

## Jane Smiley – “Lily”

CAREERING TOWARD LILY STITH IN A GREEN FORD Torino were Kevin and Nancy Humboldt. Once more they gave up trying to talk reasonably; once more they sighed simultaneous but unsympathetic sighs; once more each resolved to stare only at the unrolling highway.

At the same moment, Lily was squeezing her mop into her bucket. Then she straightened up and looked out the window, eager for their arrival. She hadn't seen them in two years, not since having won a prestigious prize for her poems.

She was remarkably well made, with golden skin, lit by the late-afternoon sun, delicately defined muscles swelling over slender bones, a cloud of dark hair, a hollow at the base of her neck for some jewel. She was so beautiful that you could not help attributing to her all of your favorite virtues. To Lily her beauty seemed a senseless thing, since it gained her nothing in the way of passion, release, kinship, or intimacy. Now she was looking forward, with resolve, to making the Humboldts confess really and truly what was wrong with her -- why, in fact, no one was in love with her.

A few minutes later they pulled up to the curb. Nancy climbed the apartment steps bearing presents -- a jar of dill pickles she had made herself, pictures of common friends, a cap knitted of rainbow colors for the winter. Lily put it on in spite of the heat. The rich colors Nancy had chosen lit up Lily's tanned face and flashing teeth. Almost involuntarily Nancy exclaimed, "You look better than ever!" Lily laughed and said, "But look at you! Your hair is below your hips now!" Nancy pirouetted and went inside before Kevin came up. He, too, looked remarkable, Lily thought, with his forty-eight-inch chest on his five-foot- nine-inch frame. Because of Nancy's hair and Kevin's chest, Lily always treasured the Humboldts more than she did her current friends. Kevin kissed her cheek, but he was trying to imagine where Nancy had gone; his eyes slid instantly past Lily. He patted her twice on the shoulder. She cried, "I've been looking for you since noon!" He said, "I always forget how far it is across Ohio," and stepped into the house.

That it had been two years -- two years! -- grew to fill the room like a thousand balloons, pinning them in the first seats they chose and forbidding conversation. Lily offered some food, some drink. They groaned, thinking of all they had eaten on the road (not convivially but bitterly, snatching, biting, swallowing too soon). Lily, assuming they knew what they wanted, did not ask again. Immediately Kevin's hands began to fidget for a glass to jiggle and balance and peer into, to turn slowly on his knee. Two years! Two days! Had they really agreed to a two-day visit?

Although the apartment was neat and airy, the carpet vacuumed and the furniture polished, Lily apologized for a bowl and a plate unwashed beside the sink. Actually, she often wondered whether cleanliness drove love away. Like many fastidious people, she suspected that life itself was to be found in dirt and disorder, in unknown dark substances that she was

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hesitant to touch. Lily overestimated her neatness in this case. The windowsills, for example, had not been vacuumed, and the leaves of the plants were covered with dust. She began to apologize for the lack of air-conditioning, the noise of cars and trucks through the open windows, the weather, the lack of air-conditioning again; then she breathed a profound sigh and let her hands drop limply between her knees.

Nancy Humboldt was moved by this gesture to remember how Lily always had a touch of the tragic about her. It was unrelated to anything that had ever happened, but it was distinct, always present. Nancy sat forward and smiled affectionately at her friend. Conversation began to pick up.

After a while they ate. Lily noticed that when Kevin carried his chest toward Nancy, Nancy made herself concave as she sidestepped him. Perhaps he did not exactly try to touch her; the kitchenette was very small. Jokes were much in demand, greeted with pouncing hilarity; a certain warmth, reminiscent of their early friendship, flickered and established itself. Conversation ranged over a number of topics. Nancy kept using the phrase "swept away." "That movie just swept me away!" "I live to be swept away!" "I used to be much more cautious than I am now; now I just want to be swept away!" Kevin as often used the word "careful." "I think you have to be really careful about your decisions." "I'm much more careful now." "I think I made mistakes because I wasn't careful." Lily listened most of the time. When the discussion became awkwardly heated, they leaped as one flesh on Lily and demanded to know about her prizewinning volume, her success, her work. Nancy wanted to hear some new pieces.

Lily was used to reading. Finishing the fourth poem, she wondered, as she often did, why men did not come up to her after readings and offer love, or at least ask her out. She had won a famous prize. With the intimacy of art she phrased things that she would not ordinarily admit to, discussed her soul, which seemed a perfectly natural and even attractive soul. People liked her work: they had bought more copies of her prizewinning volume than of any other in the thirteen-year series. But no one, in a fan letter, sent a picture or a telephone number. Didn't art or accomplishment make a difference? Was it all invisible? Lily said, "I think Kevin was bored."

