
STEVEN SCHWARTZ

Blockage

Patrick did his best. When Connie developed a migraine, he closed the blinds, set up a humidifier in their bedroom, kept the girls quiet downstairs—they'd been running in and out of the room to peek at Connie—and stopped their beagle from baying at the coyotes yipping in the foothills. They lived in Colorado, and the drier air out here had been particularly unkind to Connie's sinuses. Years of respiratory infections and rounds of increasingly less effective antibiotics had finally driven her to have surgery for her blocked nasal passages. The plan was for her to recuperate for a week at home and then take their long-planned tenth anniversary trip to the pricey resort on the outskirts of Sedona, an area known for its "healing" properties. "You'll be okay to travel," Dr. Kuhlman had told Connie two days after surgery when at his office he had extracted the endless trail of blood-soaked packing from her nose.

"Will you *please* get rid of that?" Connie begged him. "If I have to look at it a second more I'm going to vomit."

Dr. Kuhlman held up the bloody gauze with forceps like a dead python, admiring its absorption as only a clinician might, and then dumped it into a biohazard trashcan. Later, after Patrick drove her home and their daughters told Connie she looked like Vampire Mommy, and after she went upstairs

and the migraine started, she would tell Patrick it was as though Kuhlman had been pulling her brains out her nose. It was right up there with childbirth as far as the most painful experience she'd ever gone through.

Though on the day they were to travel Connie still had a mild headache, Doctor Kuhlman assured them this was normal and no reason to cancel the trip. The congestion from the swelling, dried blood, and mucous was causing blockage and bringing on the headache. He was confident once the swelling went down she'd be fine. They should go with his blessing.

They flew from Denver to Phoenix and drove the two hours up to Sedona where they were staying at a resort and spa described as "a place where mind meets spirit" and where they could "cleanse the body of toxins." Or just hang out, though not in so many words.

Their casita suite had a separate living room with a marble fireplace and not one but two couches. Patrick had gone all out, money be damned. The other casitas were scattered around the seventy-acre property, and they could walk the miles of trails in the adjacent forest where supposedly the energy vortexes would result in spiritual alignment. Earlier, on the drive up,

Connie had said, "I want to get a massage once we get there. And you should get one too. You need it as much as me. You've been caretaking for a week now when you should've been on vacation." They'd made it through ten years of marriage, mostly in love but with some big changes, including Patrick's one-time plan of becoming a writer jettisoned for a career in dental sales. Probably little matched the disappointment of selling dental supplies after years of believing you were going to be an important writer. Well, perhaps having his ex-girlfriend, who coincidentally lived twenty-five miles away in Flagstaff and whom he'd called while Connie was taking a long bath in their suite, perhaps having his ex-girlfriend become a famous writer herself—perhaps this was more disappointing than selling amalgam separators and bonding agents.

Though he was happy for her. Quite happy, he told everyone. Luciana (she'd changed her name from the given "Lucy") deserved it. She was extremely talented. Never mind that she'd hit it big on her very first try, a novel that had been translated into twelve languages, sold to the movies (Brad Pitt's company had the rights, he was told); never mind that she'd been interviewed repeatedly and managed not to mention him once, even though he'd read her manuscript three times, making copious suggestions and doing all the grunt work of submitting it to agents because she'd been daunted by the prospect of trying to publish a book.

"Are you nuts?" Connie asked him now. Having just gotten out of the tub, she was studying her

bruised nose in the mirror, trying to decide how bad it looked without a bandage.

"I just thought since we were in the area I'd give her a call."

"It's our *anniversary*, Patrick."

He was picking up the selection of body products in their capacious bathroom: mint mouthwash, lavender soap, mango-scented shampoo, almond butter moisturizer—examining them like small toys from Santa. There was a Jacuzzi with gold-plated hardware and a shower with a showerhead the size of a mini pizza. He'd called Luciana on his cell phone, never expecting her to answer—she never did when they were living together, preferring to let the answering machine get it—but she had, on the first ring. He'd been feeling aimless in the spacious suite while Connie was having a soak in the oversized tub. Luciana was packing to go to New York the day after tomorrow (for what he couldn't bear to ask—New York represented the literary Mecca of all he hadn't obtained), but she'd love to see him and Connie, too. How about dinner tomorrow?

"Do you want me to cancel?" he asked Connie. "I can call her back."

"Oh, that's great. And what would she think then? Connie. Connie the bitch."

