STANDARDS

Years later, whenever Elise Babcock thought about the Sunday afternoon Charlie Pierce came through her hedge, she would remember the sound of his voice. How its low timbre suggested that here was a steady man. So steady that when Charlie handed her his car keys, saying "Take it," she had reached with no more hesitation than if she were thrashing in twenty-foot waves and he'd tossed her a lifesaver.

The horrible afternoon Charlie came through her hedge, the Baltimore July sky was cataract-white, and she'd been trying to cope with the tumor in her husband's brain since February. And all the people who had said, "Call me if you need anything, Elise," were off to their beach houses.

That afternoon, Tommy's feet rested in a puddle of Sunday papers scattered on an old Heriz of his grandmother's, and their two older children were in the backyard near the garage. Molly holding her ratty doll and watching Stenson work at his bike with a screwdriver and wiping his sniffling nose.

Twenty minutes earlier Elise had smacked Stenson, her oldest, across his mouth. For the hundredth time, he had asked her about getting his bike fixed, and she had yelled not to bother her about it again — she was sick of hearing about his Goddamned bike. Full of a ten-year-old's rage, Stenson had screamed back, "You're so stupid. All you do is smoke. Even your farts smell stupid."

From the sunroom's French doors, Elise watched Molly start walking her doll's pink legs from spoke to spoke on the bike's rear wheel. "Oh Christ," Elise said and shifted their youngest, Oliver, on her hip to get a cigarette from her shorts. "What?" Tommy was wearing thick socks and sandals and one of the good shirts he used to reserve for court dates. His "chemo hair" had grown back frizzled.

"Oh, it's Molly." Elise contorted herself around Oliver's bottom to light the match. "She just hovers around Stenson all the time. It pisses him off. I should have sent them both to camp. But you were in treatment when the applications were due." Months before she would have bit back a statement like that, but months before Tommy's cancer hadn't metastasized and withered whatever had been decent and brave in herself. That horrible afternoon, her remark's bitterness felt almost as good as a jolt of cold vodka going down to her gut.

Suddenly, Stenson grabbed the doll and threw it. Molly was running away before the doll landed, but Stenson ran after her. Blinded by a blood lust, the boy never saw the driveway's edge waiting to trip him.

"Oh, Christ." Elise turned to Tommy, but he didn't seem up to taking Oliver. "Oh, Christ!" And she was out the door.

Stenson was kneeling, blood streaming down his chin, his hand cupping it, red running through his fingers, his primal howl piercing the Sunday quiet. Oh, Christ. Oliver was on her hip and wailing in commiseration with his brother, and then screaming louder when she put him down to look under the flap sliced into Stenson's chin and see driveway grit. And Oliver was at her leg, screaming "Up. Up." And Stenson's blood was all over her hands. Oh, Christ. Christ. And then she was running past Tommy, useless, as he came across the lawn. And she was running for ice and yelling at Stenson, "Sit down. Sit down," because he could faint. And hit his head. And then what would she do?

And when she had the ice wrapped in a towel and was halfway back to all of them who claimed pieces of her, Charlie Pierce came through her hedge. A gray-haired paunch in a red polo shirt. But tall. Very tall.

He looked at Stenson's chin. "He's going to need stitches."

"I know." She held the towel under Stenson's jaw. "I just want to stop the bleeding a bit. Put your head back, Stenson. Put it back! I need my keys." But when she had them, Charlie and Tommy were looking at her car where it slouched on a tire rim, blocking Tommy's.

"Shit," Elise said. "Oh, Christ."

Oliver started clutching her leg. "Up. Up." Trying to get him, Tommy stumbled, and the toddler ran away, screaming.

"Can you drive a stick?" Charlie said.

"It's been a long time." Elise said.

"It'll come back to you. Take mine. Take it. I'll look after your little guy and your daughter. I have a woman who helps
me with my wife. I'll call her."

And so Elise took Charlie Pierce's keys, his hand on her shoulder, steering her through the hedge and his voice telling her to take Stenson to Johns Hopkins.