"Not at all, really."

"I wasn't in the slightest," Nancy said. "They're very good. They don't have any leaves on them." Nancy grinned. She rather liked the occasional image herself.

Now was the time to broach her subject, thought Lily. The Humboldts had known her since college. Perhaps they had seen some little thing, spoken of it between themselves, predicted spinsterhood. Lily straightened the yellow pages and set them on the side table. "You know," she said with a laugh and a cough, "I haven't gone out in a month and a half. I mean, I realize it's summer and all, but anyway. And the last guy was just a friend, really, I -- " She looked up and went on. "All those years with Ken, nobody even made a pass at me in a bus station. I didn't think it was important then, but now I've gotten rather anxious."

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Kevin Humboldt looked straight at her, speculating. Yes, it must be the eyes. They were huge, hugely lashed, set into huge sockets. They were far more expressive and defenseless than anything else about her. The contrast was disconcerting. And the lids came down over them so opaquely, even when she blinked but especially when she lowered her gaze, that you were frightened into changing any movement toward her into some idle this or that. Guys he'd known in college had admired her from a distance and then dated plainer women with more predictable surfaces.

"Do you ever hear from Ken?" Nancy asked.

"I changed my number and didn't give him the new one. I think he got the message."

"I'll never understand why you spent -- "

"Nine years involved with a married man, blah blah blah. I know."

"Among other things."

"When we were breaking up, I made up a lot of reasons, but now I remember what it was like before we met. It was just like it is now." Kevin thought of interrupting with his observation. He didn't.

"Everyone has dateless spells, honey," said Nancy, who'd had her first dateless spell after her marriage to Kevin. She had always attributed to Lily virginal devotion to her work. Nancy thought a famous prize certainly equaled a husband and three children. Love was like any activity, you had to put in the hours, but as usual Kevin was right there, so she didn't say this and shifted with annoyance in her chair. "Really," she snapped, "don't worry about it."

Kevin's jaws widened in an enormous yawn. Lily jumped up to find clean towels, saying "Does it seem odd to you?" Kevin went into the bathroom and Nancy went into the bedroom with her suitcase. Lily followed her. "I have no way of knowing," she went on, but then she stopped. Nancy wasn't really listening.

**I**N THE MORNING NANCY BRAIDED AND WOUND UP HER hair while Lily made breakfast Kevin was still asleep. Nancy had always had long, lovely hair, but Lily couldn't remember her taking such pride in it as she was now, twisting and arranging it with broad, almost conceited motions. She fondled it, put it here and there, spoke about things she liked to do with it from time to time. She obviously cherished it. "You've kept it in wonderful shape," Lily said.

"My hair is my glory," Nancy replied, and sat down to her eggs. She was not kidding.

When Kevin staggered from bedroom to bathroom an hour later, Nancy had gone out to survey the local shops. Kevin looked for her in every room of the apartment and then said, "Nancy's not here?"

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"She thought she'd have a look around."

Kevin dropped into his seat at the table and put his head in his arms. A second later he exclaimed, "Oh, God!" Lily liked Kevin better this visit than she had before. His chest, which had always dragged him aggressively into situations, seemed to have lost some of its influence. He was not as loud or blindingly self-confident as he had been playing football, sitting in the first row in class, barreling through business school, swimming two miles every day. Thus it was with sympathy rather than astonishment that Lily realized he was weeping. He wiped his eyes on his T-shirt. "She's going to leave me! When we get back to Vancouver, she's going to leave me for another guy!"

"Is that what she said?"

"I know."

"Did she say so?"

"I know."

"Look, sit up a second and have this piece of toast."

"He's just a dumb cowboy. I know she's sleeping with him."

She put food in front of him and he began to eat it. After a few bites, though, he pushed it away and put his head down. He moaned into the cave of his arms. Lily said, "What?"

"She won't sleep with me. She hasn't since Thanksgiving. She never says where she's going or when she'll be back. She can't stand me checking up on her."

"Do you check up on her?"

"I call her at work sometimes. I just want to talk to her. She never wants to talk to me. I miss her!"

"What do Roger and Fred say?" Roger and Fred were friends from college who also lived in Vancouver.

"They don't understand."

Lily nodded. Unlike Lily, Roger and Fred had wavered in their fondness for Nancy. Many times she had been selfish about certain things, which were perhaps purely feminine things. She thought people should come to the table when dinner was hot in spite of just opened beers and half-smoked cigarettes or repair projects in the driveway. She had screamed, really screamed, about booted feet on her polished table. Roger and Fred especially found her too punctilious about manners, found her slightly shrill, and did not appreciate her sly wit or her

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generosity with food and lodging and presents (this liberality they attributed to Kevin, who was, simultaneously, a known tightwad). And they overlooked her capacity for work -- willing, organized, unsnobbish bringing home of the bacon while all the men were looking for careers and worrying about compromising themselves. Lily and Kevin at least agreed that Nancy was a valuable article.

