again. It

affirmed her to be, once more, his mother.

They sat in the waiting room of the radiology lab—not at the cancer center but in a hospital across town—and she drank the syrupy, cherry-flavored liquid they gave her before MRIs.

"There's a new cologne this month," she said. "It's called Rodeo."

"I'll take three," he said. He was flipping through a magazine. He hadn't shaved; his eyes looked bleary.

"The nurse has taken a shine to you," she said. "Want me to fake a seizure?"

She'd expected him to laugh or glance at the blonde behind the registration desk, but he said, "She'd call the doctor."

"Maybe the doctor's cute, too."

The nurse checked her make-up in a compact mirror. Minnie wished she'd brought catalogs to leave on the orange chairs.

"Lee," she said quietly. "Is something on your mind, baby?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Are you nervous about going back?"

He tipped his head to his shoulder, his eyes returning to an article. He said, "There's just a lot to do before school starts."

"You put so much pressure on yourself. Daddy did, too."

She finished another cup of the syrup, thinking vaguely of Richard, of his hands, how Lee's fingers resembled his. She recalled Richard carving a turkey before they were married,

maybe their first holiday together, when she already loved him so much she could hardly breathe.

"I was thinking I'd come up for Thanksgiving," she said. The words surprised her as much as her voice. Such an idea had never occurred, but now it was enticing; now it was a trip she'd always wanted to take. "I'd love to see the fall leaves. I can cook for you."

"Maybe I'll come down here. The weather will be nicer."

"No," she said. "I'd like to visit you. I intend to start traveling more."

In the MRI machine, it was not lassitude that descended, but an un hoped-for zinginess. She felt like a child on a playground, shooting through a tube slide. The air smelled steely. The cylinder's ceiling hung an inch above her; she touched her nose to it, just for a goof. Cold. The machine whirled and thumped and clanked, then went silent for a spell before the racket resumed. During one of the silences she said, "Kiss a fish" and made herself laugh. How long since she'd heard that? During the years when Lee had resented having his picture taken, Richard would say it to make him smile. "Kiss a fish," she said again, louder, then laughed again. How strange to hear her cackle reverberate, ever so slightly echo; she would mention that to Lee later. She tried to imagine him starting a conversation with the blonde nurse. He'd blink twice before each sentence,

look at his hands while he spoke; if things went well or very badly, he'd find something to fidget with. She knew, though, that he was sitting in the same orange chair, poring over a wrinkled magazine.

Then, instantly, time started dragging. Sweat on her forehead, under her arms. Her spine ached and her nose itched; she felt a sneeze coming, but couldn't move enough to let it go; she flexed her toes, heard them pop like twigs. In high school she'd learned it wasn't the joints themselves, but bubbles of sinovial fluid bursting between bones; that was the year she and her girlfriends sprawled on the beach, sharing cigarettes and mixing iodine with baby oil for darker tans. What a thing to recall. The machine cycled again, the noises grinding more harshly, as if unbuffered. A grating thrum seemed centered over her chest; the cylinder seemed to tighten, the ceiling seemed to lower. An acute terror: what if the exam revealed something unexpected and she detained Lee another five months? Assuming he'd stay; maybe such news would be the last straw. Then, strangely, as if allowing the thought to form nullified its possibility, the terror dispersed. She sighed to hear herself sigh. Now she only wanted lunch and a cigarette, to be freed from the cylinder, to become the child dropped from the slide onto the sand. Hawaii. Ukulele music and umbrellas in tangerine-colored drinks. Had Richard ever been?

She had a vague memory of him liking the Pearl Harbor museum. How much bluer was the water there, how much brighter the stars? She imagined forcing herself to mingle, telling tourists about Richard and Lee, about living in Corpus and her remission, then she would hear about their lives until the time came to ask if they'd like some catalogs. She smiled at the idea of appearing in random snapshots; years later, the photos would be rediscovered and the viewer would eventually find her in a slippery, pleasant recollection: the Avon lady.

Lee fixed his eyes on the article while a wave of shock rose in his chest. His muscles tensed. Nothing had been settled with Dr. Wood, but she'd convinced him that regardless of treatment, an MRI was necessary to assess the extent of the metastasis. She'd scheduled the tests at this lab because it was more expeditious than her own; he'd brought his mother under the pretense of an insurance company request. But she seemed suspicious. Her questions were snares to avoid, and he was losing track of what he had and hadn't told her. And now this: "Is something on your mind, baby?" His thoughts scrambled to find the letter he'd left on a table, the phone message he'd not erased, a doctor's call he'd not been home to intercept. *This is where you'll tell her*, he thought. *This is where she'll find out, in a waiting room with old*

magazines and orange-cushioned chairs.

