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After the Rain

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After the Rain

"Snake eyes," Nora says. She looks at the backgammon board for a moment, considering, then slides a brown counter two points to the right. "Don't mean much in this game, do they?"

Nora looks across the table at her husband. He is staring intently at the board, his smudged glasses riding halfway down his nose. He rattles his dice box in the air by his right ear, then spills the tiny white dice onto the board. "Aha," he says.

"Aha?" Nora says. "What do you mean 'aha'? That's a three and a five. There's no 'aha' there.

"Maybe not to you," Lewis says. He slides two white counters out of his inner table. "But you, my dear, don't know my strategy."

Nora laughs, a short laugh, and dips an index finger into her glass, poking at the ice. The Scotch has settled again, leaving a clear line of water along the top half of the glass. "Honey," she says. "I figured your strategy out forty-nine years ago."

Lewis smirks at the board. The lamp behind him sits high on its dolly-covered table, tossing a ring of light over the top of Lewis' head, across the right half of his face. It makes his skin look white, almost translucent, Nora thinks, and the bareness of his head glares out at her like a rasping cough. He looks old, she thinks, older than he is.

"Must be pretty dull," he says. "Knowing me so well."

Nora shakes her head, still smiling, and reaches for her dice box.

They have said these words so many times. She supposes it's comforting, in a way; she knows Lewis thinks so. But she wonders if he knows how it grates on her sometimes, how the expected repetition irritates her. She knows what she should say next: *Of course not, Lewis. How could you say that, Lewis? It's been wonderful, Lewis.* Instead she rattles her dice, enjoying the way the sound cuts through and fills their tiny room of wool throw rugs and miniature vases of Queen Anne's lace.

It is their second night, a Saturday night, at the Goose Hollow Inn, a pale yellow three-story clapboard high on the hill above the town of Port Townsend. Their room is on the third floor, in the northeast corner, and through the lace curtains they can see the Puget Sound heaving and sighing off the pebble coastline. This afternoon, when the sky was clear and the wet mist rimming the horizon had burned away, they could see the slight gray rise of Victoria, Canada, off to the north. And Nora swears, although Lewis won't believe her, that when they first arrived yesterday evening and she walked around the wooden wrap-around porch to the south side of the inn, she caught a glimpse of the Space Needle hovering like a tiny airborne discus over the slender blue fingers of the Sound.

Lee and Davey gave them this weekend as a gift. It came as a stenciled message tucked into a store-bought card that read "To Our Loving Parents" in slender, swirling calligraphy. Nora smiled at the card, at the saccharine sound of the rhymed verse inside. Davey's name was written in hurried blue letters, scrunched in the lower corner; Lee's signature was higher up, the lines thick and wide. The boys knew she and Lewis had spent time in Port Townsend, that Nora had eyed the Goose Hollow in the past, wondering if one day they could afford a night or two.

Nora empties her dice onto the table. A six and a one. She slides a lone counter eight points over to join a row of five. When she lifts the counter to lay it on top of the row, the tiny brown circle leaps from her fingers and lands upside-down on the third counter, its black felt bottom staring up at her.

"Damn things," she says. "Wish you could tum them on when you need them and off when you don't."

They are playing with the leather-bound travel board, the one that folds up like a mini briefcase, the one their granddaughter Nina gave them last Christmas. The counters are magnets that cling to the board but shy from each other. Maybe the magnetic feature would be nice if you were in a car or on a train or perhaps at the beach on an especially windy day, Nora thinks. But when you're inside and the air is still and the joints in your fingers are aching a little, it can be annoying to have your counters slipping from your fingers like slick chips of ice.

"A little edgy?" Lewis asks. He is leaning back into the hard wood of his chair, his fingers tugging at an earlobe. He nudges her under the table with a stockinged foot. "Feeling the pressure?"