"Okay," Lily said, "who's just a dumb cowboy?"

"His name is Hobbs Nolan. She met him at a cross-country ski clinic last year. But he's not really outdoorsy or athletic; he just wears these pointy-toed cowboy boots and flannel cowboy shirts. Out there guys like him are a dime a dozen.... "

"You know him?"

"I've seen him. He knows people we know. They think he's a real jerk."

"You blame him for all of this, then?"

Kevin glanced at her and said, "No." After a moment he exclaimed "Oh, God!" again, and dropped his head on his arms. His hair grazed the butter dish, and Lily was suddenly repelled by these confidences. She turned and looked out the window, but Nancy was nowhere in sight. The freshness of the morning was gone, and the early blue sky had whitened. She looked at her watch. It was about ten-thirty. Any other morning she would already have sat down to her work with an apple and a cup of tea, or she would be strolling into town with her list of errands. She glanced toward the bedroom. The blanket was half off the bed and a corner of the contour sheet had popped off the mattress. Nancy's and Kevin's clothes were piled on the floor. They had left other items in the living room or the kitchen: Nancy's brush, a scarf, Kevin's running shoes and socks, two or three pieces of paper from Nancy's purse, the map on which they had traced their route. But hadn't she expected and desired such intimacy? He sat up. She smiled and said, "You know, you're the first people to spend the night here in ages. I'd forgotten--"

"I don't think you should worry about that. Like Nancy said, we all go through dry spells. Look at me, my -- "

"Oh, that! I wasn't referring to that."

"My whole life was a dry spell before Nancy came along."

Lily sat back and looked at Kevin. He was sighing. "Hey," she said, "you're going to have a lot better luck if you lighten up a little."

"I know that, but I can't." He sounded petulant.

Lily said, "Well -- "

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"Well, now I'd better go running before it gets too hot." Kevin reached for his shoes and socks. But Nancy walked in and he sat up without putting them on. Nancy displayed her packages. "There was a great sale on halter tops, and look at this darling T-shirt!" She pulled out an example of the T-shirt Lily had seen on everyone all summer. It said, "If you live a good life, go to church, and say your prayers, when you die you will go to OHIO." Lily smiled. Nancy tossed the T-shirt over to Kevin, saying, "Extra extra large. I'm sure it will fit."

He held it up and looked at it and then said, glumly, "Thanks. "

"Are you going for your run now?"

"Yeah."

But he didn't make a move. Everyone sat very still for a long time, maybe five minutes, and then Lily began clearing plates off the table and Nancy began to take down her hair and put it back up again. Kevin seemed to root himself in the chair. His face was impassive. Nancy glared at him, but finally sighed and said, "I got a long letter from Betty Stern not so long ago. She stopped working on her Chinese dissertation and went to business school last year."

"I heard that Harry got a job, but that it was in Newfoundland or someplace like that," Lily said.

"Who'd you hear that from?" Refusing even to look in Kevin's direction, Nancy combed her hair.

"Remember Meredith Lawlor? Did you know she was here? She's teaching in the pharmacy school here in Columbus. She raises all these poisonous tropical plants in a big greenhouse she and her husband built out in the country. "

"Who's her husband?"

"She met him in graduate school, I think. He's from Arizona."

"I'd like to raise plants for a living. I don't know necessarily about poisonous ones." Nancy glanced at Kevin. Lily noticed that she had simply dropped her packages by her chair, that tissue paper and sales slips and the halter tops themselves were in danger of being stepped on. In college they had teased Nancy relentlessly about her disorderly ways, but Lily hadn't found them especially annoying then. Kevin said, "Why don't you pick that stuff up before you step on it?"

"I'm not going to step on it!"

"Well, pick it up anyway. I doubt than Lily wants your mess all over her place."

"Who are you to speak for Lily?"

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"I'm speaking for society in general, in this case."

"Why don't you go running, for God's sake?"

"I'd rather not have a heart attack in the heat, thank you. "

"Well, it's not actually that hot. It's not as hot as it was yesterday, and you ran seven miles."

"It's hot in here."

"Well, there's a nice breeze outside, and this town is very shady. When you get back we can have lunch after your shower. We can have that smoked turkey we got at the store last night. I still have some of the bread I made the day we left."

Kevin looked at her suspiciously, but all he said finally was, "Well, pick up that stuff, okay?"

Nancy smiled. "Okay."