Mexican food after the MRI, her idea. During chemo, she'd craved enchiladas and assured Lee and herself that if she ate slowly and responsibly, she wouldn't get sick. Or she had assured Lee, but told herself the retching wouldn't strike until later, an acceptable consequence for tasting something more than ricecakes and chalky protein drinks. But that afternoon she had vomited into her plate after only a few bites, and today the smell of pico de gallo shamed her.

"My file was marked 'Urgent,'" she said after the waiter left the check. "I saw it on the way out."

"Go figure," Lee said. "They probably consider all insurance work urgent. They'll get paid more quickly."

"I don't see why they need more exams."

Lee took a long drink of water. "Company policy."

"I wasn't supposed to get tested for another six months. Maybe something's wrong."

He sighed, lidded his eyes. "Let's give this a rest, okay?"

"I just get scared, Honey."

"You're looking for something to scare you."

She lit a cigarette, shook out the match. He was right.

He reviewed the bill and motioned for the waiter. He said, "We'll be fine."

The dilemma of telling her consumed him, and the more he considered it, the more withholding the news seemed appropriate, merciful. Whatever time remained would not be marred by a clock ticking in her head; it would tick in his alone. Contriving reasons for not returning to work would be easy enough—he'd already cancelled his flight and contacted the school's principal—then he could concentrate on making her last months comfortable. That, he thought, was what his father would do. He could start cooking her meals again, rent movies, read to her. They could play cards and work puzzles, the pieces growing larger and thicker as her faculties failed. He could drive her into the hill country, to the beach. He could take her to Hawaii.

"Oh," she said when he mentioned postponing his flight. She sounded taken aback, as if she'd planned on renting out his room. They were in the den, watching television; a strata of cigarette smoke hung over their heads. He said he'd overestimated his prep time and could stay another two weeks, at least. "Well, super," she said at a commercial. "I'll go to the store tomorrow. We'll need more food."

That night it clicked for the first time that denying her this choice could be unforgivable, tantamount to holding a pillow over her face as she slept. Perhaps the doctor would be right, perhaps her decision would surprise him. Maybe the remission had so restored her spirit

that more radiation would seem facile and she'd be baffled by his distress. He lay in bed, hearing her laugh then cough through the wall. He imagined barging into the den and delivering the news in a single breath. Then it would be over. She would be confused and shocked, but soon her newfound optimism would kick in. She would draw him near, massage his temples with fingers that smelled of lilacs and nicotine. She would say, "There, there. It's okay now."

He started watching her with pity—lamenting her wax-yellow skin, her miserable, unflinching optimism—and he thought telling her would make her less pitiful. His inclination to divulge seemed selfish, though, a cop-out to ease his own burden, not hers. Or perhaps he lacked such courage and simply cowered from bearing the worst news. For two weeks he'd viewed himself as trying to save her, like a trainer poised to throw in the towel for his outmatched boxer; now he realized that the longer he remained alone with the information, the longer he himself was saved.

They were working in the garden when she said, "We should still arrange my funeral. Even if I live another fifty years, it's a good idea."

"Maybe we can arrange mine, too. Buy one, get one free."

"I'm serious, Lee. I'm thinking pragmatically."

Even in the incandescent sun, he felt chilled. Color flushed or left his cheeks, he couldn't tell which. She scattered hibiscus seeds in the soil,

and he wondered if the blooms would eventually make him weep. He wondered how long his weeping would last. Finally he said, "You're right."

"And I have a living will. You have power of attorney, so we'll be set."

He kept quiet for fear of betraying himself. He felt it coming, the gravity of inevitability, but didn't want to surrender thoughtlessly. He intended to rehearse the words and prepare responses, to anticipate her reactions and stand ready to counter and console her.

"I ordered your new cologne. Rodeo."

He smoothed the soil. His mind strove to find a joke, something about lassos or cowgirls or horses, but nothing came.

"You seem preoccupied," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Or no. Yes and no."

She removed her gloves, took a sip of water. Her tumbler perspired. Flecks of soil clung to her neck. He wanted to brush them away but feared his touch would tear her skin. She said, "Let's go inside."

"No, I'd like to stay here. Sitting here suits me." His tone was too pensive; he felt the stress creasing his brow; he felt her seeing that.

She took another drink. She appeared neither anxious nor worried, but resigned to whatever he would say, as she must have been when he was young, when she could glue whatever he'd broken. She lit a cigarette, blew the smoke over her shoulder, away from him.