Nora rolls her eyes at him and takes a swallow of Scotch. She chews on an ice cube for a moment, feeling the iciness burn against her gums. She wonders if Lewis is right, if she is feeling a little edgy tonight, and if it's the backgammon game or the Scotch or Lewis himself that's making her feel that way. She watches him while he studies the game board, planning, no doubt, some strategy that sounds brilliant to him now but that she surely has seen ten, fifteen, twenty times before.

Tomorrow is their anniversary. Just one year shy of fifty. Nora is proud of her marriage, proud that they know the meaning of endurance, of perseverance, proud that they never let anything else be an option. But she wonders sometimes. Times like tonight. When they're together and things feel comfortable and she feels like they could go through their evening -- playing backgammon or Spite-and-Malice or just plain reading -- and never even say a word, never need to say a word. It's times like this when she starts to feel restless, anxious.

Nora looks up when she hears it: a low rumble sifting in through the open north window, so low that she feels it through the soles of her feet, low in her backbone. A breeze tosses in through the screen, pushing the lace out into the room. The air carries an arctic bite, a hint of the weeks to come once September drifts aside. Nora pulls her cardigan up around her shoulders.

"Sounds like they were right," she says. "Those weathermen."

Lewis pushes back his chair and stands to close the window. "If they're right, things could get a little hairy," he says. He winds the window crank until the pane settles into the frame and the curtain relaxes. "We're not exactly in a sheltered cove up here."

"Lewis, this house is more than a hundred years old. What did that woman say? A hundred and twenty-two years? I doubt one little late-summer storm will do too much."

"I don't know," Lewis says doubtfully. "Not much protection up here."

"You backing out on me? Forfeiting the game?"

"Not quite," he says and winks at her. He stands by the window for a moment, rubbing the palms of his hands together as he stares out.

He is wearing his gray sweater, the one Nora gave him for his birthday years ago. Underneath the sweater his green plaid chamois bunches at the shoulders, one corner of the collar tucked down and the other pointing up like a tiny triangular flag. His dark slacks are wrinkled after a day of sitting and an afternoon nap or two.

Nora watches her husband standing at the window, his back to the room, with the daylight just beginning to fade beyond the glass. She watches him and she thinks how he is worrying about the coming storm, wondering about the strength of the weathered roof, of the electrical wiring, the safety of their third-floor northerly room. And while she watches she reaches absently down into the sewing bag at her feet and pulls out her silver flask. The metal is cold and even in her fingers, and she can feel the liquid sloshing against the sides. She untwists the cap and pauses, wishing she had some ice to drop into the glass, but when she remembers the two flights of stairs to the kitchen below, she shrugs and pours the grain-colored whisky straight into her glass.

"It's your turn, Lewis," she says. "Are we going to finish this?"

"Nora?" Lewis says. He is still standing by the window. "Do you ever think about San Francisco?"

"Sure. Sometimes."

"It was raining that night, wasn't it?"

Nora thinks for a moment, remembering the craziness of their wedding night, the way she jumped on the train from Portland when he called. She remembers the running, the clang of the trolley car, the sound of Lewis knocking on a stranger's door as she stood trying to compose herself. Sometimes she loves the memories for the spontaneity of it all; other times she resents Lewis for stealing from her the glorious white church wedding she had always dreamed of. She can't remember anything about the weather, except that the air she pulled into her lungs as she struggled to catch her breath on Judge Feinstein's porch stoop was warm and tasted of the rhododendrons and lilies that lined his yard.

"I really don't remember," she says.

"It was. I'm sure it was. You were in that cream-colored dress your mother made you and when it started to rain, the drops left dark smudges on the fabric. Remember? Remember getting off the trolley? When you almost stepped in the sewer?" Lewis is standing with his hands clasped before him, his eyes on hers. He looks, Nora thinks, like he is pleased with himself, pleased for remembering.

"Sorry," Nora says.

"Then when we left that judge's house -- what was his name?"

"Einstein."

"That's right. Al, wasn't it? He wanted to give us that umbrella. He kept pressing it in my hand saying, 'Take it. Really. Take It.' And his wife -- didn't she give you a plastic head scarf or something?"