"I'll just say we're going to be busier than I thought."

"Patrick, why didn't you check with me first?"

"It was a spur of the moment thing. I didn't really call to ask her to dinner. That was more her suggestion. I just felt like we were in the

neighborhood. You know how it is. You call somebody, just because you're there."

"I don't. And I think you called her to punish yourself."

Patrick followed her out of the bathroom. "Well," he said, and lay down on the bed next to her, "I have no hidden agenda."

"I should hope not," said Connie. "I don't know why you want to torture yourself, anyway. You know she's just going to gloat." She had put her hand on his jeans and was lazily but confidently sliding it back and forth near his crotch. She would tease him, as if she had all the time in the world. Sex had been consistently satisfying with Connie. Luciana, on the other hand, might fling herself at him one moment, covering him with wet kisses, and the next lay there completely inert, as if she were strapped to a board and about to be sent through a buzz saw. Indeed her sexual mood swings had mystified him and eventually left him uncertain and hesitant—he wasn't sure whether he'd get the tigress or the ice queen—until he withdrew completely and they rarely had sex. When early in their marriage Connie had confessed to feeling threatened by Luciana, by her literary success, by her dark beauty, by her flashbulb smile, by her smooth sun-drenched Mediterranean skin and full valentine lips, Patrick had told her that their worst moments of making love had been better than his best with Luciana. "What do you mean 'worst moments'?" Connie had asked.

"Theoretically. I don't remember a specific time."

"Do you find me attractive?"

"Of course I do," he'd said. "You know I do."

But Connie, though not *unattractive*, was not, well, exceptional looking. She had small features and wore her hair short, even though he had hinted around she should let it grow—it resembled too much the pixie cut of a child—and she dressed oddly sometimes, in wooly vests that were busily embroidered as if by a grandmother suffering a manic episode, and she still had the same pair of owlish glasses, replacing the lenses but not the frames, that she'd worn when he met her ten years ago, even though he'd hinted, too, how convenient Lasik would be. But such petty concerns didn't make up love, and anyway he was no special package, the pudgy waist and receding hairline, the bum knee that had him wearing a brace when he exercised. Sometimes he just wanted to come home, unsnap his trousers, and fall into bed—beached there on the shoreline of his predictable life. Indeed, catching sight of himself now in the full-length mirror, conveniently placed in front of their infinitely sinkable feather bed, he thought that at thirty-nine he looked exponentially older than when he last saw Luciana five years ago.

"Aren't you the minute man," said Connie, squeezing his hard cock through the cloth of his jeans. She'd let the resort's plush terrycloth robe fall open to her pale bare hips, and she smelled of exotic bath salts. The tender line from her neck to the rise of her breasts was a single brush stroke of bold, arousing simplicity. Nothing was wasted; nothing was excessive. Taking his hand, she licked his index finger and applied the tip of it, with

the lightness of tapping awake a third eye, to the point of her sex.

The massage therapist—Irene was her name—was telling Connie about the commune she'd belonged to in Massachusetts before coming to Sedona. Two women in the same commune both believed they'd been Mary Magdalene in past lives.

"Didn't that cause a problem?" Connie asked, wishing Irene would talk less and knead more.

"It sure did. Especially when there was a guy there who thought he'd been John the Baptist, and they were both fighting over him."

"Really," said Connie.

"Then we had this other woman who'd been told by a midwife that she was pregnant. It wasn't true, but the woman wouldn't stop believing it, even when the midwife admitted she'd made a mistake. It got to be a real problem. The woman was absolutely convinced she was having a baby. She even went out and bought a crib. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore—I felt sorry for her. It's one thing to think you're Mary Magdalene but another to be constantly living under the assumption you're having a child. So I told her in no uncertain terms she wasn't going to have a baby."

"What happened?" Connie asked, suddenly interested now.

"Well, the woman became very upset and she started telling everybody she was having a psychic baby."

"A psychic baby?"

"Yup."

"And did she have her psychic baby?"

"No. One day she announced that she'd given herself a psychic abortion."

"Oh."

"Am I using enough pressure?"

"Um, maybe a little more around my neck and shoulders." She'd been trying to nudge her shoulders back toward the tips of Irene's fingers so she would dig deeper. She really needed to have the tightness broken up because she didn't want to get another migraine. She'd made it through the plane ride—the part she worried about the most—and the drive up, and now she was ready to relax and give her body over to this woman to take out all the knots. Sex helped, and she'd come several times with Patrick—a little frisson of delight went through her as she remembered the rippling pleasure and pressed her pelvis into the table—but she could tell her neck and shoulders were still locked up from the surgery.