"He just needs stitches, but that's where you need to take him. Trust me. Take him to Hopkins, not some suburban place. Someone will take the car."

And someone did. The waiting room was full, but someone took Stenson first. And someone brought him a stuffed bear to hold and then two more when he said he had a sister and a brother. And someone asked Elise if she wanted a cup of coffee. And the doctor gave her a vial of codeine pills "so she wouldn't have to stop on the way home." All these services moving in smooth syncopation, orchestrated by someone.

When Tommy first had told her who had bought the hulking house next door, she hadn't believed him. But he insisted. A senior partner at his law firm had gone to Yale with the old guy, he said. They definitely were *those* Pierces. The Pierces who once owned a California railroad and now a family of mutual funds. The Pierces whose money was molten magma floating under international markets.

"It's something about his wife. That's why they're here," Tommy had said. "She has some sort of mental condition. Apparently he's found a doctor who's doing her some good. You know Baltimore. People get a pair of shoes custom-made in London and then wear them for twenty-five years. They see nothing incongruous about having them resoled again and again, and dropping their Maestro's Circle check for the symphony on their way to the shoemaker's. Baltimore's the perfect place to hide. Nobody flaunts anything here."

When Elise got home, Tommy and Charlie were watching a ballgame in the sunroom, Oliver was asleep on the old oriental with his thumb in his mouth, and a rich, familiar aroma floated from the kitchen.

"I hope you don't mind," Charlie said. "I had Vannie, the woman I told you about, stop and get some things. I didn't
think you'd feel like cooking."

"The kids will be glad. My culinary skills have been reduced to cold cereal." Elise handed Charlie his keys. "You saved my life."

Molly stepped into the doorway. "We're going to have chicken, Mom. Chicken!" Her ratty doll's wide eyes were nearly popping out of their skull.

Charlie got up from the couch. "Well, you folks are in for a treat. Vannie's chicken is the best. I keep telling her she should open a little restaurant."

"Can't you stay?" Elise said, her tone inflected with neutral civility.

"No … no. Thanks, not tonight. I've got to get back. My wife doesn't like being alone too much." His words were carefully modulated, and the phrase weighted with just enough explanation to quash queries. It sounded as if he were giving a recitation. As if he knew that the listener, as if all listeners, knew about his wife, and long ago he had parsed out the phraseology to frame her condition exactly how he wanted it understood.

But at the French doors his voice rose. "Maybe you could come over for drinks. Both of you. About eight. I've asked Vannie to stay. It's been a long day. She can stay with the children."

Elise watched him walk back through her hedge. She was thirty-six and had been raised for a lifetime of summer Sundays, broken bikes, baseball games and thumb suckers on a grandmother's old Heriz. She knew good jewelry and what the "back nine" and Uffizi were. She had big breasts and could walk into the Christmas party at Tommy's firm and make easy small talk. These, wrapped in the expectancy of the life he should provide for her, were the dowry she had brought to Tommy Babcock twelve years before.

Her hopes for her marriage had been reasonable: that Tommy's warmheartedness and doggedness — the very qualities that made him a well-liked but mediocre lawyer — would be sufficient to educate their children, pay off the mortgage and buy a little condo at the beach. Now he was sitting with frizzled hair, looking as if baseball were something remote and fundamentally senseless. Elise went to the kitchen.

Stenson, his chin swaddled in gauze, was slumped on window seat in the breakfast nook. "Hey, Mom, guess what?" "What?"

"That old guy who was here? He's getting my bike fixed. Vannie told me."

Elise went back to Tommy. "He got Stenson's bike fixed?"

"Yeah. And your car, too. He just called someone, and they came."

Oliver woke up and toddled toward the kitchen. Elise let herself surrender everything to Vannie, who was as taut as a screen door spring and seemed as reliable, too. The children's dinner, the dishes, Oliver's bath, Vannie did them all, while Elise sat with Tommy, watched the game and heard his short, fierce breaths.