Nora thinks about that house where they said their vows, about the judge in his brown turtleneck and jacket, about his wife standing in the kitchen doorway with large round curlers in her hair and red lipstick applied hastily, no doubt, when she realized her husband was letting the breathless young couple into her home. There was a dark wooden cuckoo clock that hung over the mantel, Nora remembers. It was shaped like a tiny house, with a sloping A-frame roof and two long gold chains that hung from the bottom with weighted tassels dangling from the ends. The hands of the clock were a brilliant white, gleaming against the heavy wood with their arrowed ends pointing at the twelve like a silent accusation.

The judge ushered them into his parlor, past the dark kitchen and the shuttered windows that lined the entryway. A small lamp in one corner of the room gleamed low and warm, casting shadows across the far wall. Nora and Lewis sat on the tweed love seat by the fireplace, a little apart, and watched while the judge piled bits of newspaper and kindling onto the brick hearth, then lit a match. His wife came out then, wearing a blue flowered housecoat that zipped up the front and tying a matching scarf across the curlers that lined her head. She smiled at Nora, her lipstick bleeding a little high on one side of her mouth. She looked wistful, Nora thought, a little sad, and right then Nora panicked, looking at this woman and thinking that maybe this was marriage, maybe this was her in ten years, leaping from a warm bed and dashing lipstick across her face when her husband beckoned. Nora doesn't remember any plastic scarf, umbrella, or rain; what she remembers is the woman's face, and the way the tiny mechanical bird sprung from inside his house when the clock's long white hand slid down to twelve-thirty, how he called out in his sing-song voice, once, twice, then fled backwards up into his hole, the miniature doors swinging tight behind him.

"It's starting to rain," Lewis says. His hands are in his trouser pockets now, his back to her again, his shoulders hunched a little.

"They had this clock --" Nora says.

"Remember how it sounded on the trolley roof? Like nails, it was. Nails on metal. "

"They were young, weren't they?"

"Einstein?"

"And his wife. I remember thinking how old they looked, but I bet they were young."

"Fifties, maybe."

"Yes," Nora says. "Young." It wasn't that they had to get married in such a hurry; they just wanted to. Nora looks down at her drink, at the backgammon pieces. "I'm winning, you know," she says.

The room is silent for a moment, except for the sound of the wind kicking through the elms outside, then Nora feels Lewis' hands on her shoulders, the weight heavy and warm.

"Everything all right?" he asks.

"Of course," Nora says.

"You just seem a little--"

"I don't remember any rain, Lewis. I think you're wrong. I remember the flowers, the warm air. I remember pushing at my hair because it was wilting, melting almost. It was humid, I think. An Indian summer."

Lewis' fingers dig into her shoulders, pressing and kneading. She can smell the tobacco smoke on his sweater, on the skin of his hands.

"Maybe you're thinking of the time we took Davey and Lee to Marriott's Great America," Nora says. "Remember the rain that weekend? Remember the way Davey cried, even though it was a hot day and the rain was cool, even though it felt nice to the rest of us?"

"Yes," Lewis says. His voice is low, almost a whisper. He lifts his hands from Nora's shoulders and the skin feels bare where they were, bare beneath the cotton blouse and the wool cardigan, bare and a little chilled.

She swallows a mouthful of Scotch and her throat muscles constrict slightly against the heaviness of the whisky. She pushes back her chair and walks into the bathroom. With the faucet on high, she lets the water run for a minute, her right index finger waiting in the stream, waiting for the coldest moment. She looks up into the blinding mirrors that line the tiny bathroom. The floor and counters are white tile, and the light overhead spans more than half the ceiling, washing her already pale skin into a pasty starkness.

She blinks at herself for a moment, at the ring of permed white hair and the careful makeup, then looks down into the sink again. She doesn't like mirrors, the way they remind her that Toni dolls and Depression glassware are relics now, that people no longer eat homemade cream sauces or drink cocktails before dinner. At least the eyes are hers; she recognizes the blue, the shape of the lid, the expression that used to frighten her when she was young because it looked so much like her mother. Her eyebrows faded and thinned years ago, replaced by a pencil-thin brown stripe that she draws on each morning. And her nose, the delicate, even nose that she got from her father, now sits lopsided and bent, nicked on one side by the surgeon's knife that cut away the hint of skin cancer four years ago.