Still Kevin was reluctant to go, tying his shoes with painful slowness, drinking a glass of water after letting the tap run and run, retying one of his shoes, tucking and untucking his shirt. He closed the door laboriously behind him, and Nancy watched out the window for him to appear on the street. When he did, she inhaled with sharp, exasperated relief. "Christ!" she exclaimed.

"He doesn't seem very happy."

"But you know he's always been into that self-dramatization. I'm not impressed. I used to be, but I'm not anymore."

Lily wondered how she was going to make it to lunch, and then through the afternoon to dinner and bedtime. Nancy turned toward her. "I shouldn't have let all these men talk to you before I did."

"What men?"

"Kevin, Roger, Fred."

"I haven't talked to Roger or Fred since late last winter, at least."

"They think I ought to be shot. But they really infuriate me. Do you know what sharing a house with Roger was like? He has the most rigid routine I have ever seen, and he drives everywhere, even to the quick shop at the end of the block. I mean, he would get in his car and drive out the driveway and then four houses down to pick up the morning paper. And every time he did the dishes, he broke something we got from our wedding, and then he would refuse to pay for it because we had gotten it for free anyway."

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"Fred always said that being friends with Roger showed you could be friends with anyone."

"Fred and I get along, but in a way I think he's more disapproving than Roger is. Sometimes he acts as if I've shocked him so much that he can't bear to look at me."

"So how have you shocked him?"

"Didn't Kevin tell you about Hobbs Nolan?"

"He mentioned him."

"But Hobbs isn't the real issue, as far as I'm concerned. Men always think that other men are the real issue. You know, Roger actually sat me down one night and started to tell me off?"

"What's the real issue?"

"Well, one thing I can't bear is having to always report in whenever I go somewhere. I mean, I get in the car to go for groceries, and if I decide while I'm out to go to the mall, he expects me to call and tell him. Or if I have to work even a half hour late, or if the girl I work with and I decide to go out for a beer after work. I hate it. I hate picking up the goddamned telephone and dialing all the numbers. I hate listening to it ring, and most of all I hate that automatic self-justification you just slide into. I mean, I don't even know how to sound honest anymore, even when I'm being honest."

"Are you -- "

"No, most of all I hate the image I have of Kevin the whole time I'm talking to him, sitting home all weekend with nothing to do, whining into the phone."

"I think Kevin is mostly upset because you don't sleep with him."

"Well -- "

"I really don't see how you can cut him off like that."

"Neither does he."

"Why do you?"

"Don't you think he's strange-looking? And everything he does in bed simply repels me. It didn't used to but now it does. I can't help it. He doesn't know how big or strong he is and he's always hurting me. When I see him move toward me, I wince. I know he's going to step on me or poke me or bump into me."

"Well, you could go to a therapist. You ought to at least reassure Kevin that you're not



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sleeping with this other guy."

"We did go to a therapist, and he got so nervous he was even more clumsy, and I am sleeping with Hobbs."

"Nancy!"

"Why are you surprised? How can this be a reason for surprise? I'm a sexual person. Kevin always said that he thought I was promiscuous until I started with him, and then he just thought that I was healthy and instinctive."

"Well, Nancy -- "

"I have a feeling you aren't very approving either."

"I don't know, I -- "

"But that's all I want. I realized on the way here that all the time I've known you I've wanted you to approve of me. Not just to like me, or even respect me, but to approve of me. I still like being married to Kevin, but all of us should know by now that the best person for being married to isn't always the best person for sleeping with, and there's no reason why he should be." She glanced out the window. "Anyway, here he comes." A moment later the door slammed open. Lily thought Kevin was angry, until she realized that he had simply misjudged the weight of the door. Sweat was pouring off him, actually dripping on the carpet. Nancy said, "Jesus! Go take a shower." Lily wanted to tell him not to drip over the coffee table, with its bowl of fruit, but said nothing. He looked at them with studied ingenuousness and said, "Four miles in twenty-five minutes. Not bad, huh? And it's ninety-three. I just ran past the bank clock."

"Great." Nancy turned back to Lily and said, "Maybe I should try to call Meredith Lawlor while I'm here. We were pretty good friends junior year. I've often thought about her, actually." Kevin tromped into the bathroom.

WASHING LETTUCE FOR THE SANDWICHES, LILY watched Nancy slice the turkey. It was remarkable, after all, how the other woman's most trivial mannerisms continued to be perfectly familiar to her after two years, after not thinking about Nancy or their times together for days and even weeks at a stretch. It was as if the repeated movement of an arm through the air or the repeated cocking of a head could engrave itself willy-nilly on her brain, and her brain, recognizing what was already contained in it, would always respond with warmth. In fact, although she did feel this burr of disapproval toward Nancy, and sympathy for Kevin, Kevin's presence was oppressive and Nancy's congenial. Nancy got out the bread she had made, a heavy, crumbly, whole-grain production, and they stacked vegetables and meat on the slices and slathered them with mustard and catsup. The shower in the bathroom went off and Nancy sighed. Lily wondered if she heard herself.

