

“Come find me,” she would sometimes tell her son over the phone, in advance of one of his weekly visits. “I might be anywhere.” But Serenity Palms, by design, was not a sprawling place, and Ellie was ninety-two years old. Finding her was not a challenge. She would be in the community room, or in the activities room, or in the non-denominational chapel, or—more often than not—in her own room, sitting awake or asleep in the Arcadia recliner Martin had bought for her. The recliner swiveled and was throne-like, with its high back and wide arms, and if Ellie had preferred to keep her feet on the floor she might have looked like a wizened, B-movie empress when she turned away from the television or the window to greet him. Instead, she kept her feet up, used her cane to rotate the chair, and looked like a castaway rowing a life raft.

Her olfactory receptors had become so sensitive that Martin could no longer bring her flowers. The smell of flowers made her queasy, as did the smell of so many other things: candles, nail polish, aftershave, the stucco and terra-cotta exterior of the building, almost any kind of food. She liked both the smell and taste of Weetabix, and she tolerated Ensure—which was fortunate, the on-staff doctor had told Martin, because if she got much lighter, they would have to consider intravenous feeding, and Ellie wasn’t amenable to needles. In fact, Ellie wasn’t amenable to much of anything, and Martin, who’d recently turned seventy and felt every year of his age in nearly every movement he made, couldn’t blame her.

When he arrived that Saturday, she was in the recliner and had it faced away from the door, toward the picture window and its view of A1A, the distant sliver of beach, and the ocean beyond. Her roommate—Martin had yet to learn this one’s name—was sitting up in bed, working a pair of rounded scissors over the pages of a magazine. Over the past two years, Ellie had gone through four roommates, none of whom had passed away and all of whom had requested to be moved rather than suffer her complaints, her ramblings, and her observations about race that could only come across as insults.

As a rule, Martin tried not to startle his mother. Her hearing was as sharp as it had ever been, but she was easily alarmed and occasionally had to orient herself. Her eyes were closed, he saw as he drew near. Her cane was leaning against one of the recliner’s padded arms. He set his windbreaker on the back of the plastic chair nearby, dragged the chair partway between her and the window, and eased himself down. When he cleared his throat, her eyes fluttered open and she stared forward in the general direction of both him and the window. “This again,” she said.

“Hello, Mom.”

She gasped. “Jesus, you scared me half to death!”

“I thought you knew I was here.”

“How would I know that? You’re like a cat.”

Martin forced a smile. “You said, ‘This again.’ I thought you meant me.”

“Not you. *This*,” Ellie said, lifting a hand and motioning toward the window. She had been dreaming about Clermont, about the classrooms of children, about trying to teach the younger ones what an octave was. She could stand at the piano and strike the eight notes of an octave one at a time, low C to high, and get every child in the room to say *Yes* when she asked if they heard the difference. But when she struck the low and high C simultaneously, they only heard one note. “Listen carefully,” she said. “It’s this note.” *Plunk*. “And this one.” *Plunk*. “Low and high at the same time.” And then struck the two notes together. “Hear them?” The seven- and eight-year-olds could distinguish between the two notes, but the six-year-olds couldn’t. It was fascinating. Either their hearing hadn’t yet developed beyond the monophonic, or their brains were only capable of registering one piece of stimulus at a time. If she were a scientist rather than a music teacher, she might conduct a study. But then she had opened her eyes and seen the palm scrub, and the beach, and the tiny man with the parachute going up and down over the water, and she had thought—apparently had said aloud—*This again*.

“Anyway, I’m here,” Martin said.

“I was back in Clermont,” Ellie said. “I was trying to drill some sense into those kids.”

“But you’re here now. Cocoa Beach. It’s Saturday—you know that, right?”

“For godsake, I was having a *memory*.” She blinked at him, then narrowed her gaze. “Do you have a tardy slip?”

“Mom—”

“It’s a simple question. Either you do or you don’t. If you don’t, I’m going to have to ask you to take a walk down to the principal’s office.”