At the top of the ninth, he said, "He seems like a decent sort, you know. For all his money, he's just a regular guy."

"So, do you want to go over for drinks?"

"You go, Elise. I don't think I can make it. Give him my apologies. "

"You're sure?"

"One of us should." Tommy pushed himself off the couch.

"Maybe I should just call him and thank him. I can send a bottle of wine tomorrow," she said.

Tommy started toward the stairs in the hallway. "You go. Like I said, he seems a decent sort. He's probably waiting. It's just a drink, Elise. That's all." He rested his hand on the finial. "Just make sure that woman stays. Oliver might wake up while you're gone. And he's getting so heavy." His voice sounded as if it were too weary to come out into the living world. As if it wanted to curl up and stay near his heart.

"Do you need anything?" she asked.

"I'm fine."

She stepped into the hallway.

Tommy took two steps away, up the stairs. "You go, Elise.
He's a decent sort, and there aren't too many of those around. Trust me on that."

She didn't bother changing her shorts. In Charlie Pierce's "Take it," she'd heard a resonance of something inevitable, and, ultimately, fine. Something that told her he'd seen beyond her bloodstained shorts and venal failings. Beyond how she had married Tommy Babcock because Tommy Babcock was handy. Beyond how she was angry he hadn't made partner at the law firm and now she'd inherit less. Beyond how she'd thought about aborting Oliver and still sometimes thought maybe she should have. Beyond how, when Tommy was first diagnosed, she had leapt over hope straight to fatalism. Beyond how the prayers by the new rector of St. David's sounded fatuous. Beyond how she'd already decided that if Molly had one of her nightmares, she'd give her one of Stenson's codeine pills. Or maybe two.

On Charlie's porch was a table with gin and tonic and cut limes, but no glasses.

"You know," Charlie said, "my father only told me three things worth remembering. Wait a minute and I'll tell you about the first." He brought out two frosty glasses. "The first valuable thing Dad told me is that the only way to make a good gin and tonic is to refrigerate your glasses." He put in three cubes.

"What was the second?"

He poured the gin. “Oh, the second was the night before I left for prep school. He came into my room and said ‘Remember, Charlie, there are no rules. There are only standards.’ ”

“And the third, was what?”

He poured the tonic and slipped in a slice of lime. “The third was right after the second. I asked him ‘Who sets the standards?’ ”

“And what did your father tell you?”

“Dad said, ‘You do, Charlie. You set the standards.’” He handed her the drink, and she accepted it, having heard in his “standards” a measured modulation telling her Charlie Pierce understood boundaries. And she trusted that about him.

They talked about Stenson’s chin. And Vannie’s chicken. She thanked him for getting the car fixed. He told her that the fellow fixing Stenson’s bike would have it back the next day. She asked him if the man could keep it a little longer.

“I don’t want to fight Stenson about riding it with his chin.”

“I’ll call in the morning.” She felt his eyes on her legs.

He asked her if she had any family to help her. She told him she had a married brother in Chicago. And that her parents’ divorce was fairly recent and had been nasty. Her mother couldn’t get away much from her job on Capitol Hill, and her father and stepmother spent a lot of time at their beach house.

A small woman in pink slippers stepped through the screen door and blinked. She had a sweet nose and a doll’s round chin.

“Ginny, this is our neighbor, Elise Babcock. I told you we might be having someone over for drinks.”

The woman’s small, dry hand had no grip, and when she sat down, she barely dented the cushions. Charlie asked her if she wanted a drink.

“What kind of drink?”

“Gin and tonic.”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Would you like something else?”

“I don’t like gin.”

“No. I don’t mean anything with gin. Something else.” The woman sighed. “Do we have any root beer? You know I like root beer.”

“I’ll go see,” Charlie said and left.

“I don’t know why, but I’ve always liked root beer,” Ginny said.

“Yes, well, soda’s good. Especially in the summer,” Elise said. “My kids love it.”