"Is this better?" Irene asked, digging into Connie's neck.

"Mmm," she said, though now it was a bit too hard. She tried to relax, just go with it; she was in Sedona after all. She should get in touch with her spiritual side, send out positive thoughts to the universe, stop identifying with her material self, including her sinuses, detach herself from her ego and all its desires. Though that would be a problem since secretly she was writing a novel. She felt terrible about it. She'd boot up her laptop as soon as she got the girls off to school and after Patrick left for work. She hadn't said a word to

Patrick. The fact was they'd both agreed to give up writing. Oh, they never talked about it other than to say they were parents now, adults with real lives and responsibilities, and they didn't have time to pursue such pipedreams anymore. At some point the signs were there, or the luck wasn't, and you just had to accept your fate and get on with your life. At least that's what Patrick had said whenever he ran into someone who knew him from before and asked if he was still writing. As for her, well, she'd never even gotten as far as Patrick; she'd gone to a few writing conferences, and she'd tried her hand at some short stories and started a novel that didn't make it past page forty. But that was back then. Now it felt like cheating, worse than cheating. At least an affair could end and you could stop yourself and admit your guilt and promise never to do it again. But she couldn't stop writing. The words flowed and the scenes dropped in whole and the characters spoke convincingly and the tension was so good she could barely type fast enough; she flew to the novel in the middle of the night, crouching over her laptop in the basement and typing away, commanded by the voices of these characters she loved, watching them march across the page. She imagined telling Patrick and seeing his surprise then his hurt that she hadn't told him anything about it, then her explaining she wanted to wait to make sure she could really finish, which was true! But she knew she was hiding the real truth from him: she feared he'd be so jealous that his resentment would keep her from finishing. He wouldn't be able to help himself from feeling like it was a betrayal. And

nothing was more important to her right now, not the children, not her marriage, not her temp job at the college library—it was horrible to admit to herself!—not protecting him from his own literary disappointments, *nothing* mattered in her life more than finishing this book. And worst of all, despite all the odds against it, she knew it was good and would be published.

A stabbing pain shot through the back of her head, just underneath where Irene had been deliberately pressing her thumbs at the base of her skull as if into a marshmallow.

"Did I hurt you, hon?"

"I'm okay," Connie said, lying. In fact she could feel a migraine coming on.

Patrick had seen Connie sitting one day alone in an Adirondack chair on the rolling lawn and made his way over to her. He'd introduced himself, and she'd said, "I'm not very important, are you sure you want to be talking to me?" He'd found her delightfully blunt about the hierarchal rankings of the famous conference, and coincidentally, just at that moment, Luciana had breezed by in a whispery blue skirt, flanked by an entourage of newly acquired admirers who were crowding her as you might a star ducking into a premier. She hadn't noticed him, or maybe she had and didn't want to be bothered or embarrassed by him. "That's my wife," said Patrick.

"You don't sound very happy about it."

"No, I'm not."

"Would you like to talk?"

"I'd love to," he said.

"I've no clout here."

"You mentioned that."

"I just thought I'd remind you," she said. "Time is contacts."

"You're funny."

"You're sweet to say so."

He was charmed by her willful self-effacement and persuaded her, after many attempts, to show him her writing. He'd been impressed. It wasn't Luciana's sensuous, enveloping prose, nor the solid brick-laying edifice he toiled over, but it had wit and a fetching oddity that often resulted in genuine pathos, too. Her own assessment was that it was just dull. She told him she would never consider sending her work out. In fact, it had been a huge step for her even to come to a conference. Fortunately the big-name writer with whom she signed up for a private meeting had gotten sick and left for good. She was supposed to be assigned to someone else, but that person was yet to be determined. "Have you gone over to the office?" he asked.