This was what the on-staff doctor called “mental jurisdiction.” Ninety-two-year-old Ellie was entitled to her

own mental jurisdiction, just like seventy-year-old Martin was entitled to his. It was okay—even healthy, the doctor had said—to indulge her a little. And so Martin found his wallet, pulled out an ATM receipt, and presented it to her.

“Ha!” she said, ignoring the receipt and taking hold of her cane instead. She brought the rubber-tipped end of it down to the floor and gave a push, so that the recliner turned away from him. “You fall for that every time!”

Martin nodded and tucked the receipt back into his wallet. She was moving the recliner full circle—slowly, but she was getting there—and as he was putting his wallet away he had to stand a little and push the plastic chair back to make room for her elevated feet.

“That was a bad idea,” she said, coming to a stop. “Now I smell something.”

How a minute could feel like an hour in this place. How an hour could feel like a week. Martin had news for his mother, but the ideal moment for telling her wasn’t going to present itself. The ideal moment didn’t exist. He glanced at the roommate, who was watching the two of them as if they were on television, and then pivoted his head, listening to his neck crackle. “What do you smell?”

“I should never go all the way around. Part way around and back is okay, but all the way around stirs something up. Is it floor wax?”

“Is it floor wax?” the roommate suddenly piped up from across the room. “Is it floor wax?”

“Oh!” Ellie said. “I’m smelling a parrot! Have you met my parrot, Martin? Her name’s Pauline, and she loves to imitate, loves to sharpen her beak on things.”

“Squawk, squawk,” the roommate said. “Go choke, you old bag.”

Martin opened his mouth to say—something—but his mother and her roommate kept talking.

“She sheds, is part of the problem,” Ellie said. “She molts. And, I swear, when she doesn’t get enough attention, she picks up her poo with her feet and flings it across the room!”

“Gas bag!” the roommate said. “Gas bag from hell!”

Should he tell them to stop, call for assistance? Was there protocol for such a thing in an assisted-living home? A semi-emergency cord to pull alongside the regular emergency cords that were hanging next to each bed and in the bathroom?

“Do you hear the filth that comes out of the parrot’s mouth?” Ellie asked him. “It’s like a toilet flushing in reverse.”

“Look who’s talking,” the roommate said. “Everyone—I mean, *everyone*—on this floor is sick of you.”

“Ask her what she’s up to over there, Martin,” Ellie said calmly. “Go ahead, ask her what she’s working on.”

Martin didn’t want to ask either one of them anything. He wanted to leave, but they’d come to a lull in their volley, and they were both looking at him. “What are you working on, Pauline?” he asked, then felt his forehead tighten, realizing her name might not be Pauline, that “Pauline” might only be Ellie’s parrot nickname for her.

But the roommate seemed unfazed. Her scissors were still moving. On the nightstand beside her bed, Martin noticed, were cutout circles stacked according to size—some as small as quarters, some as big as coasters. “A collage.”

“Ask her what kind of magazines those are,” Ellie said.

“What kind—”

“They’re pornos,” Ellie said. “Ask her where she got them.”

“Where did you—”

“She stole them,” Ellie said.

“I did *not* steal them,” the roommate told Martin. “And they’re not pornos. They’re *Playboys*. The home fired Mr. Strickland, the head custodian, and they had to clean out his office before the new custodian got here. I walked by, and these magazines were stacked on top of the things waiting to be thrown out. No one else wanted them.”

“She picks through trash,” Ellie said.

“Liar,” the roommate said.

“She *collects* them. Not the magazines. She collects the breasts and the lower-downs. She’s got hundreds of them in a shoe box under her bed.”

“So what if I do?” the roommate asked. “And how would you know, unless you went snooping?”

“Mom,” Martin said, “can we go somewhere and talk? Somewhere private?”

“This is my room,” Ellie said. “We can talk here.”

“But it’s not private.”

“It’s not private because of her. That’s not my fault.”

“I’m not blaming you for anything. But come on,” he said, getting to his feet. “Let’s get out of here for a little bit.”

