

Strong Like Water

Robert Hodgson Van Wagoner

THE SAME WEEK KARMINE DISCOVERS HER HUSBAND is having an affair with a man, she takes her mother to a doctor who finds a tiny patch of cancer on the tip of the old woman's nose. Abby, Karmine's seventy-five-year-old mother, cannot be convinced she has not contracted the malignancy from her former neighbor, a young woman stricken with lymphoma who regularly, at the conclusion of Abby's visits, kissed the old woman on the nose. Abby's little spot is a garden variety cancer, the result of too many years' unprotected exposure to the sun, years and years of wear; its removal requires but a small operation and the maintenance of a periodic check-up. But as far as Abby is concerned, she has caught lymphoma from kissing. She is convinced she will shortly die.

"You're not going to die," Karmine says. "There's nothing fatal about a tiny spot on the end of your nose." It is snowing hard—icy flakes click softly when they hit the car. It is the sound, Karmine imagines, of parakeet feet, unnumbered parakeet feet, walking on glass. She has turned the windshield wipers to the highest speed. The blades rush back and forth, and though Karmine doesn't entirely realize what is happening, the vigorous back and forth, this motion of winding a watch, has begun to stiffen her neck.

"Lymphoma," Abby insists. She examines her nose in the visor mirror, but she doesn't touch the cancer. "I should have never let her kiss me."

Karmine is Abby's youngest child, and for all practical purposes, Abby's only child. Harlan, Karmine's older brother, lives in Detroit, an automotive engineer. He calls Abby weekly, and visits as he can, usually on major holidays. It causes a guilty moment, this resentment she feels for her brother, his distance and freedom from Abby's unreasonable aging. Karmine resents Harlan for his careless assumptions, and for his useless and insufficient gratitude. She resents him most, however, for the same reason she resents her father who is dead—she resents them both for leaving her alone and terrified that Abby will die.

"You're not listening," Karmine says. "There are no lymph nodes on

the end of your nose. And even if there were, it simply isn't possible to catch cancer from another person."

Abby pushes the visor to the ceiling, and as an afterthought, though they are almost to her home, checks to make certain she has locked her door. "This is the beginning of the end," she says calmly. "You remember this conversation. This is the beginning of the end. I give myself three months."

In Abby's driveway, Karmine turns off the car. The windshield wipers stop, and she is immediately grateful for the stillness. "The beginning of the end," as far as Karmine is concerned, has long passed. The end had begun five years earlier when Karmine's father, a man ten years older than Abby, died of heart failure. On the day of her father's funeral, Karmine hadn't given her despondent mother three months, much less, five years. Now, Karmine is distressed, put off, by Abby's arbitrary death predictions. She is put off by the arbitrariness of death. For five years Abby has deteriorated—lost much of her sight, some of her balance, a little of her memory—but she has not died. Abby slips away much like a child grows, in increments beyond perception, with only memory and the passage of time for measurement. And the more frail Abby seems, the more frightened Karmine becomes. Strange, it strikes Karmine, that now, when Abby can no longer offer the comfort and reassurance of the mother, that she, Karmine, is most terrified of losing her. And perhaps it is because they need each other again, as in the child's early life. For very different reasons they need, though they can no longer truly help one another. Karmine sometimes wonders if it would have been easier (for her, for Abby, for Harlan) if Abby had, in fact, died as predicted, shortly after her husband's death.

"I hope Peter doesn't take this too hard," Abby says. Peter is Karmine's husband. "I was hoping he'd come along today; he usually does. He'd have been very upset by the lymphoma. I don't think Peter is going to take this well."

Karmine gets out and comes around to help Abby. Abby adores Peter, and Peter adores Abby. They have adored each other for twenty-six years, since before Karmine adored Peter. Peter's adoration of Abby was one of Karmine's first reasons for adoring Peter. In the twenty-five years of Karmine and Peter's marriage, Peter has made no distinction in time and concern and service between Abby and his own mother. So much adoration, in light of all that Karmine must keep to herself, must keep from her mother, only complicates the needing—needing Peter, needing Abby.