And briefly, he felt absolutely and desperately calm, himself resigned to whatever the future held. His calm was not born from hope—and perhaps, he feared, neither was hers—but from hope's absence. He had never expected her to live. Even when news of remission enveloped and intoxicated them like the smell of a new, beautiful home, even when a delighted relief enlivened their first morning thoughts, and even when they confirmed and celebrated their luck with plans for the coming years, he had never trusted her recovery. Since her initial diagnosis, he'd known but never admitted that she wouldn't survive; he'd started mourning her on the afternoon she called him home. Now his last obligation was to wait.

"So what is it?" she asked.

"School," he said. "The district's laying off teachers. It might be a year before I can go back."

Lately she'd started wondering what kind of mother she'd been, too lax or strict, too clingy or absent; she wondered how, when the time came, Lee would remember her. When he was young, she had forbidden movies his friends were allowed to watch, and had sometimes done his homework when he was ill. She'd insisted he play only touch football, but let him wear a mohawk. She'd given him condoms too early, but called him too often at college. She had fallen apart when his father died, and she had

never recovered. She had convinced him she would live when he moved to St. Louis, then she had dragged him home again.

Originally, she had considered not telling him of the disease. He'd been in Missouri for two years, happy and thriving, and she didn't want to interfere. And she was more scared of the treatments than of dying. She knew the misery of chemo, knew radiation guaranteed nothing. After her doctor said "cancer," she'd tried writing a letter for Lee to find afterward, but the words sounded feeble, clumsy. How to tell your son you've decided not to go on? Then suddenly she found herself on the phone with him, spilling the diagnosis and sobbing because she was afraid of everything. She had endured the treatment to keep him beside her, but recovering had never been more than a distant, cursory consideration, like a roadside attraction she might stop to see if time allowed. She had never wanted to live, had only wanted not to die alone.

Tonight she waited until he'd eaten and relaxed before saying anything. They watched television in the den, then when the timing felt right, she said, "No more treatment."

He looked caught, trapped, astonished. Poor thing.

She exhaled smoke, stabbed out her cigarette. "I delivered Dr. Wood's Avon a few days ago."

The consternation on Lee's face made her feel as if she'd told him of some metastasis in his

own body. Her heart lurched; she wanted nothing more than to gather him in her arms and apologize, but she didn't move. She saw him gauging what would be best to say, what would be worst. Richard had done this, deliberated each word and thought before granting them voice. It was considerate and nerve-racking. She lit another cigarette, forced herself to feel the cold-hot cloud in her lungs. She stopped expecting him to disprove her. Rather, she tried to stop. For days she'd struggled to purge such a prospect from her mind, and though she'd mostly succeeded, times came when she indulged herself, like sneaking a bite of cookie dough. Grandchildren, the trip to Hawaii, seeing Lee's life unfold. Now she needed to stay composed and discard everything except his silence that confirmed her dying.

"I'm not angry," she said.

He nodded. Maybe he said he'd planned on telling her, that he'd decided he must and was only awaiting the right time, but she heard very little. Her pulse raced. Her skull pounded. Undoubtedly this would spawn a migraine. She told herself to stay calm, to take deep breaths, to bear up. Then, at the oddest moment, a memory: Lee, in third grade, doing magic at a talent show. She had sewn his costume, fashioned a top hat from posterboard, and Richard had paged through a book of beginner illusions with him. He hadn't won the contest—Who had? The pig-tailed soprano?

The brothers staging the detective play?—so afterward she and Richard treated him to ice cream. Vividly, she recalled thinking such a night was all she'd ever wanted, thinking for half an hour that she'd known precisely what life was for; it was for this.

In the den, Lee said, "There *is* treatment. The doctor—"

"No more."

She'd anticipated him getting righteous and angry and lobbying for radiation. Her mind stayed poised to grapple with him, to spar until he conceded to let the disease run its course. But he didn't argue. His silence disoriented her. Suddenly time needed filling, and in those still, hushed moments she realized it: they would never fight again. Starting now, their lives would fray and splinter and speed away from each other. All of their future interactions would be strained pleasantries, empty and courteous conversations that meant nothing except I'm sorry or goodbye.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For not gunning for treatment. I appreciate it."

He peered out the sliding glass doors to the deck. He said, "I would like to discuss it."

"But not tonight, okay?"

He said nothing, though his expression beckoned *Then when? There isn't much time.*

"We will, I promise. But I'd like to wind

down for the night. Can you understand that?"