She hadn't. So he escorted her over there and got her signed up with someone new, an elderly female writer of fading reputation who took a great deal of interest in her work and encouraged her to keep in touch. But Connie, being Connie, never followed up. "I'm not really a writer," she wrote Patrick in one of their e-mail exchanges when Luciana was traipsing around the country on her twenty-city book tour. "I'm not sure I am either," he wrote back. "How nice it would be just to think of myself as ordinary. Think how happy I could be!" It was the first time he'd seriously

considered what life might be like without writing: No rejections, no defensively explaining when people asked if he'd published anything that he was a "long-distance" runner and that novels took time; no perusing authors' jacket photos to deduce how much younger they were than him; no reading over the day's work and swinging between megalomania and self-loathing; no more being jealous of the person you lived with who had struck it big and now had a movie deal and had you pretending to be ecstatic too . . . Connie was his only outlet for his real self, the person for whom he didn't have to pretend he would succeed one day. "Even if you became the most successful writer in the world," she wrote to him, "it wouldn't make one bit of difference to me. I'm not impressed by fame. You're more real to me than that."

And that was it; that was all she had to say. He told Luciana when she got back from her swing through the West Coast segment of her book tour that he was leaving her. She'd not been terribly disappointed. He didn't doubt that she'd had an affair or two along the way of her path strewn with roses.

Preparing to meet Luciana now in the resort lobby, he steeled himself for her undoubtedly dramatic entrance. Connie, meanwhile, had taken to bed to see if she could divert an oncoming headache before dinner. Luciana's website—admittedly he'd checked it out—had a message board where people could discuss aspects of her career, although at one book how much of a career could you have? The big subject presently was about the second novel—when would it be

out? After ten years, the anticipation was killing her fans. Some speculated it was a sequel. Others thought it would be an entirely different book. "Someone like Luciana Gevani doesn't need to repeat herself," one reader, assured of her own astuteness, had written.

Occasionally, Luciana would break into the message board herself and "blog" an item or two about her daily existence, a trip she'd taken, or a word about her novel's putative progress, but he got no real sense of her personal life. As far as he knew she was still single and living with her two Persian cats. Patrick and she exchanged e-mails infrequently. What was there to say? They traveled in different circles—or circuits. She was on the literary circuit and he was on the dental one. He visited dentists with his tri-fold briefcase and waited patiently with his heavy samples on his lap to be admitted to the back office where a usually tolerant enough practitioner gave him fifteen minutes to make his pitch about the latest advances in composite veneers and invisible braces. Then he'd call home from some anonymous hotel room in Sterling, Colorado, or Farmington, New Mexico—his region was the whole Southwest—living to speak to his girls and Connie. They would put everything right, make the twelve-hour days all worth it, filling his ears with patter about baking cookies or giving Herm the diabetic hamster an insulin injection or buying a new tutu for Erin to replace her lost one or drawing a picture of him at school about which Sarah was giggling as she spoke, or both of them begging to know what he was going to

bring them this time, and then Connie saying, "I miss you," and knowing that meant physically, emotionally, *temporally*—he shared a space in time with them, particular coordinates of belonging; he wasn't famous, but he wasn't alone and he was clearly needed and loved without reservation. And trusted. She had no reason to doubt that he would not look twice, well maybe not more than twice, at the blonde in the hotel bar, or put too much stock in the dental receptionist from Durango laughing extra hard at his jokes and leaning in close to him when she did. He'd learned to remember names of the staff—they were the key to his getting in the door—and their likes and dislikes and to bring them small gifts: chocolates, flowers, pen sets, sports team coffee mugs. And how to appear upbeat even when he was so weary he wanted to weep.

"Ciao, Patrick!" And there she was, coming through the lobby's high wooden double doors in a stretchy black-and-white-striped sweater dress with a feathery red boa and her hair in loose dark ringlets like a Spanish consort, her lips plump and pursed with greetings, her arms outstretched to give him a big hug. "Look at you!" she said, without specifying what that meant: You're just the same? Or you're so much older and chubbier? "Where is the lovely Miss Connie?"

"She'll be here soon. She's resting a bit before dinner."

Luciana raised her eyebrows. "Oh? Have you been tiring her out, my friend? I am joking. I am just joking!" This was new—this slight whiff of a foreigner's inflected and stilted English.

"I thought we could eat here," said Patrick. "Connie's still recovering from surgery, and I don't want her to have to take a long ride into town." He was trying to look off to the side, avoid her ample cleavage and high-heeled stance that cried out for a whip in her hand.

"Miss Connie had surgery?"

"Yes, I told you on the phone."

"I am so sorry! My goodness, I do not know this!"

"Luciana."

"What, my old friend?"

"Why are you speaking like this?"

She drew back in mock surprise. "How do you mean?"

"The 'I do not know this!' The 'my old friend.' You're American. You were born here."