Her wheelchair was folded up and standing beside the dresser. Martin opened it and wheeled it over to the recliner. It was slow business getting himself around these days, but it was *very* slow business getting Ellie from one chair to the other. Her legs weren’t much wider than his wrists, her wrists not much bigger around than his thumbs. Her skin was cool to the touch, and it bruised with the slightest contact, but she didn’t seem to mind. She had dry mouth but it didn’t affect her teeth, which had been swapped out for dentures two decades ago. She suffered from macular degeneration and mild glaucoma but managed, so long as her drops and her magnifying glass were nearby. She was unhappy with her bowels. Unhappy with the constant swelling in her feet. Unhappy

with her hair, which was white and wispy and untamable, as soft and volatile as dandelion seeds. But she was still here and, for the most part, still operating under her own steam. Had she ever actually been sick? Martin had made a point of asking her that recently, and she had told him, emphatically, *yes*: she'd been as sick as a dog in 1943, on her honeymoon, and sick again right after Martin was born. She'd been on-and-off sick during all her years of teaching public school. And she hadn't exactly felt well since he'd moved her into Serenity Palms, if he wanted the truth. But she was holding on for a little while longer, thank you very much.

He held both her hands as he helped her into the wheelchair and noticed the absence of her wedding band.

"Did you lose your ring?" he asked. They'd already had it resized once to accommodate her weight loss.

"I traded it," she said.

"To who? For what?"

"To Mr. Hollingsworth. For Weetabix. The British Weetabix you can't get in the States. His niece sent a box over in a care package."

"Mom, for Pete's sake, you can't—"

"Take as long as you want," the roommate all but sang. "Take her to China, for all I care!"

"Enjoy your smut," Ellie said as Martin wheeled her past the foot of the roommate's bed.

"I will. I might even glue these to the wall over your bed."

"I think that's *wonderful*," Ellie said. "I really do." She reached over her shoulder and tapped one of Martin's hands. "Tutti-frutti, that one."

Poor Martin. When was he *not* in a rut? He had grown up to look just like a character in one of the comic books he used to read. Private Punky? Sargent Schlep? Ellie

couldn't remember the name. Despite years of correcting him, he had the poorest posture she'd ever seen in a young man. "Tab neck," she used to call it in her students, and she would warn them that if they didn't straighten up, they were going to turn into bass clefs. Well, here was her own son: a bass clef. And getting a little soft in the stomach because of it, all that middle body pushing forward. It was sad, really, because with posture like that, how was he ever going to land a nice girl? Or a wife, for that matter? But that was wrong, she realized. Martin had a wife—had *had* a wife, and she'd died. That was a perfect example of a fact Ellie had to keep track of, because when you got something like that wrong—something big, like a death in the family—the doctors and the neighbors and even your children wrote you off as senile. Mr. Griffin, who used to live across the hall, got it into his head that he'd been hired by the mafia to shoot Lee Harvey Oswald but that Jack Ruby had gotten there first. So where did that leave Mr. Griffin, who'd never been reimbursed for his plane ticket to Dallas or for the gun he'd bought? One day, tired of waiting for answers, he climbed up onto a sofa in the dayroom and started demanding to know who was mafia around here? Who was going to get him his damn money? Well. *No one* took him seriously again after that, least of all Ellie. She pitied him, but she never again took him seriously. And so, certain facts had to be kept straight.

Claire was the name of Martin's wife. She'd had cancer, and she'd died the same week as Bob Hope.

And the comic-book character's name was Sad Sack.

They were passing the chapel room now, where she had one of the staff members wheel her several times a week just to sit in the peace and quiet and gaze up at the starburst on the wall that wasn't supposed to be Jesus or Buddha or anyone else a person could actually pray

to. She thought about asking Martin if they could stop in, but it was against the rules to talk in the chapel, and hadn't Martin said he wanted to talk? That he had something to tell her? There were diamonds on the floor—big, ugly, turquoise diamonds against a mud-colored background. She hated the new carpet.

"I think you and your latest roommate are a good match," Martin said from behind her.

"She's an idiot," Ellie said. "And a typical Italian."

"I predict she's going to be the first one who ends up not asking to move," Martin said. "She seems stubborn enough to stand up to you."