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Lily remembered that the kitchen workers in the college cafeteria had always teased Kevin about his appetite. Certainly he still ate with noise and single-minded gusto. His lettuce crunched, his bread fell apart, pieces of tomato dropped on his plate and he wiped them up with more bread. He drank milk. Lily tried to imagine him at work. Fifteen months before, he had graduated from business school near the top of his class and had taken a risky job with a small company. The owner was impressed with his confidence and imagination. In a year he'd gotten four raises, all of them substantial. Lily imagined him in a group of men, serious, athletic, well-dressed, subtly dominating. Was it merely Nancy's conversation about him that made him seem to eat so foolishly, so dependently, with such naked anxiety? To *be* so foolish, so dependent? When he was finished, Nancy asked him whether he was still hungry and said to Lily, "Isn't this good bread? I made up the recipe myself."

"It's delicious."

"I think so. I've thought of baking bread for the healthfood store near us. In fact, they asked me to, but I'm not sure it would be very profitable."

"It's nice that they asked you."

"A couple of guys there really like it."

Kevin scowled. Lily wondered if one of these guys was Hobbs Nolan. Nancy went on, "I make another kind, too, an herb bread with dill and chives and tarragon."

"That sounds good."

"It is."

Lily was rather taken aback at Nancy's immodesty. This exchange, more than previous ones, seemed to draw her into the Humboldts' marriage and to implicate her in its fate. She felt a brief sharp relief that they would be gone soon. She finished her sandwich and stood up to get an apple. It was before one o'clock. More stuff -- the towel Kevin had used on his hair, Nancy's sandals, Nancy's other hairbrush -- was distributed around the living room. Lily had spent an especially solitary summer, with no summer school to teach and many of her friends away, particularly since the first of August. Some days the only people she spoke to were checkers at the grocery store or librarians. Her fixation on the Humboldts' possessions was a symptom that her solitary life certainly was unhealthy, that she was, after all, turning back into a virgin, as she feared. It was true that her apartment never looked "lived in" and that she preferred it that way. Suddenly she was envious of them; in spite of their suspicions and resentments their life together had a kind of chaotic richness. Their minds were full of each other. Just then Kevin said, with annoyance, "Damn!" and Nancy shrugged, perfectly taking his meaning.

"There's a great swimming pool here," Lily said. "I've spent practically the whole summer there. You must have brought your suits?"

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KEVIN HAD BEEN DIVING OFF THE HIGH BOARD steadily for at least forty-five minutes. At first, when Nancy and Lily had been talking about Kenneth Diamond and Lily's efforts to end that long relationship, Nancy had only glanced at Kevin from time to time. Lily remarked that she had slept with Ken fewer than twenty times in nine years. Nancy stared at her -- not in disbelief but as if seeking to know the unfathomable. Then, for four dives, Nancy did not take her eyes off Kevin. He did a backwards double somersault, tucked; a forward one-and-a-half lay-out; a forward one-and-a-half in pike position; and a double somersault with a half-gainer, which was astonishingly graceful. "I knew he dove in high school," she said, "but I've never seen this." A plump adolescent girl did a swan dive and Kevin stepped onto the board again. Other people looked up, including two of the lifeguards. Perhaps he was unaware that people were looking at him. At any rate, he was straightforward and undramatic about stepping into his dive. The board seemed to bend in two under his muscular weight and then to fling him toward the blue sky. He attempted a forward two-and-a-half, tuck position, but failed to untuck completely before entering the water. In a moment he was hoisting himself out and heading for the board to try again. Nancy said, "It's amazing how sexy he looks from a distance. All the pieces seem to fit together better. And he really is a good diver. I can't believe he hasn't practiced in all these years."

"Maybe he has."

"Maybe. I mean he looks perfect, and no older than twenty-one. That's how old he was when we first met -- twenty-one. I was dating Sandy Ritter. And you were dating Murray Freed."

"I could have done worse than stick with Murray Freed. But he was so evasive that when Ken approached me in a grown-up, forthright way, I just gave up on Murray. He's got a little graphics company in Santa Barbara, and I hear he spends two or three months of the year living on the beach in Big Sur."

"Well, don't worry about it. I've always thought leisure and beauty were rather overrated, myself." She grinned. "But look at him! He did it! That one was nearly perfect, toes pointed and everything."

"I guess I'm sort of surprised that you think he's funny-looking. Everybody always thought he was good-looking in college."