"Peter had a meeting after school," Karmine says. She holds onto Abby's elbow, pulls her gently from the car, bracing herself against a slip. It is still snowing, and through Karmine's feet she senses the uncertain grounding, that rigid insecurity born in the snowy layer separating her

boots from concrete. Her muscles, without permission, tighten, a phenomenon she remembers from years of carrying infants across Utah winters.

"A meeting?" Abby scoffs. She knows few meetings keep Peter away. "I hope it wasn't a *church* meeting."

"No church meeting," Karmine assures. "A meeting with the administration to plan this year's tour. He would have canceled had it been anything else."

Abby grunts but seems satisfied with Karmine's explanation. Near the back door the old woman stops and looks at her yard. It is January, and it has already been a hard winter. Drifts from Peter's shoveling stand as tall as Abby, taller in places. He has shoveled off her carport and beaten the snow from her bushes. The temporary stain of Ice Melt stretches like a blue carpet to the carport where Abby's car awaits Peter or one of the older grandchildren, Harlan when he is in town, the few people who drive the aging vehicle, now and then, for the sake of maintenance.

"It's going to snow for a long time," Abby says, stepping toward the door, pulling Karmine with her. "I can feel it. I wish you Mormons would stop praying for snow."

"We stopped a long time ago," Karmine says. "We're praying for snow-blowers now."

Because of Peter, Karmine and Abby can say these things to each other. Karmine's conversion to Peter's faith, the fact that she has abandoned her parents' faith, works because Abby loves Peter. It has worked because Karmine and her parents, always suspicious of Mormons, loved Peter more than they suspected Mormonism. And it has worked because Peter never once asked Karmine to convert, because he married her expecting full-well that she never would. Peter, himself, has suspected Mormonism, he has been openly skeptical at times, which is why, perhaps, he has never been promoted in the lay clergy beyond choir director. On the other hand, his persistent service with those hopeless congregational choirs, the fact that he is never called to serve elsewhere, may simply be the consequence of being very good at what he does.

Inside Abby's house, Karmine helps her mother remove her winter clothing. She hangs Abby's coat in the closet, removes the old woman's boots, and covers her feet with lamb-skin slippers. Positioned haphazardly about the house are a half-dozen walkers, four pronged canes, landmarks of Karmine's determination to keep her mother on her feet. They are rentals Karmine has picked up, some with wheels, some without, different designs on the hope that variety and novelty will tempt Abby to use one. Karmine picks up the nearest walker and places it next to the couch, where her mother sits.

"Diane next door was skin and bones by the time she went," Abby says. She shakes her head sadly, but without the drama Karmine has come to

expect from Abby. Abby is convinced she has lymphoma, and she seems remarkably content to have it. It occurs to Karmine that her mother is more concerned with the fact, the certainty, of the disease, than she is troubled by the consequences of having it.

"You're going to lose some skin off your nose, Mom." Karmine smiles. "There's no bone, only cartilage, at the end of your nose. Your nose is already down to skin and cartilage."

Abby glances at her daughter, a look of mild reproach. She points at her nose without touching it. "It's like the entrance to a coal mine," she says. "One little opening for all those miles and miles and layers and layers of tunnels inside."

Karmine imagines her mother as a diagram, something late nineteenth century with obscure, ominous markings, a cut-away illustrating a network of roughly organized mining tunnels beginning at the tip of Abby's nose, arrows and measurements indicating the intended direction of the invisible miners still burrowing away inside. It is an image Karmine understands; it explains so much. The hollowing out, being consumed a bite at a time from the inside. She wonders what such a diagram of herself might reveal, how complicated the tunnels would be, which pieces of what would be missing. And a diagram of Peter? How much of Peter would be gone?

"Well," Karmine sighs. "When the doctor takes off the tip of your nose, I'll have him shine a light down the shaft. If the back of your head glows, we'll run tests for lymphoma."

Abby throws her head back and laughs. Karmine smiles, and after a moment, she laughs, too.

"I have to tell you something," Abby finally says. She smooths the front of her blouse. "For the last week, your father has been spending the nights. He sleeps right where I'm sitting. On the couch."

Karmine blinks rapidly. She resists an impulse to open her mouth wide, as in a yawn, to open the chamber and release a sudden pressure behind her ears. For the past nineteen years, since converting to Mormonism, she has slowly assumed the accouterments of the faith. It is no longer beyond her, as it was before her conversion, to consider the spirit world viable, the distance between mortals and their predecessors, small. It is something she sometimes hopes for, and sometimes dreads. Yet, even after so many years, she is not certain her hoping constitutes actual belief.