"There is just no telling how perverted some people are until they show their true colors. Don't you think I'm right?"

An ancient but energized-looking resident in a bathrobe and tennis shoes strolled past them and nodded hello. They nodded back.

"Of course you're right," Martin said, and Ellie recognized the patronizing tone in his voice—the same tone she used to hear in her own voice when he was six years old and would come running into the house babbling about something she had no interest in. He was placating her, letting her prattle. They'd come full circle.

"What do you think about standardized tests?" she asked, reaching for a topic that would lend her authority and show how smart she still was.

"I was never very good at them."

"You certainly weren't. But I don't think they're fair to the teachers. They measure what's been *learned*, not what's been *taught*. See the difference?"

"Sure."

"If I teach you how to tie your shoes, that doesn't necessarily mean you've learned it forever. People forget things. What if you wear loafers every day of your life

except for the fifth of May? Do you think it's fair that they'd come after *me* for that?"

The question was most likely rhetorical; she would keep going if he grunted, which was good because he was trying to figure out where in this place you were supposed to have a conversation without people lingering around and listening in. Maybe that was part of the idea of assisted living: you were assisted, or accompanied, each and every moment of the day. His stomach was growling. He should have eaten lunch before coming here.

"I taught all those children how to read music, but it was just dots to them. And who can be expected to remember what you never had a passion for to begin with? One of those boys—his last name was Pratt, I'll never forget it because it rhymed with brat—told me I was a waste of his time. Can you imagine? A third grader sass-ing a teacher like that? Standardized tests would have weeded out the Pratts of the world, let me tell you, but the school board didn't want to use them for electives." She was vaguely aware of having gone back on the point she was trying to make. "Let's stop in here," she said, motioning toward the open doors of the dayroom.

Not that Martin's assessment mattered, but the dayroom was his least favorite part of Serenity Palms—the room he found most exanimate and depressing, the room he would avoid entirely if he were a resident here (and, indeed, some of the residents looked to be not much older than him). There were overstuffed chairs and couches laid out in a kind of grid. An entire wall of windows facing an over-fertilized lawn. And at one end of the room, a large console television around which a dozen people sat staring at Judge Judy. Thankfully, Ellie never wanted to linger in the dayroom. Today, for some reason, she wanted to show it to Martin as if he'd never

seen it before.

“There they all are,” she said, her eyes scanning the room, her voice lowering, but only by a few decibels. “Greeks and Jews and Irish and Italians. Mostly Greeks. And only one colored, which, if you ask me, is unusual.”

Several residents looked their way.

“Mom,” Martin whispered.

“What? I said ‘colored.’ And I’m pointing out there should be a few more of them, statistically. I’m all for the melting pot, so long as everyone behaves. The Greeks can actually be nice people.”

Martin turned the chair around.

“Where are we going?”

He steered them out of the room.

“I’m not a shopping cart,” she said.

“No, you’re not,” he said, as if he wished she were.

“Slow down, then.” They were already moving at a snail’s pace, but she disliked the surrender of control implicit in the wheelchair. She didn’t need the chair for short distances—she had the cane and the walker for those—and being lowered into it always made her feel like she might never come out again. She could be as bossy as she wanted with the Serenity Palms staff when they wheeled her around, and they would either suffer it quietly or dish it right back to her in a jovial sort of way she didn’t mind. But Martin was so sensitive. Always brooding. He’d never been in a full-blown argument in his life—not with her, anyway. Certainly not with any of the bosses he’d had, who’d been so stingy with their raises and promotions. And not with his wife, who, as far as Ellie could tell, got everything she ever wanted. And whose name was Claire. And who was dead, she reminded herself. There you go, that bit of information was secure and it was nothing to shake a stick at; she was a widow herself—since before Martin had ever gotten married—

and she could barely remember what life with Howard had been like. The sound of his voice, yes. The stink of his cigarettes, certainly. But not how his presence had felt in a room, or in their bed. Sometimes it seemed as if her memory was as big as a hatbox. For everything she tried to fit into it, something had to be taken out. She had given up whole pieces of herself to make space for the clutter of other people, and who ever thought to acknowledge that? Who ever thought to thank her? “Where in the world is the fire?” she asked, gripping the arms of the wheelchair.