"*Sorry*. I didn't know it was offending you." She smiled briefly for a bitter moment. "Sometimes I use a different voice for professional reasons."

"You mean to convince people you're Italian?"

"I think we should eat. I am *so* hungry. Oh, *so* sorry! I could eat a steer! Come on, pardner, let's chow down! Is *that* American enough for you?"

"Okay, okay," he said.

"I'll stop if you do."

"I never started anything."

Connie, Miss Connie, walked in, looking especially frail and colorless in a simple sleeveless A-line dress with a squared puritan front that made her breasts look flatter than they actually were. Her short hair, wet from a shower, was plastered to the sides of her head like earflaps.

Luciana captured her in a hug and said how sad she was to hear about the surgery, with a tone you might use to comfort a late-stage cancer patient.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Oh, don't say another word," Luciana told her. "I know how it is when you're recovering." She turned to Patrick, who stood under an Aztec sun-god mask emanating metal rays that looked to him like pikes for severed heads. "Time to dine, no?"

Connie had tried on the three different outfits and finally decided on the plainest of them. No way could she compete with Luciana, so why even try? And sure enough, Luciana looked as if she'd just stepped off the fashion runway in Milan, wearing a sexy knit dress that fit her like a body glove. On Connie it would have looked like a grownup's costume. The massage had set off another headache that was getting worse, but she'd been determined to show up at dinner. She took Patrick's proffered arm on the way into the restaurant, as much to steady herself as to steady him—he looked unhappy about being here. Why had he called her? He and Luciana were like competitive siblings. Connie didn't know anybody who felt competitive with her. What was there to be threatened about? Just like tonight, in her dull dress, walking into the restaurant beside a flamboyant Luciana. She was going on about her most recent trip to France where she'd been given some award with the word "prix" in the title not once but twice—the prize for prize?—under the guise of telling them about the food over there,

of course. And then, Connie wasn't sure why, but when Luciana asked her at the table, after telling a story about some Hollywood producer who was stalking her, what she'd been up to lately, she admitted, "Working on a novel." It just slipped out, and she tried not to look at Patrick, but she could see out of the corner of her eye that he was still—very, very still.

"Tremendo!" exclaimed Luciana. "What's it about?"

"Um, I'd rather not say."

"Would you like to send it to my agent?"

"Really?"

"Of course. And I'll write you a rave introduction."

"But you've never read any of my work."

"Does that matter? I know you're good. How could it be otherwise? Tell me the title and I'll jot it down."

"I don't have one yet—"

"Why not?" said Patrick. It was the first he'd spoken.

"What?"

"Why don't you have a title?"

"I just haven't thought of it yet."

"I'm sure you have," said Patrick.

"I've really just been fooling around," Connie said meekly.

"Doesn't sound like it."

"Oh," said Luciana, her eyes narrowing. And then again. "Oh! You haven't told him about this?"

"No."

"Well," said Luciana, looking sympathetically at

Patrick. "It comes as a surprise then. But a happy surprise, right? So now we all know at once." Connie pushed her half-eaten steak aside. Her head was hurting too much to eat. "This deserves a toast," said Luciana. "Let us drink to your future success." She raised her wine glass, an expensive Bordeaux from a bottle she'd picked out without discussion of the wine menu. "You're going to have a baby novel!"

Patrick was poking methodically at his whipped sweet potatoes with the tines of his fork.

"I'm sorry," Connie said to him. "I wanted to—"

"It's all right," he said, dazed, though, she could see. "Will you let me read it at least?"

"Of course." She took his hand. He sounded so plaintive her heart was breaking. "Of course I will. Always."

"This is *very* touching," said Luciana, in a tone that could almost pass for sincerity. "To Connie's success!"

"I think we should drink to something else," said Connie.

"Oh? And what would that be?" asked Luciana.

"How about to our anniversary?" Connie tapped Patrick's hand, lifeless as a dead crab on the table. "Okay?" Her head was really splitting now. She could barely keep from seeing double. If this went on much longer, she would vomit.

"What do *you* think, Patrick? Shouldn't we drink to the success of your wife's novel?"

"I think we should drink to whatever she wants."

The waiter came by with the dessert menus.

"Well," said Luciana again, "my arm is certainly getting tired holding my glass aloft! I hope we can agree soon."

"Let's skip it," said Connie, squinting now. "I think . . . I think I might be getting sick."