“Do you have any sisters?” “No. I wish I did,” Elise said.

“Oh.” Ginny rubbed her forehead. “My sister never liked root beer.”

“Well, different people like different things.”

“I like to wear slippers. My feet get sore.”

When Charlie came out they chatted a bit more about the heat. Elise said she had to go, and over the head of his wife whose lips were puckered toward her root beer, he said he understood.

F F F

It wasn’t hard. As soon as Stenson’s stitches were out, Elise’s stepmother called and asked if he and Molly would like to come to the beach. Vannie was coming almost every day, and Oliver liked playing at her feet. Tommy was sleeping more and more.

Charlie told her what to do. It was late afternoon in early August and very, very quiet. Out in a valley of horse farms he waited behind a ramshackle gas station. He held open his car door for her. His Mercedes was old, and he drove with the windows rolled down. Whenever he downshifted, he would flick his other wrist and grab the inside of the steering wheel. She couldn’t remember the last time a man had driven her anywhere.

They didn't speak.

He pulled onto a long drive to a big brick house overlooking a meadow. Past the house, he turned onto a dirt road through woods opening to another meadow and a white farmhouse. When they went up the walk he put his hand on her shoulder. The door was unlocked, and the living room had a low ceiling and a big, stone fireplace.

Her earring got caught in her hair. She gave a little a laugh and raised her arms to unfasten it.

He said, "Don't."

He freed her hair. He took her earring off. He cupped her chin to turn her head. He took her other earring off. On a dresser, he laid them side by side. He smelled like lime and wood.

She'd never been undressed by a man who used ceremony to reach her nakedness. He had the touch of a blind man whose sighted fingers could capture the memory of her in their tips. She had soft, pillowy skin, and the impressions his fingers traced were as fleeting as that of a hand dangling from a rowboat on the surface of a lake. But they were disturbances nonetheless.

They didn't speak.

Later, they wrapped themselves in blankets and drank wine on the little porch off the bedroom. He asked about the children. She told him that she regretted she hadn't enrolled Stenson in Pelham Academy. "Tommy and I talked about it,
but I just never got around to it."

"Why do you want him to go there?"

"Well, it's all boys. Stenson's smart, but he has all this energy. I think Pelham would channel it a little better than the Pickford School does. It has mostly male teachers. He would do better in a more masculine environment."

"And you think it's too late to get him into Pelham now?"

"They almost never accept anyone this late. Besides, I've already paid Pickford."

Charlie rested one foot on the rusty iron table so that his blanket fell open. She knew he wanted her to do the same and so she did. He looked at her.

"Today is Monday. Why don't you call Pelham tomorrow afternoon. Not in the morning. Call in the afternoon."

She had her stepmother bring Stenson home from the beach. Pelham Academy interviewed him on Thursday and accepted him on Friday. And the Pickford School refunded the tuition.

"We know how difficult things are right now, Mrs. Babcock," the headmistress said. "The board met and decided to make an exception."

When she went upstairs to tell Tommy, he was asleep in his clothes. His eyelids didn't even flutter when she took off his shoes.

She became obsessed with lotions and ointments. Whenever she had to get a new prescription for Tommy, she'd buy something lily of the valley, or something musk. She bought a thirty-five dollar lipstick and aloe cream for her feet.

It was always the same. The gas station. The silent drive. The solemnity. She sensed that a man lived in the little farmhouse. Her grandfather's apartment had the same desperate orderliness. A recovering alcoholic's space. Everything foursquare. White sheets washed in harsh soap and pulled tight. But she never asked.

If she had and he had told her that a cousin lived there, or that a great aunt owned the estate, she would have probed too far, would have violated the space they allowed themselves, delimited, but bound by no promises or expectations.

They always wrapped themselves in blankets and drank wine on the small, screened porch surrounded by bushes. Someone had hung a hummingbird feeder.