Karmine looks at the couch. Since before her father's death, her mother has slept on the living room floor. Every night for five years, Abby has unrolled the foam-rubber mattress, made her bed with sheets and blankets. Every morning she has removed and folded the bedding, rolled the mattress. What began as a service to her ailing husband is now a safeguard

against falling out of bed. And, too, it is warmer, she claims, on the floor near the heat vent.

"Every night?" Karmine asks.

"Except for last Thursday," Abby says. "He didn't come at all last Thursday. But every other night. He comes after I go to bed. When I wake up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom he's there, so I put a blanket on him. It's been so cold. His hair still has that beautiful black curl. He's always gone by the time I get up in the morning."

Abby is pleased with her secret, as pleased to have such a secret as to have her husband again spending the nights. Karmine does not begrudge her mother her pleasure, nor her visions, but she is distressed and angry, nonetheless. She is angry because a sign, if it is a sign, should bring more comfort than distress. Comfort to her, Karmine, as well as Abby. She is angry, too, because her mother, who has never believed in the supernatural, the preternatural, the spiritual, has without question accepted the whole as real. And Karmine is distressed, for she has heard of such things before. Whatever the cause, whatever the reality, she suspects that in the world at large people experience similar occurrences quite regularly. And usually (in Karmine's limited experience) to their own demise.

Abby stands, using the walker to pull herself up. "I'm going to show you something." She abandons the walker and crosses the room. She passes into the hall and returns a minute later carrying an accordion folder. Before returning to the couch, she drops the folder in Karmine's lap.

"Diane next door went about this thing the wrong way," Abby says. "The way she shriveled away to nothing."

Karmine opens the folder. It is full of papers, pamphlets, envelopes. She dumps the contents on her lap. "The Hemlock Society," she says.

"My damned eyes," Abby laments. "Four years I've been a member and I've never been able to read more than the headlines. Given the clientele, you'd think they'd print everything in that big, oversized script."

Karmine stares at the pile. She cannot make herself touch the papers. She is thinking that Peter will soon have to climb on the houses, Abby's and their own, to shovel off the snow. Peter is a large man, very strong, sure on his feet. He is capable of shoveling heavy snow for hours, throwing it, if needs be, fifteen or twenty feet without shifting his feet for balance. His physical strength, and the way he smells after working hard, musky but without the strong odor Karmine has smelled on other men, are qualities she has always loved. Karmine wonders what Abby would say about Peter. She wonders what Peter would say about the Hemlock Society.

"You do not have lymphoma, Mother," Karmine says. "*You simply do not have lymphoma.*"

"Fine." Abby smiles. "But browse a little, anyway. Tell me what you think."

Her children grown, no longer demanding her time, Karmine often walks to the high school to watch Peter rehearse the wind ensemble. Summer through fall, marching band season, she takes an active role, sewing uniforms for the flag team, filling large water coolers with Gatorade for those long pregame rehearsals. Peter respects her opinion; he asks for her criticisms and suggestions. And over time, Karmine has assumed an interest, staked a claim in his artistry of proportions that at times, she suspects, may be intrusive. Standing high on the bleachers to better view the formations, sitting in the band room listening to Peter work the counterpoint between the trombones and the French horns, Karmine has sometimes lost herself in the precariousness of Peter's work. All of those awkward children struggling too hard to be indispensable, yet fearing, as they squeeze those sometimes paltry notes to life, that the opposite may be true. And during transitional years, when the performances have not been the best (though, even in bad years, the bands have been large), Karmine has watched and listened and smiled, knowing that some people are at their best when they are bridging chasms created by those around them.

It has been a week since Karmine has attended a rehearsal, and though it is cold outside, she still walks the two blocks to the high school. Peter appears pleased when she comes in. Students are opening cases, sucking on reeds, screwing on slides. It is already much too noisy to talk, and Peter is much too busy, so Karmine removes her coat and pulls a chair from Peter's office.