In the darkness, Patrick could barely see Luciana, but she had hold of his hand while informing him of a women's group that was giving her an award next month for her work in curtailing the sex slave industry. "You stopped sexual slavery?"

"I have supported so many brave women in their efforts to do so. They want to recognize me for my contribution."

"Which was what exactly?"

"You know, Patrick," she said, having slipped into that familiar New Jersey accent that she'd almost but not quite eradicated, "no one else but you always questions me like this. With other people, I make conversation. With you, it's always a cross-examination. Don't get me wrong, I love it, I really do! You keep me on point. But really, you should have been a fucking lawyer." She gave his hand a squeeze and drew him along.

They crunched ahead on the dark path, with the flashlights they'd borrowed from the front desk flickering off and on as the batteries waned. Connie had taken to bed and urged them to continue the night without her. Luciana, on this spring evening, with the sky clear and packed with stars, had persuaded Patrick to walk into the resort's adjoining woods, twittering and

hooting with nighttime activity. They might see a fox or hear an owl or come across a black bear or encounter a javelina or step on a king snake and hopefully not a coral one, but probably they'd just pass by the two-hundred-year-old alligator juniper and make their way to a small church that she assured him was always open for worship. A church? What would he do in a church? Nominally Presbyterian, he was really a member of the order of religious boredom. "We are in the heart of darkness, no?" said Luciana.

Could he murder her? Could he get away with it?

"I sweat like the pig!" Luciana declared. She pulled down the top of her stretchy knit dress and wiggled on ahead of him—her rumba through the jungle. In the dark he could make out the bare silhouette of her naked shoulders. He shined his flashlight on her, the stretchy dress now rolled halfway down her back, the beads of perspiration and the tendrils of dark glistening hair at the nape of her neck. He could almost see her as the real person she'd once been before she'd become a caricature of herself. Generous, shy of her own beauty, more enamored of others than herself. Now she was no happier than him, and perhaps twice as lonely. He had Connie and the girls after all, and she had her art and far-flung adulation. Would he trade with her? Not for a moment.

That was a lie; that's what people always told themselves or had to believe to rationalize their regrets. You came to your senses about the really important things in life. The fact was . . . he could throw everything away out of some terrible

self-destructive urge to be free of himself. That's what he'd always wanted from the writing, and that's what he saw in Connie's face tonight: transcendence. She had the glow and the certainty. That's all he had ever desired: the knowing. Not once in his three unpublished novels on even his best days had he achieved it. But he saw it in her, the proof, her deliverance. The migraines? They were just a symptom of the spirit of revelation about to crack her head open with delirious joy.

He called to Luciana. "So," he said, with great reluctance, "how's the novel coming along?"

She barked a laugh over her shoulder. "You don't want to know."

She was right. He didn't. He was only trying to be polite out of some obligatory deference that he presumed she expected. Though give her credit, rather than just being flippant, perhaps she was trying to spare him the details. "Where is this church exactly?"

"It's somewhere—"

Later, he would wonder about the church—when and how had it come into existence? In all the hubbub of the rescue and the ensuing charges by Luciana that the resort was at fault for not having adequate fencing, and the countercharges by the hotel that she was on private property without permission, Patrick had forgotten to ask. As far as he was concerned, it mattered that they'd been looking for some sort of holy sanctuary and not just traipsing off into the woods together while his wife Connie was back in the room with such a bad migraine that she had to call 911 and get herself taken to the ER. And it was here, in the

emergency room of the Sedona Medical Center that Connie was being examined, unaware of any further mishaps other than her own miserable condition. She had tried to tough it out in her hotel room. She'd forced herself to breathe through the pain. When it became unbearable, she'd cried out helplessly for Patrick. But hours after he left her, he was still not back, and when she could stand it no longer, much to her mortification, she called the front desk and asked if a doctor was available. She explained that she'd just had sinus surgery and was in so much pain that she believed she was going to have a seizure. The desk clerk had an ambulance at her casita within fifteen minutes. The ER doctor asked her on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest, how bad her pain was and Connie said ten thousand. He ran an IV and gave her a shot of Demerol, reluctantly, because he didn't want her to drift off to sleep without observing and interviewing her further. She confessed the head pain had persisted to a lesser or stronger degree for days. His conclusion: she was nearing status migrainosus, a prolonged condition that if untreated could lead to stroke. Stroke! She was on vacation! Dr. Khulman had told her to go! It was her wedding anniversary! She started to sob and begged the nurse to try her husband's cell phone again.