"Did they? It's hard to remember what he looks like, even when I'm looking at him. I mean, I know what he looks like, but I don't know what I think about it. This diving sort of turns me on, if you can believe that."

"Really?" But Lily realized that she was vulnerable, too, and when Kevin came over, dripping and fit, toweling his hair and shoulders with Lily's own lavender towel, his smile seemed very white, his skin very rosy, and his presence rather welcome.

Actually, it was apparent that they all felt better. Lily had swum nearly half a mile, and Nancy had cooled off without getting her hair wet. Kevin was pleased with the dives he had

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accomplished and with Nancy's obvious admiration. All three of them had an appetite, and it was just the right time to begin planning a meal. "This is a nice park," Kevin said. "The trees are huge."

"We should get steak," Nancy said.

IN THE BEDROOM, PUTTING ON HER CLOTHES, LILY smiled to hear Nancy's laugh followed by a laugh from Kevin. Really, he was a good-humored sort of person, who laughed frequently. Although she could not have said how the visit had failed that morning, or why it was succeeding right then, she did sense their time filling up with possibilities of things they could do together. She heard Nancy say, "I think the coals must be ready by now," and the slam of the door. She pulled a cotton sweater over her head and went into the kitchen thinking fondly of the Humboldts' driving away the next morning with smiles on their faces and reconciliation in their hearts. She hadn't done anything, really, but something had done the trick. Kevin was sitting at the table wrapping onions and potatoes in foil. Lily opened the refrigerator and took out a large stalk of broccoli, which she began to slice for steaming. Kevin had put on a light-blue tailored shirt and creased corduroy slacks. His wet hair was combed back and he had shaved. He said, "Why did you stick with Diamond all those years? I mean" -- he looked at her cautiously -- "wasn't it obvious that you weren't going to get anything out of it?"

"I got a lot out of it. Ken's problem is that nobody thinks he's anything special but me. I do think he's quite special, though, and I think I got a good education, lots of attention, lots of affection, and lots of time to work. It wasn't what I expected but it wasn't so bad, though I wish there had been some way to practice having another type of relationship, or even just having dates."

"What did he think about your winning the prize?"

"I don't know. I broke up with him right after I applied for it, and I didn't read the letter he sent after I got it."

"Last night, when you were talking -- " But the door opened and Nancy swept in. "The coals are perfect! Are these the steaks in here? I'm famished! Guess what? I got three big ears of corn from your neighbor, who was out in his garden. He's cute and about our age. What's his name? He was funny, and awfully nice to me."

"I've never even spoken to the guy," Lily said.

"What do you do? Cross the street when you see an attractive man?" Nancy teased.

"It's not that. It's that some curse renders me invisible. But Kevin was about to say something."

He shrugged.

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"Put on you by Professor Kenneth Diamond, no doubt," Nancy said. She handed a potato back to Kevin. "Do that one better. The skin shows. Seriously, Lily" -- Kevin took the potato back with a careful, restrained gesture -- "you can't keep this up. It's impossible. You're the most beautiful woman anyone we know knows. You have to at least act like you're interested. I'm sure you act like you wouldn't go on a date for a million dollars. You don't prostitute yourself simply by being friendly." Kevin rewrapped the potato and handed it back to Nancy. Then he smiled at Lily and she had a brief feeling that something dramatic and terrible had been averted, although she couldn't say what it was. Nancy ripped the paper off the rib eyes and dropped it on the table.

THE WINE WAS NEARLY FINISHED. KEVIN HAD CHOSEN it, a California red that he'd tried in Vancouver. He kept saying, "I was lucky to find this so far east. That isn't a bad liquor store, really." Lily hadn't especially liked it at first because of its harsh flavor and thick consistency, but after three glasses she was sorry to see the second bottle close to empty. She set it carefully upright in the grass. There was a mystery to its flavor that made her keep wanting to try it again. Nancy was talking about the play she had been in, as the second lead, with a small theater group in Vancouver. She had loved everything about it, she said. "The applause most of all," Kevin said, smiling. "She got a lot of it, too. The third night, she got more than anyone in the cast. She was pretty funny."

"I was very funny."

"Yes, you were very funny."

Nancy lay back on the chaise longue. "The director said that he thought I should take acting classes at the university. They have a very good program. I had never acted before, and they gave me the second lead. You know, there are tons of professional actors in Vancouver."

"It wasn't exactly a professional show. Only the two leads were getting paid, and the guy wasn't even an Equity actor," Kevin said.

"I know that."