“We’re barely even moving, Mom. Would you like to stop for a while and rest?”

“I’m not *doing* anything. Why would I need to rest?”

“Listen, about your ring. Who’s this Mr. Hollingsworth? I don’t know what kind of person would think it’s okay to do that, but you can’t just take someone’s jewelry and give them a—snack.”

“Weetabix,” she said. “British Weetabix.”

“But you gave him your wedding ring. It’s valuable.”

“Probably not, knowing your father.”

“Sentimental value, then,” Martin said. “It has that, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose.” She wanted to change the subject. More and more, she found that interacting with anyone made her want to change the subject. “Who cares? Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

She could still surprise him, now and then, by paying attention. He did want to talk to her about something; he just wanted to get her someplace private first because he knew that no matter how gently or diplomatically he phrased his news, she was going to react poorly.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “Do you want to go to the cafeteria?” The cafeteria was sometimes empty between mealtimes.

“God, no.”

“What about outside? It’s not so hot today. It’s nice, actually.”

“Why are you so eager to get somewhere?”

“So we can talk,” he said.

This didn’t bode well, she decided. Martin wasn’t usually crafty, or particular. Under normal circumstances, he was as clear and simple as a glass of water. He had something up his sleeve. “Come around here,” she said. “Come around so I can see you.”

She felt the chair stop moving. Then he was squatting down in front of her, his knees crackling. She was relieved to see that he didn’t have a crazed, Richard Widmark glint in his eye. It was this godawful chair that was getting her so rattled. Unless you were Franklin Roosevelt, it was impossible to stand your ground in an argument when you were sitting on wheels.

She had to remind herself that they weren’t arguing. But he looked so somber, her Martin, such a little dough-face. “There’s my little man,” she said, wanting nothing more than to see him smile.

He did smile a little. He even leaned forward and gently hugged her—something he usually only did at the end of his visits. Things were sliding back into Ellie’s favor. Her throat, which had been fluttering just moments ago, was now regaining its grip. Her nostrils flared as she caught the scent of something disagreeable—the wallpaper, maybe, or the glue behind it. But all of this was going to be fine.

The atrium was a compromise, since Ellie refused to go outside. Located in the center of Serenity Palms, it had, until just a year ago, been a proper atrium: open-air, exposed to the elements, with a pond in the middle where koi and goldfish swam. But the fish couldn’t keep up

with the mosquitoes, and the summer storms scattered the mulch over the walkway—little sticks that might catch on slippered feet—so the atrium had been enclosed with a peaked skylight. The bugs were gone now and the walkway was clear, but the air was no different than in any other part of the building and hummed with the compressor of a hidden air conditioner. Also hidden were a set of speakers that dripped music—sometimes piano, today violin. The fish had been removed. The pond had been filled in with cement and was now a sitting area.

Martin put the brake on Ellie’s wheelchair. He pulled out one of the patio chairs and sat down across from her.

“It’s like the great outdoors without having to be there,” he said.

“I liked it better when it was open.”

“You never wanted to come in here before. The smells, and noise from the highway, remember?”

“Now it smells worse.”

“But there’s music. You like music.”

She looked down at her lap and smoothed the fabric of her robe with both hands. “You don’t need to tell me that,” she said. “I know I like music. I used to *teach* music. I just don’t think Vivaldi should get as much attention as he does. He’s not serious enough, flits around too much. If Charlie Chaplin had had violins for eyebrows, they’d have played Vivaldi.”

Fair enough, Martin thought.

“And you look spotty,” she added, as if these topics were at all related. “When’s the last time you saw a dermatologist? Some of those marks on your forehead could be cancerous.”

“Do you like it here?” he asked.

Possibly a trick question. She glanced at the ficus trees, the bamboo, the Mexican fans.

“Not the atrium,” he said. “The facility. The home.”

"It's okay. There's a lot wrong with it."