Nora hears Lewis call her name from the next room and she splashes water into her glass, swirling the Scotch to mix the two. She lifts the glass to her lips and tastes, lowers it again to add more water, then shuts off the faucet and the bathroom lights and returns to the main room.

"Thought you might be drowning in there," Lewis says. He is sitting with his feet propped up on the end of their bed, his chair tilted back on two legs. Smoke curls up from the pipe he holds in his left hand, and a fresh glass of Scotch is on the table. The room is filling with the thick, sweet smell of tobacco. A patch of bare skin shines up from the toe of one of his black socks.

"I wish you'd tell me," Nora says, eyeing the sock. "People'll think I'm neglecting you."

"It's just a sock, Nora. Drink your Scotch and sit down. Relax a little. We didn't come here so you could sit around darning my underclothes."

Nora walks to the window. Her drink is cool against her fingers. She leans against the wall, her face close to the screen. The sky is dark now, and she can see the scattered lights of town flickering down the hill. The hill itself is bare, a grassy slope with an aging set of cement steps running up the middle, a cracking dirt path wavering just to the right of the steps. She can see the stairs gleaming a dull gray in the darkness, lit every ten feet or so by a lantern-shaped street lamp.

She and Lewis walked the steps this afternoon, down to the touristy shops and beer halls along the waterfront, then back up to the art galleries and coffee shops of uptown. A woman in the museum told them the steps have been there since Port Townsend was a booming seaport. The town flourished for a year, maybe two, in the late 1800s, while the powers-that-be in the state of Washington decided whether to land the state capital in Seattle, a neighboring port; in Olympia, a more central city where the rail lines could run; or in Port Townsend. They decided on Olympia, the woman said, because trains were crisscrossing the country then and the state didn't want to be left behind. Port Townsend, meanwhile, drifted into a sleepy town with a deserted waterfront and a few scattered houses.

When Nora asked the woman about the steps, she told them they had been there for the genteel uptown women to use when they had to walk downtown to purchase groceries. The dirt path also was a fixture from the town's more successful days, the museum woman said, a route for the downtown women to use -- the whores and the "loose women" who passed their time in the

rowdy barrooms. A downtown woman who dared to use the cement steps was cited for trespassing.

Nora cranks the window open a little, breathing in the cool sea air. She tries to imagine the town on a noisy Saturday night back in the 1890s, back when times were good. She wonders how it would have been to stand there in a strangling corset and gown, her hair piled high and heavy on her head and a cocktail glass in hand. Perhaps she would be staring down at the rowdiness below with pious disdain. There would be shouts from the bars, and laughter and music, and maybe the sound of accidental gunfire every now and then. And the shoreline would be crowded with drinking men and clinging women, an occasional ship easing in to meet the docks, its fog horn blowing low and deep into the night air.

Or maybe she would be down there in the midst of it, Nora thinks. Standing apart a bit, a beer mug gripped in one hand and her eyes on the lighted windows of the houses up on the hill. Her dress would hang thin and limp from her shoulders, a knit shawl draped across her bare arms. She would be cold, maybe a little hungry, but her skin would be smooth and her hair carefully brushed. Men would watch her, a little awed by her grace and unsure of whether to speak to her. The downtown ladies would whisper about her, envious of the natural flush in her cheeks, the natural pink of her lips. She would be standing there eyeing the stone steps, the muddled path alongside it, and cursing the rich folks who think themselves better.

She prefers the intrigue of the second image, and she ponders only for a moment where Lewis might fit into the picture before deciding that he most definitely would be sitting in a house on the hill, warm in his paisley smoking jacket and woolen slippers and frowning on the revelries below.