Lily took a deep breath. Neither Kevin nor Nancy had changed position in the past five minutes. Both were still leaning back, gazing into the tops of the trees or at the stars, but their voices were beginning to rise. She said, "It must be lovely to live in Vancouver." She thought of it vividly, as if for the first time: thick vegetation, brilliant flowers, dazzling peaks, lots to eat and do, the kind of paradise teaching would probably never take her to.

"It's expensive," Nancy said. "And I've found the people very self-satisfied."

"I don't think that's true," Kevin said.

"I know you don't. Kevin likes it there just fine. But the university is good, and they send

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acting students off to places like Yale and England and New York City all the time."

"By the time you could get into acting school, you would be thirty-one at the very least." Kevin had sat up now, but casually. He poured the last of the mysterious tasting wine into his glass.

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, frankly, I don't see how you can quit working for another two years, until I get established." He looked at the wine in the glass and gulped it down. "And maybe thirty-one is a little old to start training for a profession where people begin looking for work before they're out of their teens. And what about having kids? You can't very well have any kids while you're going to school full time. That play had you going eighteen hours a day some days. Which is not to say that it wasn't worth it, but I don't know that you would even want to do it six or eight times a year."

Nancy was breathing hard. Lily leaned forward, alarmed that she hadn't averted this argument, and put her hand on Nancy's arm. Nancy shook it off. "Kids! Who's talking about kids? I'm talking about taking some courses in what I like to do and what some people think I'm good at doing. The whole time I was in that play you just acted like it was a game that I was playing. I have news for you -- "

"It was a community-theater production! You weren't putting on Shakespeare or Chekhov, either. And it's not as if Bill Henry has directed in Toronto, much less in New York."

"He's done lights in New York! He did lights on *The Fantasticks!* And on *A Chorus Line!*"

"Big deal."

Nancy leaped to her feet. "I'll tell you something, mister. You owe it to me to put me through whatever school I want to go to, no matter what happens to our relationship or our marriage. I slaved in the purchasing department of that university for three years so that you could go to business school full time. I lived with those crummy friends of yours for four years so we could save on mortgage -- "

Lily said, "Nancy -- "

Kevin said, "What do you mean, 'no matter what happens to our relationship'? What do you mean by that?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean! Lily knows what I mean, too!"

Lily pressed herself deep into her chair, hoping that neither of them would address her, but Kevin turned to face her. In the darkness his deep-set eyes were nearly invisible, so that when he said, "What did she tell you?" Lily could not decide what would be the best reply to make. He stepped between her and Nancy and demanded, "What did she say?"

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"I think you should ask her that."

"She won't tell me anything. You tell me." He took a step toward her. "You tell me whether she still loves me. I want to know that. That's all I want to know." The tone of his voice in the dark was earnest and nearly calm.

"That's between you and Nancy. Ask her. It's not my business."

"But you know. And I've asked her. She's said yes so many times to that question that it doesn't mean anything anymore. You tell me. Does she still love me?"

Lily tried to look around him at Nancy, but seeing the movement of her head, he shifted to block any communication between them. "Does she?"

"She hasn't told me anything."

"But you have your own opinion, don't you?"

"I can't see that that's significant in any way."

"Tell me what it is. Does she still love me?"

He seemed, with his chest, to be bearing down on her as she sat. She had lost all sense of where Nancy was, even whether she was still outside. Wherever she was, she was not coming to Lily's aid. Perhaps she too was waiting for Lily's opinion. Lily said, "No."

"No, what? Is that your opinion?"

Surely Nancy would have stepped in by now. "No, it doesn't seem to me that she loves you anymore." Lily broke into a sweat the moment she stopped speaking, a sweat of instant regret. Kevin stepped back and Lily saw that Nancy was behind him, still and silent on the chaise longue. "Oh, Lord," said Lily, standing up and taking her glass into the house.

THE HUMBOLT'S STAYED OUTSIDE FOR A LONG time. Lily washed the dishes and got ready for bed; she was sitting on the cot in the guest room winding her clock when Nancy knocked on the door and came in. "We had a long talk," she said, "and things are all right."

"Did you -- "

"I don't want to talk about it anymore. This may be the best thing. At least I feel that I've gotten some things off my chest. And I think we're going to leave very early in the morning, so I wish you wouldn't get up."

"But I -- " Lily looked at Nancy for a moment, and then said, "Okay, I won't. Thanks for

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stopping."