He told her he had a son "doing some ecology work for us in the Adirondacks" and a daughter who owned an art gallery in Palm Beach. He told her he had a law degree, but had never practiced and that he had served on a nuclear submarine and was interested in pre-Columbian North American archaeology. He used to sail and liked

Baltimore because it was near Washington, and he tried to "help out the administration in whichever way he could."

When she was home, she never looked at his house. If she saw him getting the mail, she managed to see him for what he was, her gray-haired, next-door neighbor. She began sleeping on a lawn chair she'd moved into the bedroom because she thought Tommy's bones were getting brittle. Nobody had told her that, but, still, she was afraid that if she slept beside him on the bed she'd bump him and break something. She didn't have the time to potty train Oliver and worried that he was "speech delayed." Molly started wetting her bed, and Pelham Academy suggested tutoring in mathematics for Stenson. Her mother came and made lentil soup, but the kids wouldn't eat it. Her stepmother painted Molly's fingernails, and the Pickford School sent a note saying it wasn't allowed. The doctor recommended oxygen for Tommy, so she smoked outside. The whole house could burst into flames.

Tommy kept asking her to bring Oliver to him. He wanted a picture of them together. "I want him to remember me. Molly and Stenson will, but I don't know about Ollie."

When she went to get the pictures, she stopped at a little shop and bought three silk camisoles. They came from France and cost more than her winter coat. When Tommy saw the pictures he cried, and she held and rocked him. "Oh, Tommy, Tommy." She shoved the camisoles behind some ratty sweaters in her dresser.

"I'm going crazy," she told Charlie. It was late October, but still warm.

"No, you're not." The liquid in the hummingbird feeder glinted to red.

"I really think I am. I don't know what I'm doing."

"You have your kids. You're not going to let yourself go."

"I'm so tired. My mother comes when she can. My stepmother. The kids like her, but she smokes and I'm afraid with the oxygen."

"You smoke, Elise."

"Trudi smokes *and* drinks. I'm afraid she'll forget to go outside."

"Just don't have any liquor in the house."

"I want liquor in the house. I'm tired."

"I have something for you." He brought out a strand, a rope, of pearls. She was a tall woman, and they looped below her navel.

"I had a whole speech prepared about how I wanted you to indulge an old man's fantasy," he said. "About how happy it made me to pick these out for you and how, if you didn't accept them, I'd feel just like another foolish, old guy."

"You'll never be foolish, Charlie."

"When it comes to women, all men are foolish. After fifty or so, we only become more foolish. It just gets worse. It's the price we pay for living too long." He ran his hand up and down within the loop. "I only wish I could have given them to you under circumstances where you could enjoy them."

She stopped his hand. "You have to understand, if I seem ungrateful, it's because I'm numb. Nothing's registering.
They're exquisite. Really, just exquisite."

"They had to be."

She started to cry. "I haven't been much of a wife, you know. I should have encouraged him to fight harder. I never did. Not once. We never even discussed other options."

He held her head in his hands and kissed her eyelids. When she opened them, a hummingbird was at the feeder. A hovering improbability. He saw it too. The sort of shared transaction that can accumulate to a lifetime.

Two weeks later, Tommy had a nosebleed she couldn't stem, and he went to the hospital. Years later, she would remember calling Vannie and screaming not to do any laundry. She wanted his T-shirts. They were all she had that smelled like him. Early in November, Tommy was moved to the hospice wing.

Someone cooked a turkey and made sweet potatoes. Someone bought a Christmas tree and got Oliver into St. David's preschool. Someone bought him a wooden train and Molly a dollhouse.

In the middle of January, someone bought Stenson his first suit and Elise a black dress. And someone shoveled their walk, so she and the children wouldn't slip the morning they got into the big, waiting car that drove them down St. Bart's Way to St. David's. Maybe Charlie was there. Maybe he wasn't. Elise never could remember.

That February was so cold, even the stars were blue. She was smoking in her back yard, when she heard footsteps crushing the brittle snow. The watch-cap over his ears made Charlie look like what he was: nineteen years older than she was.

"I keep thinking that if I find just the right star, I'll find him. It's crazy," she said.