But Patrick, beneath the now cloudy two a.m. sky, with only the aid of his flashlight, his cell phone dead, was presently trying to make his way down the unstable wall of the excavated pit that was to be the site of the resort's greatly expanded wellness center. His dark wish for Luciana's demise

had come true: she'd disappeared mid-sentence over the side, and his panicked shouts to her below had been met with a harsh and ominous silence. The beam of his flashlight diffused blindly into the bottom of the pit in search of her body. Carefully, he tested a wall of the pit, but the red earth crumbled beneath his feet.

A thin noise filtered up to him, a whimper or a cry or just a faithless moan for help. "I'm hurt." But it sounded like *I'm hoit*. No mistaking the inflection this time—it was Lucy, the girl from New Jersey, without her guard or accent up.

"I'm going for help!" he called to her. No good would come of his trying to reach her and getting trapped below too. He stumbled through the woods thinking of Connie back in their casita, and how he wished he'd never called Luciana, and why, *why*, he wondered, had Connie told him about her novel in front of Luciana? Was it to humiliate him further? No, that wasn't Connie. Maybe she'd simply wanted to hold her own with Luciana. He would apologize for his smallness. He'd be happy for her, help her, as he had once helped Luciana: he was—he hated to admit it—a better editor than a writer. His greatest fear was not that Connie would become the successful writer he had never been but that she would turn into a monster of raging self-importance and forget about him. Like Luciana. Whom he had to save!

Connie, meanwhile, felt the first wave of relief from the Demerol, the throbbing block of pain on the left side of her head breaking up like an iceberg calving. The ER doctor explained that the migraine had probably been triggered by the

combination of sinus surgery and—his phrase for the massage—inopportune manipulation. Irene, the massage therapist, had claimed many people believed Sedona was the center of the planet for electromagnetic field activity. Such vortexes contained ten different dimensions: three of space, one of time, and "six others you can't even imagine." Linear energy fields were in these vortexes, and if Connie opened herself to them she could be healed of almost any affliction, even the deepest psychic wounds. "Do you have trauma in your life?" Irene had asked, and when Connie said no, she had been spared the usual ones of divorce, incest, alcoholism, rape, war, or murder, Irene had held her hands an inch above her forehead and declared, "But I'm feeling some blockage here that you haven't dealt with, I'm afraid."

The nurse and doctor, satisfied she would not have a stroke, had left her alone and told her to rest. They'd work on getting in touch with her husband. Wherever he was. Patrick felt distant to her, off in some faraway land, while she lay in this cool dark room on the padded examination table, telling herself she had to call her mother back home in Denver and check on the girls. But they would all be sleeping now, awaiting daybreak when Sarah would be sure to trip over the bottoms of her pajamas that belonged to her older sister. Connie's mother would be up at six a.m. and have a pot of coffee going by six-thirty. Her father, dead three years, was either in the vortex with Connie stroking her hair and healing her poor gouged sinuses or he was nothing more than an atomized memory in the mind of a dutiful daughter. She'd

always been good, except for those moments when she was awash in the glow of her laptop typing her heart out and no one could know her.

Lost. He'd wandered off the path on his way back to the hotel for help and had twisted his ankle crossing a stream. He had no idea which direction to head. He swept his flashlight around trying to determine where he was in relation to the hotel. Nothing. Just the ponderosa pine forest dense as cell bars. He considered weeping: he had last done so when his first daughter, Erin, was born. After cutting the cord, he'd excused himself for a moment and stood outside the birthing room. A cry of gratitude had rented from somewhere deep in his soul. The nurse—bless her for the twenty-four hour shift she'd put into Connie's forty-two hour labor—had rubbed his back gently and

said he'd be amazed by how many fathers lost it afterward. It was a good thing, she said, a lovely newness.

Now he leaned his forehead against the rough bark of a vanilla-smelling pine and thought of Luciana swallowed up in a pit, cursing him in her fake Italian, and of Connie needing him. He saw off to his right in a small clearing the outline of a building the shape and size of a gate house, perhaps large enough for two people to squeeze into—or just one with a heavy burden. He shook his dying flashlight. The light flickered brightly enough for him to see an arched and slightly crooked door with a wooden cross nailed to it. Limping across the forest floor, he pushed open the surprisingly heavy door and looked inside for anyone or anything that might be waiting for him. ■