Lightning flashes across the eastern sky, and Nora sees the white spear of a church steeple on the distant hill, illuminated for a brief second against the black night. The elms, too, come to life in the flash, their spidery arms waving and bowing in the growing wind. Nora swallows another mouthful of Scotch and waits, counting, for the thunder -- one-one thousand, two-one thousand, three --

It crashes louder this time, echoing into the room through the open window and forcing Nora back a step. She cranks the window closed and turns back to face the warm, heavy glow of the room. Their bed is draped with a thick feather comforter stitched in red-and-blue squares, and its mattress sits high, more than three feet off the ground, in the room's northwest corner. Against the wall is a narrow bench scattered with dog-eared magazines: *National Geographic*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall's*, *Sports Illustrated*. Across the room is the small round table where Lewis sits, smoking his pipe and watching her, the backgammon board lying naked and waiting in the middle of the table. His fingers are curled around his glass.

Nora smiles at her husband, feeling the pull on her mouth. "Should be quite a storm," she says.

"Would you feel better downstairs?" Lewis asks. "We could sit in the front room, nose through their bookshelves, maybe light a fire."

"It's just a thunderstorm," Nora says. "Let's finish our game."

"Fine by me," Lewis says cheerfully. He lays his pipe on the edge of the table and picks up his dice box, rattling it in the air by his ear -- a little too loud, a little too long. Nora watches him, watches the growing smirk on his face, the self-satisfied look. He must know she hates the way he crashes those dice around, trying to get on her nerves. Like the way he always whistles those two tuneless notes, a C and an E, or maybe a D and an F, whenever he knows she's angry with him and he's trying to play innocent, trying to pretend he hasn't noticed.

She wonders if maybe they would be better off downstairs, not because of the storm but because the room is larger and airier and she might not feel so closed-in. But she knows there will be people down there, other guests who've decided to congregate on a Saturday night or to escape the dreariness of their rooms, and she dreads the thought of having to chat politely with other people, of having to accept an invitation to play poker or bridge when she'd really rather be alone.

"Double fives," Lewis says. "Would you look at that."

Nora sits down at the table, her drink in one hand and, in the other, the folds of her cardigan clutched to her chest, pulling it tighter. She watches Lewis move his counters, then shakes her dice onto the table. The dice turn up a six and a five. Nora stares at the two counters she knows she should move, the only two it would make any sense to move, and she waits. She is a little ahead, she can tell, and she figures if she pauses long enough, Lewis will think she has something complicated worked out, something unbeatable.

As she sits there, her fingers absently wiping the condensation from her glass, occasionally raising the drink to her lips, Nora thinks about the Christmas they spent at Lee's house two years ago, the one when Lee and Davey talked Lewis into pulling on the Santa Claus costume. She heard them downstairs, the three of them laughing and shouting in the guest bathroom, their voices hollow as they floated up through the air vents and into the warm kitchen. They had locked themselves in the bathroom with a bottle of rum, and Nora tried to ignore the drunkenness she heard in their too-loud laughter, tried to concentrate on slicing celery and Granny Smiths for the stuffing and reminded herself that it was, after all, Christmas, and they were just enjoying themselves.

But then they were all sitting around the tree and she could hear Lewis and Davey chortling on the front porch, and then Lewis burst into the front hall with his skin blazing red and his tie-on beard halfway down his chin. He pulled the grandkids around him, onto his knees and into his arms as he sat down on one of Lee's dining room chairs. Everyone was laughing and excited and the children were staring up at Lewis with awe and adoration, unsure of whether this truly was Santa Claus or only Grandpa in a red wool costume, and none of them really caring either way.

Nora saw it happening, saw a flash of red and momentary fear in her grandchildren's eyes just before Lewis started to lean. Then his red arms swept out as if he were swimming and the chair fell over backwards and Lewis was a pillow-stuffed weight on the floor with grandchildren

scattered over and around him. No one was hurt, thank goodness, and Lewis was soon on his feet and laughing and lifting the children into his arms one by one.

