

NEAR SUNSET

They are already stripped off and white cuffs folded back, Harry Sodermain holds their everyday tumblers under the icemaker. “So when did he call?”

Martha’s chopping carrots on the kitchen island, the jute lanyard from her glasses swinging like a loose jib line. Below the hem of her khaki skirt, blue veins lace her ankles, and her moccasins squeak on the glossy, dark floor.

“About ten. I was just on my way to take Coco to the vet’s.” She turns to a recipe propped on a clear, plastic stand. “I know I’m forgetting something ... something. Oh well.”

Harry watches her running a finger up and down the recipe, then carries their tumblers to an array of amber liquor near the French doors. Behind the bottles, a window overlooks a sweep of backyard that, even in October, holds the vivid green of a springtime pasture. Between his neighbors’ houses and tall trees, the sunset blazes pink and orange above a low, purple ribbon.

“So he called at ten?” Harry splashes more bourbon into one tumbler than the other.

“Yes, about ten,” Martha says. “I already had Coco’s leash on. She thought we were going for a walk. To see her leaping around, you’d never know she had to go to the vet’s. When Peter called, she was barking so much I had to lock her in the mudroom. Let’s see, I put in the shrimp, the orzo. Oh, well.” Scooping the carrots against her knife, she plops them into a blue enamel casserole.

“So what did he say?” Harry carries the tumblers back to the refrigerator where poodle magnets hold a flurry of fall notices: a lecture titled *Scott and Zelda in Baltimore, the Sad Sojourn* at the Historical Society, a noontime discussion on *The Shepherdless among Us* at St. David’s. This last is circled in red.

“Only that his area code has changed. Apparently the one in Miami is too full, so his neighborhood got a new one. I wrote it down.” Martha puts the casserole into the oven and sets the timer. The red seconds and minutes begin counting down.

“So his own number didn’t change again?”

“No. Just his area code is different... he wanted us to know. Those carrots have to cook. What with Peter’s calling and all, I was too late for Dr. Steinwald to see Coco. I had to leave her with someone new, a Dr. Wu.”

“Did you tell this new guy she’s passing blood?”

“He wants to do some tests. He’ll call us tomorrow. Do you want something? That orzo will take a while.”

“We’re nearly out of bitters.”

“Write that down for me, so I don’t forget.” Martha washes the knife.

On a blackboard wreathed with scraps of paper pinned to its frame, Harry writes “bitters,” and starts rooting around in a French country hutch with shelves full of bright soup tureens and photographs in silver frames. The pictures are mostly of himself and Martha and their three children. In the largest, they are all on a dock: Eric in his Dartmouth sweatshirt, Polly with her big smile, and Peter with his lamb-like eyes staring past the camera toward something the others aren’t interested in.

“What are you looking for?” Martha hangs the knife blade on a magnetized strip.

Harry is still looking in the hutch. “I want some chalk. There’s just a nub left on that string by the blackboard.” “The stores still have some back-to-school supplies. They’re getting their Christmas stuff, but they should have some chalk left. I’ll get it, but write it by the bitters. If it’s not written down, it’s like it doesn’t exist for me these days.”

Harry tries to close the drawer, but it sticks and when he shoves it. A picture topples over, the only one in black and white — Peter, older now. On the cusp of manhood. On the deck of a sailboat, in jeans and a sunburst T-shirt. The angle of the light says the picture was taken near sunset. Harry rubs his thumb up and down the silver frame, then sets the picture back in its place.

“Do you want some cheese?” Martha asks. “Or how about hummus?”

“Cheese would be good.” Harry writes bitters and chalk with a white nub and carries both tumblers out the French doors to the patio where a thick vine of small roses covers a white trellis. Along the patio’s edge, candles in globes with plastic webbing sit at even intervals, as if someone took four steps and set a candle down, took another four and set another down. Harry puts Martha’s tumbler on the table and runs his thumb up and down his own, cutting a wide, wet ribbon in its frost. On St. Bart’s Way everything is very quiet. When he pulls out his chair, its iron legs grate and clang on the flagstones.

The summer had been dry and hot, and the early October weather is still warm. At the end of his yard, the dogwood blazes to scarlet, but a few curled, dusky leaves, like wisps of newly sheered dark wool, litter the flagstones, Harry notices.

Martha carries out a basket of crackers and a red disk of cheese with a few slices cut from it. “I forgot the knife,” she says.

“This is enough,” Harry says. “I don’t need any more.” “I’ll just be a minute. Don’t wait for me,” she says.

Harry doesn’t drink until she comes back with a knife and takes a sip from her tumbler. Then he takes a deep swallow.

“What did he say?”

“Oh, we just talked about Coco. I told him it was still warm up here.”

“So mainly he wanted us to know about his area code?”

“Yes. I wrote it down somewhere.”