"You're entitled. It's a crazy time."

"It seems impossible that someone can just stop being. That someone can talk and think one minute and then just not BE. That seems too cruel. If that's true, then everything we do and feel has no purpose at all … we're just accidental muddles of random chemistry. That we go through all of this for nothing."

They were standing so close their blue clouds of breath found each other. "I keep feeling he's out there, somewhere," she said. "I have to believe that." She heard Charlie take another step. "If you touch me, I'll break. I can't let that happen."

"Then I won't touch you."

F F F

In May, he asked her to lunch at the Center Club, and she bought a new suit. The club had a private elevator, and, over tables covered in stiff, white linens, businessmen murmured to each other as she passed.

"Why here?" she asked.

"It's the safest place. All these old guys think I'm just like them. Someone looking at you and trying to decide which voice in his head he should listen to. The one saying 'Go for it.' Or the one saying, 'You don't stand a chance, you old fool.' They think our meeting is only prelude." He lifted a finger and a waiter came.

Charlie asked about the children, and she told him that the three of them were too careful with each other. "Even my stepmother says they've stopped fighting. They don't play with other kids. In a way, they know too much and that separates them. And sometimes I think … this sounds crazy, but sometimes I think they feel they can make Tommy whole by just being together."

"I have something for you."

When she opened the brown envelope, she saw certificates with blue borders and rows of zeroes.

"Charlie."

He held up his hand. "They're bearer bonds. You should put them in a safe deposit box right away. If you decide to cash them, there's a guy named Burt Greene. He's honest. Honest and cautious. You can trust him."

"Charlie, I can't. I'm not that bad off. Tommy had insurance. And his grandmother says she'll change her will for the kids."

"You're a beautiful woman, Elise. And you're going to become more beautiful. Sorrow can do that to some women. It will to you. Any guy here would want to dazzle you with his money. You don't need that. You're smart, but it's almost impossible to see a man separately from his money. This way, if someone comes along, you can see him for what he is, not as someone to take care of you and the kids. A woman who sees only the money can get overwhelmed. It gets lonely for the guy. Things fall apart." He was looking far out the window and talking to some painful, remembered middle distance.

She waited.

"There's something else," he said. "I've sold the house. My daughter is having some problems down in Florida, and it might be easier this way."

Elise started shoving the envelope back across the table. She didn't want to be bought off with a good-bye gift.

"It's not what you think. If I move, if you want to go on, it might be easier if there's some distance. I'm only human. Think about it. And call Burt Greene."

On the way home, she went to the cemetery, hating the groundskeeper for tipping his hat and assuming she was a devoted widow, when she was only confused, with no more idea of what to do than the robin hopping on Tommy's grave. She ran her fingertips over his marker: Thomas Holcomb Babcock Beloved Son, Husband, Father. It said everything. And nothing.

In July, she made certain to be down at her father's beach house so she wouldn't see the moving vans, and in October, she met Charlie in Washington. And six months after that, on an estate in Virginia horse country. That next summer, they spent two weeks on a sailboat anchored off Block Island, and when he asked about the children, she told him that Stenson had played shortstop at Pelham and that Molly was friends with the little girl who had moved into his old house. "And Oliver, well, let me just say I don't worry any more about him being speech delayed."

"That's good," he said. He was wearing a baggy old cardigan and wrapped her in it when he hugged her. His neck tasted like salt. When he went for a swim, she touched the sweater, envying it for holding the memory of his bones in its weave. In a drawer under a bunk she found a book of Emily Dickinson's poems inscribed, "To my dear Ginny. Happy Birthday, Charlie."

When she went home, she tried dating other men, but most of them were divorced. She told her stepmother, "We have different sorts of sorrow. I'm wounded one way, and they're in another." People stopped urging her to "move on."

She started working at a decorator's three days a week. When Oliver entered Pelham, the issue of tuition was never brought up, although an anonymous donor had made a "substantial gift" for the new library wing.