"But you like it better than the other two homes, right? I mean, you seem at least a little happier here than you were at Garden View or East Haven."

"That's what you wanted to talk about?"

"I'm just asking," he said. "Just checking in."

"Do you want to take my temperature, too?"

"No."

"What is it? You're acting so strange today. Why did you even bother to come?"

It occurred to them both that she was getting ahead of herself. She usually saved this particular zinger for just when he was about to leave.

He sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees. The whites of his eyes looked pink all of a sudden. "I came because I love you, okay? And because I wanted to see you."

She didn't like the sound of that. "Go on."

"And there's something I need to tell you. The fact is—" He sucked in a shot of air through his nose. "I've gotten really tired of being alone all the time."

"Me, too!" she said with more spark than she'd intended. "I've been alone my whole life."

"No, you haven't. And neither have I. But I've been on my own since Claire died, and that was eleven years ago."

"Bob Hope's been gone for eleven years?"

"Who—would you just listen, please? For once?"

All she did was listen. All she did was get talked to. She pressed her lips together and widened her eyes at him.

"I had a great life with Claire. We were married for twenty-eight years, and we shared something that's always going to be special to me. I know the two of you never got along, but there was nothing I could do about that—"

"Stubborn," Ellie slipped in. "She was stubborn." Then pressed her lips back together.

"—and she always told me she wanted me to move on. So the fact is, I've met someone." He paused for a moment to let this sink in, but nothing changed in his mother's expression. "Her name is Beth. She's a landscaper—she's retired now, but she still grows orchids and takes them to shows. We've been doing that together for a while. We're serious, Mom." He cleared his throat. "We actually got married six months ago."

One of the doors to the atrium—the front or the back, Ellie couldn't tell which—swung open and then hissed shut on its slow-moving hinges. No one appeared, though. "*That's* what you wanted to tell me?" There was an opportunity here, she just wasn't sure what it was. Martin had had a toy when he was little, a Volkswagen car that had flashing lights and a mechanism inside that made it back up whenever it ran into something, back up and redirect, over and over, until it was turned off. Her thoughts felt like that sometimes. They felt like that now. Back up, redirect. "Does this person have children?"

"Beth. She does. She has a son and a daughter. And her daughter has a daughter. Which makes me sort of a grandfather."

"Why didn't you ever have children? You and Claire, I mean."

"We didn't want any." Martin had always been indifferent about becoming a parent and had left the decision up to Claire, and when she'd waffled on the idea until she was too old to have kids, he'd been relieved.

"It would have been nice to have a grandchild," Ellie said. "A little Martin Jr. to toss around."

"That's beside the point."

"I guess I don't see what the point is, then. When do I get to meet this—" The name was gone from her head.

"*Beth*," Martin said.

"When do I get to meet her?"



“Well, that’s just it. I don’t think it’s going to happen, Mom. Like I said, I’ve been married for six months, and I haven’t been able to bring myself to introduce the two of you—or even tell you about her. And I finally decided there was a reason for that. A good reason.”

“What in the world are you talking about?” she asked. “Of course I’m going to meet her.”

“I don’t think so,” Martin said. For all the mental preparation he’d undergone, his hands were shaking. He locked his fingers together to steady them.

“Why not?”

“We don’t have to go into that.”

“We most certainly do. She’s your wife, for godsake. I’m your mother.”

“And you were horrible to my first wife. You were horrible to Claire from day one, and right up to the end. Horrible.”

“I was *not*. I was *not*. Don’t you come here and rewrite history. Not while I’m still around to keep the record straight. I was *not*.”

“You were,” he said, eyes still pink but his voice calm.

“Oh, this just takes the cake!” Ellie said. “You’re as stubborn as she was! I’ve never heard of such a thing in my life.”

“Do you remember,” Martin said, the moment so alive in his head that it might just have happened an hour ago—and, oh, how he’d longed to throw this back in her face for so many years, and how he’d sworn to himself that he never would because the past belonged in the past. Well, the ugly truth was that there was no real divide between the past and the present. The present couldn’t be ignored, and the past never went away. They were like twins joined at the hip. “Do you remember when Claire was in the middle of chemo and radiation, the first time she was really sick, and you wanted to come

stay with us and help out?”