"You can't mean that, but I'll write." She closed the door and Lily put her feet under the sheet. There were no sounds, and after a while she fell asleep. She awoke to a rhythmic knocking. She thought at first of the door, but remembered that Nancy had closed it firmly. Then she realized that the blows were against the wall beside her head. She tried to visualize the other room. It would be the bed, and they would be making love. She picked up her clock and turned it to catch light from the street. It was just after midnight. She had been asleep, although deeply, for only an hour. The knocking stopped and started again, and it was irregular enough to render sleep unlikely for the time being. She smoothed her sheet and blanket and slid farther into the bed. Even after her eyes had adjusted, the room was dark: the streetlight was ten yards down, and there was no moon. Nancy and Kevin's rhythmic banging was actually rather comforting, she thought. She lay quietly for a moment, and then sat up and turned on the light. She felt for her book under the bed. The banging stopped and did not start again, and Lily reached for the light switch, but as her hand touched it, Nancy cried out. She took her hand back and opened her book, and Nancy cried out again. Lily thought of the upstairs neighbor, whom she hadn't heard all evening, and hoped he wasn't in yet. The bed in the next room gave one hard bang against the wall, and Nancy cried out again. Lily grew annoyed at her lack of consideration, and then, inexplicably, alarmed. She put her feet on the floor. Once she had done that, she was afraid to do anything else. It was suddenly obvious to her that the cries had been cries of fear rather than of passion, and Lily was afraid to go out, afraid of what she might see in the next room. She thought of Nancy's comments about Kevin's strength, and of Nancy's carelessness about Kevin's feelings. She opened the door. Lights were on everywhere, shocking her, and the noise of some kind of tussle came from their bedroom. Lily crept around the door and peeked in. Kevin had his back to her and was poised with one knee on the bed. All the bedcovers were torn off the bed, and Nancy, who had just broken free, was backed against the window. She looked at Lily for a long second and then turned her head so that Lily could see that her hair had been jaggedly cut off. One side was almost to her shoulder, but the other side stopped at her earlobe. The skein of hair lay on the mattress. Lily recognized it now. Seeing Nancy's gaze travel past him, Kevin set down a pair of scissors, Lily's very own shears, that had been sitting on the shelf above the sewing machine. Lily said, "My God! What have you been doing?"

Looking for the first time at the hair on the bed, Nancy began to cry. Kevin bent down and retrieved his gym shorts from under the bed and stepped into them. He said to Lily rather than Nancy, "I'm going outside. I guess my shoes are in the living room."

Nancy sat on the bed beside the hair, looking at it. It was reddish and glossy, with the life of a healthy wild animal, an otter or a mink. Lily wished Nancy would say that she had been thinking of having it cut anyway, but she knew Nancy hadn't been. She thought of saying herself that Nancy could always grow it back, but that, too, was unlikely. Hair like that probably wouldn't grow again on a thirty-year-old head. Lily picked up the shears and put them back on the shelf above her sewing table and said, "You were making love?"

The door slammed. Nancy said, "Yes, actually. I wanted to. We decided to split up, earlier, outside." She looked at Lily. "And then when I got in bed I felt happy and free, and I just



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thought it would be nice."

"And Kevin?"

"He seemed fine! Relieved, even. We were lying there and he was holding me."

"I can't believe you -- "

At once Nancy glared at her. "You can't? Why are you so judgmental? This whole day has been one long trial, with you the judge and me the defendant! What do you know, anyway? You've never even lived with anyone! You had this sterile thing with Kenneth Diamond that was more about editing manuscripts than screwing and then you tell my husband that I'm not in love with him anymore! Of course he was enraged. You did it! You hate tension, you hate conflict, so you cut it off, ended it. We could have gone on for years like this, and it wouldn't have been that bad!"

"I didn't say I knew anything. I never said I knew anything."

Nancy put her face in her hands and then looked up and said in a low voice, "What do I look like?"

"Terrible right now -- it's very uneven. A good hairdresser can shape it, though. There's a lot of hair left." Nancy reached for her robe and put it on; she picked up the hair, held it for a moment, and then, with her usual practicality, still attractive, always attractive, dropped it into the wastebasket. She glanced around the room and said, "Well, let's clean up before he gets back, okay? And can you take me to the airport tomorrow?"

Lily nodded. They began to pick things up and put them gingerly away. When they had finished the bedroom, they turned out the light in there and began on the living room. It was difficult, Lily thought, to call it quits and go to bed. Kevin did not return. After a long silence Nancy said, "I don't suppose any of us are going to be friends after this." Lily shrugged, but really she didn't suppose so either. Nancy reached up and felt the ends of her hair, and said, "Ten years ago he wouldn't have done this to me."

Had it really been ten years that they'd all known each other? Lily looked around her apartment, virginal again, and she was frightened by it. She felt a sudden longing for Kevin so strong that it approached desire, not for Kevin as he was but for Kevin as he looked -- self-confident, muscular, smart. Her throat closed over, as if she were about to cry. Across the room Nancy picked up one of her hairbrushes with a sigh -- and she was, after all, uninjured, unmarked. Lily smiled and said, "Ten years ago he might have killed you."

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