She never asked Charlie about it. The foundation they had laid that distant August had been laid in silence, not the absence of noise, but the presence of stillness. To ask, to probe would violate something no less profound for being tacit.

Because San Francisco was cold when they met there, Charlie bought her a mink-lined raincoat. Their room had a view of the Golden Gate, but the fog was so dense they saw only a long, sad drape of gauzy lights. They were having lunch when he got a call from Ginny's clinic in Minneapolis. He said, "I have to go."

On the flight back to Baltimore, Elise sat next to a molecular biologist coming to give a lecture at Hopkins. When he asked her out to dinner she thought she owed it to herself try dating again — somewhere there had to be a man who could give her the sense of steadiness she found with Charlie. But the restaurant was so noisy all she caught from the biologist were bitter slices of "my charming ex-wife." Elise tried telling him about her children, that Stenson had finally buckled down to schoolwork because he wanted his driver's license, that Molly hated her braces, that Oliver was the only fifth grader reading at the ninth-grade level. Across the table, the biologist's smile was rapt, but his eyes didn't understand she was telling him milestones achieved by children dragging a great loss. She didn't even let him kiss her good night.

Stenson and Oliver stopped saying they "felt funny" when she had her father take them to Pelham Academy's annual father-son bull roast, and the hole Tommy's death punched in every holiday began to fill in. At the decorator's, she was showing a client a swatch of rose damask when she noticed the calendar: her wedding anniversary. Three-twenty in the afternoon and she just realized it. Before she went home she got a basket of chrysanthemums for Tommy's grave and noticed his marker no longer looked new and innocent among all the others.

"I was sort of an inattentive wife, and now I'm an indifferent widow," she told Charlie.

"Three kids in twelve years, Elise. You barely had time to say 'Good morning.' You were just constantly adjusting. Reacting," he said. "As for being a widow, there are no rules that
I know of."

She touched his arm. “You’re a good friend.”

It was a drizzly March morning, and they were having their coffee before a fire in a Manhattan townhouse overlooking Gramercy Park.

“I have to go out for an hour or two. I won’t be long,” he said. His voice carried a smile — whatever he had to do had nothing to do with Ginny.

When he left, Elise began going through the townhouse. She sensed it was Charlie’s truest home, and she wanted to see if she could walk into a room and pick out “his” chair. But she got increasingly restless and started opening drawers, closets. She discovered Ginny everywhere. In little, cracked photographs. Drawers of Belle Isle sweaters. Tubes of cuticle creams. A yellow flowered shower cap.

Despite the drizzle, Elise went and sat in the little park. By spying, she’d betrayed him, and so had diminished herself. He’d never promised her anything and had never asked her for anything she hadn’t been willing to give. She’d expected more of herself than to go probing through his things, trying to find how much of him belonged to Ginny, how much to herself. As if he were a pie to be sliced. She owed him more than that. She went back in and was writing him a note saying she’d decided to go home when he returned. He’d bought a puppy. A collie puppy. Its innocence was infectious, so she stayed. They named him Attaboy.

The dog was with them two years later when the October snow in the Adirondacks was powder fine and they crosscountry skied. The second day, Charlie fell asleep on the couch before nine. Elise got a blanket to cover him, but his mouth was gaping open, and she didn’t want him to know she’d seen him like that. So she wrapped the blanket around herself, pretending to sleep until he got up and kissed her head. “I’m going to bed,” he said. Twenty minutes later, when she got in beside him, he was already snoring.

The next afternoon she was heating stew when Charlie said that Stenson should think about going to Annapolis.

She poured the stew into speckled metal bowls. “He’s a gung-ho sort of kid. You know that. He’d like it, but the Academy’s hard to get into.”

“He should try. Have him try.” He poured some stew for Attaboy.

F F F

Stenson was serving on a submarine, the rainy April morning Charlie called and Elise heard the resonance of an inward turning. She packed and went to New York. From across the room overlooking Gramercy Park, she saw the effort he made to smile when he saw the pearls. Under silver dishes blue flames burned. He pulled out her chair. They hardly spoke.