“Of course.”

“And I came to Garden View and got you and brought you back to the house, and you did nothing but complain? About how messy the place was, and how bad my cooking was, and how preoccupied I was?”

The house *was* a mess; she remembered that clearly. But she redirected her thoughts and said, “I was sad. It was a sad time—for all of us.”

“It was. And you stood there in the hallway, asking what time we were going to eat dinner and saying you hoped it was better than what we had last night. I was helping Claire get dressed for her appointment, and you were complaining about the food.”

“I was sad!” she said again. “It was a sad time! Your wife was dying!”

“She wasn’t dying at that point. She was undergoing treatment. For all we knew, she was going to beat it and live another twenty years. But, yes, it was a really sad time.”

He was going to cry, she thought. She *wished* he would cry. Comforting him would be easier than listening to him.

“I said, ‘Mom, I’m not thinking about dinner right now.’ And do you remember what you said back?”

“It was so long ago,” she said. “I’m tired, Martin. I want to go to my room.”

“You pointed at Claire, my wife, and you said to me, ‘Of course you’re not thinking about dinner, because all you care about is *that*.’”

She should have been keeping a ledger this whole time. From day one of getting pregnant, the diapers, the spitting up, the scabbed knees, all the work she’d done to keep him alive and safe—only to have him zero in on one thing she’d said, one thing he *claimed* she’d

said, which she had no memory of saying whatsoever. She should kept a ledger.

He took his handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped it under his nose.

“Why even tell me, then?” she asked. “Why tell me you’ve married this person, if you don’t want me to meet her?”

He wagged his head a little. “I don’t know. I guess so I could tell you I was happy.”

“Oh,” she said. “And that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Well, good for you!” she said, raising her voice, nearly shouting. “Martin is happy, hip hip hooray!”

Birds would have taken flight, if there’d been birds. Heads would have turned. But they were alone.

He wheeled her back to her room.

The Italian was sleeping. The magazines and the rounded scissors lay on her lap.

Martin brought the wheelchair up alongside the recliner, put its brake on, stood in front of Ellie and held out his hands. Ellie raised her own hands and held on to him as he lifted her and carefully moved her back into the recliner. He asked her if she needed anything.

“Some water,” she said.

He took a cup from the shelf next to her nightstand, filled it at the sink, and brought it to her. She drank down half of it and set it in the cup holder built into the recliner’s arm. For a moment he just stood next to her, and fearing he might want to resume their conversation, fearing the conversation itself, she looked out the window and pointed and said, “What is that?”

“What’s what?”

“That tiny man with the parachute. Out over the water. He goes up and down, up and down, like he can’t make up his mind. What’s he doing?”

Martin followed to where she was pointing. “Parasailing,” he said. Then he bent down and kissed her cheek.

He stopped at the front desk on his way out and asked the woman there if she knew a Mr. Hollingsworth. She did; she said he was a resident. “This might sound crazy,” Martin said, “but is it possible he’s traded some biscuits for my mother’s wedding ring?”

She smiled. “Mr. Hollingsworth gives her the biscuits, and she gives him her ring even though he doesn’t want it. So he brings it to us. It’s happened several times.” She reached over to a table beside her desk and found an envelope with his mother’s name written on it. She held it out for him.

“That’s okay,” he said. “I’m on my way out. Would you mind giving it to her?”

“I’ll make sure she gets it,” the woman said.

He thanked her and walked through the automatic doors into the warm afternoon.

The sun beat down on the back of his neck and his forehead as he crossed the parking lot. For just a moment, he imagined he could smell the stucco and the terra-cotta radiating off the building. She was right about the dermatologist, of course; he would have to make an appointment soon. She was right to question why he’d told her about Beth. She was maybe even right to trade her wedding ring for a box of biscuits, if the ring was always going to be returned. But he was done, he decided. And if it confused her, wondering where he’d gone, even if it hurt her terribly—well, it could only hurt for so long.