"You're feeling better!" a young flutist calls. Some of the other students wave. Karmine smiles and nods and returns the waves. Apparently, Peter has explained her absence as illness, and perhaps this is, after all, not such a bad explanation. In the middle of the band, their youngest child, Timothy, warms up with the French horns. If he is surprised or pleased or unhappy to see Karmine he doesn't indicate it. This is Timothy's usual response, and Karmine is not offended. She knows it must be difficult for a fifteen-year-old boy to have his father for a teacher and his mother for a teacher's aide.

Karmine has taken another step toward a routine, the routine that is her routine, because she can determine no other step to take. So far, Peter has not said what he intends to do. What are you going to do? As a question, a sentence, it has dangled between them, a bilateral blight that no one has ventured to address. Their three children know nothing.

Karmine is not sure what it means, that her husband is having an affair with a man. She is not sure she understands the specifics of such an affair;

she is not sure she understands the generalities either. For that much, she cannot blame Peter. He has tried—and there is something of a tidal wave in his efforts—to convince Karmine to listen, to let him talk. And despite her resistance, Peter seems hopeful.

Karmine watches Peter tune the band. From the director's podium, he leads his students through a series of simple sounding exercises, *études* derived from the mountains of tricky sounding exercises he has, over the years, abandoned because they did not work. When it comes to training a band, Peter says, the deceptively difficult is almost always more effective than the blatantly difficult. Peter claims this to be one of his most valuable secrets, a secret not because he hides it, but because so many of his colleagues find it difficult to understand. Karmine, sitting in this same chair listening to these same exercises, has watched Peter produce some of the state's finest high school bands.

Karmine has seen the man Peter loves, but she does not know him. He plays keyboards, does freelance work for the ballet, the opera, the local theaters. For years, Peter has brought in extra money playing freelance—the ballet, the opera, the local theaters. French horn, like Timothy. Peter has a reputation for being consistent and dependable. Peter says it has been evolving for years, this love affair, though only recently has he allowed it to become physical. Physical, Karmine thinks. Physical. When Karmine thinks of physical, Peter as physical, she sees him throwing snow twenty feet without shifting his stance, she sees him moving quickly for such a large man, and confidently, down the basketball court at the church gymnasium, a forward on the church basketball team. Only recently has he allowed it to become physical? Karmine does not feel much of anything one way or another for Peter's pianist.

She does, however, feel very foolish. She feels foolish for having never suspected Peter, and though now, looking back, there may have been much to suspect, she is still rather confused as to which of those things, exactly, she should have suspected. And how she should have known. It is not computing well, Peter's claim after a quarter of a century of marriage, that he has, through the years, been desperately lonely in his attraction to some man. Surrounded by his family, in bed with his wife, he has been so hopelessly lonely it was all he could do to hold his secret until morning. And from morning until night. Twenty-five years. Where had *she* been those twenty-five years? This is not Peter's question, but her own. When Peter gets to this point in his story, Karmine refuses to hear more, but she remembers some of those moments, finding him soaking in the bathtub, lights out, weeping for no explainable reason. More times than she can separate into a single memory, Karmine has felt surprise—she remembers the surprise—and relief, when after weeks,

sometimes, without feeling him, he has suddenly reached for her under the covers.

And here, in fact, is the most confusing element—that while his touch has been unpredictable (with passing anniversaries, little more than seldom), when he has touched her, when he does touch her, he is a wholly unselfish lover. Peter has declared extraordinary gratitude in lovemaking, particularly when Karmine has been needful, giving herself over to selfishness. Not always, but often enough, their lovemaking has been of a quality and a sincerity that tempers, almost removes, the uncertainty created in the gentle but passionless companionship between touches. Karmine has been uncertain, but her uncertainty has moved along like a narrow road cutting at night through the wheat fields of some distant state, rolling slightly, taking the pit of her stomach one moment, compressing her the next. And if Karmine has been uncertain to whether she is traveling up or down it hasn't much mattered, for the road has at least taken her forward. Until now, the rolling road has never dropped too quickly nor risen too steeply.

Karmine studies Peter as he tests the trumpet section, player by player, to see if a difficult fanfare has been mastered. He taps his baton against the stand, meting out the beat so the nervous students can concentrate on the manuscript and the fingering. Without harassing, Peter teases the students, and his smile, when he compliments, encourages, criticizes, never changes. He is forty-seven, two years older than Karmine, and except at his center, where he has begun slightly to widen, he has managed to remain respectably firm. On the podium, rehearsing and performing, he moves lithely like a dancer, like an athlete.