“I wanted to get you something,” he said over coffee. “Something significant, but all the jewelers said they needed more time. I was only diagnosed a few days ago.”

“Oh, Charlie.” On the white tablecloth, her hand looked old and hoary.

“I’m seventy-one, Elise. Prostate cancer doesn’t leave a man much to brag about. If you’re lucky, you live a little longer. If you’re very lucky you live and you don’t piss yourself. If you’re very, very lucky, you live, you don’t piss yourself, and you get to hold onto your manhood. All the money in the world can’t buy that kind of luck. Not for me.”

When she told him there were new treatments, new procedures, her voice sounded shrill and she hated it.

“What good is treatment,” he said, “if you can’t even recognize yourself when it’s through? I don’t want to be an old fool pining for past glories.”

She took his hand and kissed it. “Elise.”

“What?”

“I want you to go.”

“What? No!” He had never asked her for anything she hadn’t been willing to give, but now he was asking for everything, for breath itself.

“They say some women only know themselves by the affirmation they receive from the eyes of men,” he said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she lashed and hated herself for slapping him with a pained, bitter lie.

“Yes you do. It’s not that much different with a man. You have no idea how many times I remember you walking into a room, looking for me and giving off that something that says you’re a woman who’s found her man. A man needs an affirmation, too. At least, I do. From you. I couldn’t stand to have you walk into a room and see pity in your eyes.”

“I’d never pity you, Charlie.” She was leaving him nothing but lies, after they’d been so honest with each other, never speaking what they gave each other, never needing to.

“You won’t be able to help but pity me. I’m becoming someone different, and you won’t be able to look at me without remembering what I had been. Soon enough I’ll be surrounded by well-intended, but pitying eyes. I don’t need yours, too.”

Someone covered the blue flames. Someone carried away the silver dishes. She wanted to say something calm, something memorable — he had enough on his mind without worrying that she was going to fall apart. He had to trust she’d hold herself together.

When she draped her scarf, the pearls swung. “They say something else, too, you know,” she said.

“What?”

She put on her coat. “They say that we only love the feelings, not the person. We just love the feelings, because we can’t ever really know another person. Not entirely.” She picked up her handbag. “If that’s true, if I just loved the feeling you gave me, not you, well, I hope, I pray, it was enough. With all my heart, I pray that. The feeling was wonderful.” “It was everything to me,” he said.

F F F

By the time the train crossed from New Jersey into Delaware the rain had ended, and by the time it crossed the Susquehanna River night had nearly fallen. To the west, only the faintest scatterings of violet and gold bobbed on the river, and to the east, where it emptied into the Chesapeake, the river and bay were a meld of gray. Little lights dotted the shore. Sometimes a low roofline.

Closer to Baltimore, the houses were only a blur of the city’s famous ox-blood red brick rowhouses. One after another, with narrow little yards ending at concrete alleys. Sometimes she could make out a dog. A basketball hoop. A bike. And the windows. In some, yellow lights.

Behind all of them, she knew, were dreams and disappointments. Generations, accreting one after another, like the soot burrowing into the bricks, slowly corroding the concrete holding them one to the other. Her losses, she knew, were no greater than those in any of the tiny houses. And her loves, no more worthy. She was almost as old as Charlie had been the afternoon he had stepped through her hedge.

When the train stopped, the cavernous station’s ceiling was an echo chamber catching every sound and sending it ricocheting off the oak waiting-room benches and terrazzo floor. On the sidewalk in front, over the sibilance of wheels slicing the wide boulevards’ dampness and the cabbies’ barking, she heard a frail young man with a wispy red beard and knitted turquois beret playing a Peruvian pan pipe. Beside him, in a concrete planter, a random jumble of daffodils bobbed and danced. Elise opened her purse, tossed a few dollars into the basket at the piper’s feet and got into a cab.

“Take me home,” she told the driver. “Take me home.”