“So that was it?”

“He said he might be bringing a boat up from St. Augustine next month. A sixty-footer.”

“So he’s still doing that boat thing? What do they call them? Boat runners?”

“Yes. Boat runners.”

“Helluva thing to call them.”

“Well, that’s what they’re called. People want their boats one place or another and don’t have time to do it themselves.

He said he was up in Halifax this summer.”

“Halifax?”

“Part of a four-man crew.”

“You’d think he’d have more sense than to go anywhere near Canada.”

“That was a while ago, Harry. He was just the cook. How could a cook have known what they were up to?

He was only nineteen.”

“Talk about tempting fate. Jeez ... going to Canada again!”

“Well, he went. And nothing happened.”

“Not that we know of.”

“I should have brought out some napkins.” Martha starts to get up.

“It’s okay. Don’t bother. This is fine.” Harry puts some cheese on a cracker.

Martha sits down and twists her mouth. She looks out over the expanse of lawn, where the purple border has darkened and is pushing back the pink.

“I saw a flock of robins in that dogwood this morning,” she says. “A whole flock. They were eating all the berries. You usually only see flocks in the spring. Hardly ever in the fall. I guess they were congregating so they could fly south.”

“So he’s bringing up a sixty-footer. Where to? Annapolis?”

“I don’t know. I guess so. He said he expected to be in Maryland sometime next month.”

“Why would anyone want their boat in Annapolis in November? Only fools race on the bay in the winter. Everyone knows the Chesapeake is hell in winter.”

Martha puts down a cracker. “My gosh, the pesto! That’s what I forgot ... the pesto! I had to make an extra stop just to get it.” A shrill edge has crept into her voice. “I stopped deliberately to get it and there I go and forget it. My mind is such a sieve these days.” When she pushes back her chair, her glasses swing from their lanyard and slap the tabletop.

She goes into the kitchen, and Harry puts down his drink and cups his fist over his mouth. He stares out over his back yard, where, through the open garage door, the angle of the setting sun enflames the rear reflector on a rusting bicycle fender.

Martha comes out. “Good thing I had to go in. The recipe calls for only a cup and a half of chicken broth, but it really needs more. The orzo still wasn’t soft. It would have been like eating pebbles. I should make a note ... two cups.”

“What else did he say? Anything?”

“I didn’t want to tell him I had to get to the vet’s; I didn’t want to cut him off. But Coco was going crazy. She didn’t know what was happening. She seemed more energetic today. Maybe that blood isn’t anything. The Watsons’ poodle lived to fourteen.”

“How’d he sound?”

“Fine.”

“He sounded okay?”

“He sounded fine, you know, like himself. I told him I was trying to get that new biography of Rilke. You remember, he wrote that paper on Rilke.”

“I thought that was Erik. I thought Erik wrote on Rilke.”

“It was Peter.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I know I am. Twenty-five pages on Rilke — ‘the point of life is to fail at greater and greater things.’ He got a B because it was late.”

“Is he taking the inland waterway, or sailing up the coast?”

Martha draws a sudden intake of breath. “You know, I didn’t think to ask. I should have thought to ask.”

“The coast can be rough in November.”

In the kitchen the phone rings and Martha starts to get up. “Don’t bother,” Harry tells her. “It’s probably someone from Calcutta calling about refinancing our mortgage.”

Martha pushes back her chair. “It could be Dr. Wu. Maybe he’s got the test results early. He said he’d call tomorrow, but maybe he’s got them already.”

Harry sits alone. Against the twilight’s purple border, the dogwood has deepened to mahogany. The cicadas have started, and the cubes in Harry’s tumbler clink. But everything else outside is still.

Inside, Martha’s voice has taken on that rising intonation it always does when she’s about to say goodbye. Harry waits, but she doesn’t come out. He waits longer and hears nothing in the kitchen. No oven opening. No refrigerator door. No moccasins. Nothing. Through the French doors he can see past the liquor bottles to the mud room doorknob where Martha’s pouch of a handbag hangs.

He drains his glass and goes in.

She's holding a battered brown address book with gaps like missing teeth where some of its alphabet tabs are gone. The "S" hangs by a prayer.

"Was that him on the phone?" Harry asks. "Was that Peter?"

"No, no, it was the vet's. Some little assistant or something." Martha's glasses slip from her nose and swing on their lanyard. She tries putting them back on, but they fall off again. She keeps flipping through the address book.

"What are you looking for?"

"That paper. I told you, I wrote Peter's new area code on a piece of paper. Somehow, when the vet's called, I just realized I didn't remember what I did with it." The kitchen timer beeps and jerks her head like a slap. She puts down the address book and yanks open the oven door. She sends the casserole cover clattering onto the island, tastes the orzo, then punches more numbers into the timer.

"Why did the vet's call?" Harry says.