Karmine, too, has maintained herself. She has given birth to three children, but, being small and elastic, has never had to struggle with weight. All the same, her confusion during Peter's periods of disinterest has often found her looking twice in mirrors. Though Peter insists it is not so, assumes the blame fully, she knows she has failed her womanhood, that her womanhood has failed her, and in a way, to an extent, that is beyond anything she might have feared, turning this way and that way in the mirror, wondering when Peter would again reach for her.

Peter wants to know what she is going to do. Karmine does not even know what the options are. She is waiting for him to decide what he is going to do. She knows less today than she did a week earlier when, for that instant after his confession, she had understood how some people can kill.

The bell rings, the students disassemble their instruments. Wind ensemble is the final class of the day, and the students move off at different speeds. Some students remain seated, rehearsing their parts. Timothy waves, finally, as he carries his French horn to his father's office. It has been

the same ritual for all of their children, Peter carrying instruments to and from school each day, even on days he did not drive, so the children, without the hassle of dragging the instruments back and forth on their own, could have them at home to practice.

"I'm going to the writing lab," Timothy says, hurrying from the office. He makes a face. "I'll be a little later than usual."

Karmine smiles, and without cause or precedent doubts her son's excuse.

The room is nearly empty before Peter is freed from the questions and answers and excuses that detain him. Karmine attempts her typical concern for the few students who stop to tell her how they've been. Peter gathers his music and puts it in a folder. He comes down from his podium.

"This is a good sign, maybe?" he asks. Karmine can tell by his open, awkward posture that he wants to embrace her. But he doesn't dare.

"It's not really a sign at all," she says.

Peter nods too agreeably. Lately, they are both thin-skinned; it is too easy to draw blood—her own, Peter's. She doesn't apologize.

"I remembered some things about Mom's visit to the doctor," she says. "I forgot to tell you the other day. That's why I'm here."

"Okay," Peter says. They both know she could have waited until later, at home, but he doesn't point this out. "Do you want to sit down?"

"No." Karmine looks at the door. "I *don't* want to sit down."

"Okay," Peter says again.

Karmine pauses; she does not like the sound of spite, particularly in her own voice. She does not like to sound out of control. "Mom seems to be convinced she has lymphoma."

"Lymphoma?"

"The spot on the end of her nose." Karmine sighs. "She thinks she caught lymphoma from Diane, her next door neighbor."

"Mmm," Peter says. He purses his lips seriously, looks at the ceiling, nods his head.

"Right," Karmine agrees. "She gives herself three months."

"So long?"

"That's not all." Karmine breathes deeply. "Apparently, Dad's been spending the nights. He sleeps on the couch and she covers him in the middle of the night with a blanket when she gets up to go pee."

"Holy cow!"

Karmine smiles despite herself. She has always liked Peter's self-deprecating use of phrases like "holy cow" and "groovy" and "neato."

"Dad's hair is as black and curly as ever."

"I always liked your dad's hair." There is no mockery, only seriousness in Peter's consideration. "And how does Mom feel about having only three months?"

Karmine thinks of the Hemlock Society. She has hidden the accordion folder in the downstairs freezer, behind a case of orange juice. She has mentioned it to no one. "If she doesn't die, she's going to be mad as hell."

"Ohhh," Peter groans. He touches his chest. "Maybe I should talk to her. Do you think it would help if I talked to her?"

Karmine shrugs. She is determined not to show Peter the gratitude she feels, the hope she holds in his concern. Though she knew Peter would make such an offer, she is more relieved than she'd thought possible.

"It might," she says.

Peter begins sleeping in Karmine's sewing room. Karmine calls it her sewing room though she has only recently moved the machine and the table from the basement, upstairs. For eighteen years the room has been Marcee's, and it still is, though Karmine's only daughter is away at school, a freshman at Brigham Young University. Marcee lives with her older brother, Mark, and his wife. Mark is a graduate student in music and his wife is trying to finish her bachelor's degree. Karmine suspects her daughter-in-law is also trying to get pregnant. Karmine must resist the impulse to call Marcee and beg her to major in prelaw, premed, to resist the Mormon influence and forget about marrying young. Except for the sewing table, the machine and Peter, Marcee's room remains the same. Karmine wonders what they will do when Marcee comes home for a weekend. She wonders what they will do when Timothy begins asking questions.