But Nora was ashamed of him then, ashamed that he could be so careless with their grandchildren, ashamed that he couldn't sense the fear that had swept through the room in the moment when the chair tipped, the knowing looks and murmurs of rum that had passed among the watching adults. She tried to remind herself that he was only having fun, egged on by his two grown sons, but she wanted him to be more aware, more adult.

"Do I need to pull out the timer?" Lewis asks, breathing his sweet smoke out across the table. "Or maybe you just need a pointer. A pointer from an old pro."

"Thanks," Nora says. "But there's only one pro in this room. And she's about to finish this game."

Outside the rain is falling heavier now, the thick drops tapping steadily on the roof above. Nora can hear the wind whining around the corner of the inn, plying at the loose edges of their window, fingering its way under the eaves.

They begin to pull their counters off the board, two at a time, each of them ready with the dice before the other is through. The game is faster now, the finish close but still undecided, and Nora shrugs her cardigan off her shoulders, letting it fall onto the arms of her chair. The air in the room feels thick, suffocating, and she swallows the last of her Scotch.

Then Lewis tosses doubles onto the game board, three times in a row, and with a wide grin on his face he sweeps the last of his counters off the board and leans back in his chair, pipe in hand.

"I hate that," Nora says, staring at the board, at the two fours on Lewis' dice. "When it comes down to that. When there's no skill, no challenge. It's not fun. Luck, that's all it is. Plain old luck."

"Nora," Lewis says. His lips are straight, pressed against the stem of his pipe as he inhales, but Nora can see the gloating in his eyes. "This," he says, "is only a game. You really shouldn't take it so seriously."

"Nor you," Nora says. She stares at him sternly for a moment, as if he is a child and she is telling him to calm down, to keep in his place. Then she splashes the last of the Scotch into their glasses. This time, she decides, she might as well drink it without the water.

Lewis swallows his drink in four long gulps, then stands and taps his pipe into an ashtray on the bedside table. The dying embers smolder there as he goes into the bathroom and shuts the door. A thin ribbon of smoke stretches up to meet the ceiling.

Nora sits and listens to the wind and to the rain. She can feel the warm weight of the whisky in her throat, in her belly, and she rests her glass against her lips as she waits for Lewis to finish in the bathroom. When he comes out she can smell the toothpaste on his breath, and she watches as

he carefully folds back the bedspread and lifts each pillow into the air, pounding it with his fists to make it fresh.

He sees that she is watching him and he pauses, his hands resting on the bottom of his sweater where he has started to lift it up and over his head.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

"Fine," Nora answers. She looks into her glass, drains it, then sets it on the table with a sharp sound of glass on wood.

"Are you sure?" Lewis asks. "You don't look all right."

"I'm fine, Lewis. I'm just a little tired. That's all."

"I hope so," Lewis says. He crosses the room and leans down to kiss her goodnight. His lips are dry as they brush against hers. "Maybe," he says, "It'll be a nice day tomorrow."

"Maybe," Nora says. She fingers a button on her sweater, rubs her thumb against the smooth plastic. "Maybe it'll even be," she murmurs as he turns to the bed, "a happy anniversary." She says it quietly, her lips moving over the words, not really wanting him to hear.

But Lewis looks back at her, pleased, and she realizes that the words are all he has heard. He has not heard the annoyance. Or the impatience. Or the restless longing. And maybe, Nora thinks, that's all right for tonight.

"Yes," he says. "Happy anniversary."

Nora watches as Lewis settles into the high bed and pulls the chain on the red-shaded light, leaving her alone in the pool of yellow from the lamp behind her. She rises to brush her teeth, her hair, to pull on her nightgown.

Later, when she is in bed and the room is dark, she feels the weight of forty-nine years pushing down on her chest like an open hand. With her right hand she reaches out to Lewis, to rest her palm on the warmth of his hip, to feel his easy breathing and remind herself that he is her best friend, that he is on her side. But something in the Scotch or in the smoky air of the room or in the sound of the rain drumming above her head forces her thoughts, making her dwell on how Lewis misunderstood what she said, how he didn't even hear the mocking in her voice, and how ashamed she is of the impatience she tries to keep bottled inside but that slips out sometimes, leaking into the air in her bitter words and in the slender lines drawing down from the corners of her mouth.