Another slow, defeated nod as he turned to peer out the sliding glass doors to the deck. Already she felt herself acclimating to this last experience of her life, succumbing, like someone who after days of treading water finally goes under without surprise or regret. Again she thought of Lee's talent show, pictured him alone on stage making her scarves disappear, then for the grand finale, bringing them back.

After another cigarette, she said, "I've got more news."

"Okay," he said, guardedly.

"I won the Hawaii trip."

What else could he have said: "I'm sorry."

After his mother drifted to sleep, Lee went through the house turning off lights. He felt as if he'd duped her. Perhaps a shred of that feeling stemmed from not telling her, but most of the burden seethed in a less identifiable place. It coursed in his veins, covered his skin like film. He realized he'd had more hope than he'd admitted; he realized this because now it was gone.

When he returned to the den, she was still asleep in the recliner. The glow of the television illuminated the room. Pictures of himself lined the walls, photos that seemed disconnected from him now, boys he'd never known. Hanging slightly askew among them was the Avon plaque. He almost reached to straighten it, but

resisted. Just then he was loathe to disturb anything she'd touched; that chore would come. He watched her sleep and her every breath seemed a sheaf of life itself. He wondered if he'd feel anything when she passed, some alarm or rupture or seizing up in his body. *Your mother has died*, he thought, even allowed the words to take shape in his mouth, tasting how they would hollow and shamefully exhilarate him. He imagined wrapping the plaque in a towel, packing it with the pictures. What else would he keep, what would get sold? Despite himself, he would start assessing her effects this way, categorizing them in terms of Sell, Donate, Trash. At breakfast tomorrow he would appraise the table and chairs, the dishes and cutlery, her robe, slippers and rings. And what would he find that he'd not known about? Love letters from his father, a diary? A childhood drawing he'd made for her, newspaper clippings about his graduations and meager achievements? Or would more innocuous things crush him? Half-finished crossword puzzles or a stash of chocolate, a postcard he'd sent her or a cut-out recipe. He began wondering what she had kept from him because now it seemed he'd kept everything from her.

Minnie had never seen or spoken to the doctor. Still, she knew the news as surely as if she'd sat in Wood's office and studied the test results herself. For days she'd bided time,

considered how to approach Lee. She thought the strategy she had finally chosen would prove less taxing, less painful for both of them. Get it over with, pull the bandage off quick.

She pieced together how he had come to know of the metastasis, but had she not suspected it already, she would not have recognized its clues. She had sensed the presence in her body just as a young mother can sense her child long before learning she's pregnant. She regretted Lee's dwelling on the news alone, and anger welled inside her—maybe where hope had been—toward herself and toward the new doctor who must have disclosed the information. She considered calling his superior, thought of suing the hospital, a lawsuit that would outlive her but one that might yield good money for Lee. Swiftly, though, the idea lost air and she thought Rama might make a fine doctor, one who only wanted his patients to get the care they needed. In time she would forgive herself, too, or at least forget what she'd ever thought she'd done wrong.

And she re-accustomed herself to the idea of dying. Her remission had lasted almost five months, and she regarded the time as a vacation, as a brief though pleasurable stint on an island, but now she found herself home again, returned to a familiar routine. Fear returned too, of course, and moments came when it hammered her, struck so hard that she felt nothing else and had to sit to save herself from falling. But fear

had come with the remission as well—who would understand this?—the terror of relapse, and a different terror of living another twenty years, another thirty. She unpacked the box she'd intended to have waiting in Missouri; she gave him the contents one by one, when she remembered. If she knew he was away, picking up a prescription or grabbing dinner whenever neither felt like cooking, she let herself cry. She wept for all she had lost, all she had taken and would take from her son, and for all that she would lose before, at last, she herself was relieved.

Before drifting off on the night she confronted Lee, Minnie said, "I'll keep working as long as I can. The money helps."

He nodded, though probably he suspected she would start staying home more, as she herself suspected it.

"Who knows," she said, "maybe we'll make it

to Hawaii after all. Or somewhere else. I'd like to get out of Texas for a while."

"Sure. Anywhere you want."

"That's our next project, a much-needed vacation. We'll keep our chins up. This doesn't have to mean the end of the world."

"No," he said, "it doesn't have to mean that at all."

She could have said more, but a comfortable silence settled and Minnie closed her eyes. There would be time to talk tomorrow and the next day and the next. For the moment, she liked the quiet and felt neither scared nor in pain; she was just tired, and only wanted Lee to sit with her as she went to sleep. Really, that was all she'd ever wanted, someone to watch over her, someone who would lie and tell her not to be afraid, someone who would always, always say, Don't worry, I'm here. 