"What?" She puts the casserole back into the oven.

"Coco's tests ... why did the vet's call?"

"Some little assistant ... she wanted me know that I'd left Coco's leash there. She said they didn't know whose it was, so they let all the dogs sniff it and when they held it under Coco's nose, she whined so they knew it was hers."

Her voice sounds shrill again. She goes back to the address book, turns it upside down and shakes it by its covers. The pages dangle like the body of a dead sea bird held by its wings, but nothing falls out. "I'm losing everything. I didn't remember to get the pesto when I got the orzo. I had to make an extra trip. Now the paper with Peter's number. I don't know what I did with it."

"Maybe you put it in your bag."

"What?"

"Your handbag. Maybe it's there." Harry goes around the island to the blackboard.

Martha leaves the address book and gets her handbag from the doorknob. "This thing has so many pockets. I bought it so I could keep things straight. But I can never remember what's in what pocket. I swear it eats things. I put things in, and they just disappear." She dumps her wallet and keys on the counter. With his knuckle, Harry skims the papers pinned around the blackboard, and they flutter after his touch. "You know, directory assistance will give you the new area code if you call the old one. It's all automated now. You just call the old one," he tells her.

Martha keeps rooting in her handbag. "I'll never find it. I'm losing everything." The kitchen timer beeps again and she stares at it as if it were a midnight summons.

"We could do that," Harry says.

"Do what?"

"Call the old area code. They'll give you the new one."

"Oh." She jams her handbag onto the counter, and a lipstick rolls out. She hesitates between picking it up and going to the oven. She goes to the oven. Harry watches her but keeps his finger on the notices. His knuckle slowly circumnavigates the rim of the blackboard twice more before it stops.

"Is this it? Five-six-one?" He takes a little square of paper from the frame. "Is this it?" he says.

"What did you say?" Martha's moccasins squeak as she pivots from the oven to the island with the casserole.

"Is this it?" Harry says. "Five-six-one. That's all it says ... five-six-one."

Martha stands still. "I knew I put it somewhere. I remember writing it. I should put it in the book right now. If I wait until we eat, I'll forget." Martha takes the lid off the casserole and the scent of shrimp fills the kitchen like incense.

"You take care of that. I'll take care of his number," Harry says. Under "Peter Sodermain" are numbers for San Diego, Duluth, Provincetown, Vancouver, Galveston and Miami. And for the Pacific Haven Clinic. The

Desert Springs Treatment Center. He writes the new area code by the Miami number and puts the book away. He picks up Martha's lipstick and then sets out two wineglasses.

"Red with that?" he says.

"Yes, there's shrimp in it, but I think red would be good." Martha's slicing a baguette she's taken from the bread drawer. "I bought a new kind of butter. It's from France. They whip it some way so it has half the calories. At least that's what it says."

"Leave it to the French to fill something with air and charge twice as much." Harry looks at her, but there's no smile. She checks to make certain the oven is off.

Harry puts down the corkscrew he's twisting. "Don't worry about Coco," he tells her. "She'll be okay."

"I'm not worried about Coco. That's what's wonderful about dogs. They don't know what's coming. They always think everything will be okay." Martha keeps slicing. Her glasses slip.

"You know, after we eat, maybe I should give Burt Greene a call," Harry says.

Martha puts the bread in a basket. "Why?"

"Well, Burt and I, we have lunch once in a while, and every fall, he gives me this song and dance about wanting to get his cabin cruiser down to the islands. Then, come February, it's the same thing from him, 'Geez, if I only had managed to get my boat down south, Harry.' Nobody sings the blues like Burt."

"So you think he might want Peter to take it down?"

"It's worth a shot. Peter'll be up here in November. He knows the waters. That way he can make money coming and going. And I was thinking ..."

"What?" Martha holds the basket of bread.

Harry pours the wine. "Well, if Peter's up here for November, maybe he'll stick around until Thanksgiving."

"What about Burt Greene's boat?"

"I don't even know if Burt will want Peter to take it south, and if he does, what's another week or two? I've thrown some business his way over the years. If I ask him to wait a bit, he'll probably do it. He's a decent sort." Harry watches Martha check the oven again. She asks him if he wants to eat in or out.

"Out," he says. Why not? Might as well do it while we can."

"So, you want to eat on the patio?"

"Why not? Who knows how many nice days we have left?"

He carries the wine outside. The sky's vivid colors are all gone, and the dogwood is a dark silhouette against an expanse of silver slipping to black. Harry sets the glasses on the table. From the patio's edge, he chooses a yellow candle and picks out the dried leaves caught in its webbing. To get the match near the wick, he has to tilt the globe. The flame sputters, then catches, blue in its center. When Harry sets the globe between the two glasses, the wine lights to burgundy. Everything is quiet. Harry sits down. And he waits.