She tries to think of the good things -- the times when Lewis is excited about something he is doing or thinking about and his face takes on that animated, intelligent glow; the times when he listens to her with intensity and patience in his pale blue eyes; the times when he holds her, his arms a solitary, sheltering cocoon.

She tries.

Instead she sees the obstinateness on his face when he refuses to budge on something; the ridicule in his eyes when he laughs at her, questions her; the dull, foolish glow of his cheeks when he has had too much to drink.

His face is flashing, flowing, wavering before her in the darkness, and then she is running, running in the grass with her legs stretching long and youthful beneath her, her arms pumping strong and sure at her sides. Other people are running alongside her and behind her, other young people, and she senses that they are all racing somewhere, and that she is in the lead. The ground beneath her dips and lifts, and she feels the strain in her thighs, the slap of the earth beneath her feet. She feels the heat of someone breathing close to her left ear and she runs faster, euphoric in her own strength, her own power over her body. She looks up and sees the wavering bodies, the expectant faces that line the cement stairs to her right and she knows that they are there to see what will happen, to see who will win, and it makes her pump her arms harder, faster. They are standing on the stairs to uptown, watching as she battles her way up the narrow dirt path, the material of her worn cotton dress tangling between her legs. Then she sees herself, the white-permed penciled-eyebrow image from the mirror, standing under an orange maple, the face round and exuberant and the arms waving excitedly into the air as the mouth widens and shouts to her, words she cannot hear. She sees herself with her nicked nose and her lined old-lady mouth, and something in her falters and then she is down, tumbling and rolling through the damp grass as she feels the other runners leaping over her, their tennis shoes flashing white in the hazy air. Then she is still and she is shaking, her arms wrapped around her knees and her face pressed inward, and she is cold, so very cold.

When Nora opens her eyes, she is still shaking, her body rolled to one side and her knees pulled up toward her chest, her hands clasped tightly under her chin. For a moment she is lost, floating somewhere between knowing who and where she is, and then she realizes that it is night and she is lying in a bed in the Goose Hollow Inn and that the comforter is wrapped around her ankles and that Lewis is no longer there.

She stretches her legs downward, careful of the muscles that have cramped and stiffened in the night, trying to untangle her feet from the blankets. The room is dark and quiet and the air she pulls into her lungs is painfully cold. She pushes herself up onto one elbow and realizes that the window is cranked wide open, the curtain tied back against the wall, and an icy air is drifting through the room. She can see a glow through the open window, something distant and faintly yellow, and the tree branches outside sweep and scrape across it, tossing in an easy breeze. Flecks of white dance across the darkness and Nora presses her fingers to her eyes to clear them. Beneath the stillness she hears something, something comforting, something almost musical.

She sits up straighter, pulling the comforter up around her, and then she sees him: Lewis is sitting at the table in his underwear, his pale skin glowing dimly in the light from the window. He leans over the backgammon board, his pipe in his hand, and he fingers the tiny magnetic counters, sliding them this way and that, turning the board as if playing two different people, two different sides. Nora can see that he is smiling slightly, pleased with what he is doing, and at that

moment she realizes that the whiteness drifting into the room is snow, that the evening storm has quieted into a late summer snowfall.

Leaning back into the wall, Nora clutches the comforter to her chest and smiles a little and watches her husband, wondering at the open window, at the snow, at this midnight game. She can hear that he is whistling softly to himself, and that sound, that distant, familiar sound, makes her husband look handsome: the way his ears fold forward a little, the way the mole tucked low on the right side of his neck is so familiar, the way his face bends down in that comfortable, thoughtful way, and brings back a life of endless backgammon games, midnight walks beneath suburban street lights, and Saturday mornings sleeping late with his breath faint in her ear. The air around her is cold, but beneath the comforter her skin feels warm. And as she lies there wondering, watching, something comes back to her -- something about a trolley car and steam rising off the sloping streets and the splash of rain across her new white stockings.