It has been three weeks. Karmine, when she counts the days, does not know how time can pass so fiercely, with the blurring velocity of a summer storm, and not blow or wash or dissolve something away. Peter is still here, and Karmine, and maybe Peter's pianist, though Karmine is not certain. Abby is still around, and her lymphoma, though the tip of her nose is now missing. The Hemlock Society is still frozen, gathering ice behind the orange juice in the freezer. Abby's daily question is always the same, and Karmine's answer: "I'm still reading." She lies, assures Abby she is sifting through the pamphlets, the newsletters, the legal action forms. "And by the way," she sometimes adds, "how's Dad?" Karmine appreciates the irony—that at about the same time her father returns from the dead to sleep with her mother, her own husband retreats, moves to their daughter's room.

As much as anything, it is the nothing that is killing Karmine. Peter is kind and gentle and patient, the things he has always been. But he is something less, too: He is helpless. He is incapable of being more than he has always been. He defers and defers and defers with courage and stamina and humility. For her more than for himself, he has moved out of their bedroom. He is trying, but he has, at present, so little to work with. Karmine longs for something more than nothing. And, to Karmine's chagrin, when

nothing takes a turn toward something, she discovers too late that there is much, after all, to appreciate about nothing.

"There are two middle-eastern women sitting in my car," Abby tells Karmine. It is late afternoon, clear, cold. The sun is preparing to set. Karmine shifts the phone to her other ear.

"Middle-eastern?" Karmine asks. "Like from Saudi Arabia?"

"How should I know?" Abby shrieks. "They're wearing turbans and those things over their faces. How do you expect me to know which one of those countries they're from?"

Without thinking, Karmine turns off the stove. The oven is on, too, a casserole inside, but Karmine has not for any conscious reason turned the surface element to off and she does not think to do the same with the oven. Instead, she wedges the phone between her ear and shoulder and places her hands, palms flat, on the warm oven door. She leans forward, siphoning the heat into her hands and her thighs.

"Well, Mom—" she says.

"Don't 'Well Mom' me, Karmine," Abby snaps. "They've been sitting there all day long. I want to know what they're doing. What if they steal my car?"

"Do they look like they're trying to steal your car?" Karmine, who cares little for Abby's car, is beginning to feel frantic. Cautiously, Peter appears at the kitchen door; he has been reading in the other room. Karmine, still leaning against the stove, sees him from the corner of her eye. She doesn't look in his direction, but she grimaces for his benefit. He puts his hands in his pockets and leans against the door frame.

"What would that look like?" Abby asks. Karmine can see her mother, bent over the kitchen window sill, straining with bad eyes to see two turbaned women sitting in the old Chrysler.

"Like they're trying to start the car, Mom," Karmine says, shaking her head. She suspects she is neither asking the correct questions nor giving the correct answers. "I don't know, maybe they'd be fiddling under the dashboard."

"They're not fiddling," Abby declares. "They're just sitting there, the same as they've been sitting there all day long."

"It's awfully cold to be sitting—"

"I know how cold it is," Abby says. "Any minute they're going to want to come inside and get warm. What am I going to do then?"

Karmine looks at Peter. "I'm coming over."

"Good," Abby says. "And bring Peter: Who knows what these people intend to do."

Karmine lets Peter drive—she has always let Peter drive. They have

spent so much time sidestepping, watching each other from afar, that it feels strange to be sitting beside Peter, sharing the same air.

"Have you said anything to the children?" Peter asks.

"No," Karmine says.

"The children will hate me." Peter does not look at Karmine when he makes his declaration. He steers with both hands, looking straight ahead. Karmine's earlier self-consciousness is gone; she studies him openly.

"Yes," she says. And she knows it is true. Peter is not trying to elicit pity, nor is he asking Karmine to keep his secret. His is a pronouncement, part of an ongoing progression of circumstantial, consequential awareness that has come to them both in one-line snippets.

"The church will excommunicate me." Yes.

"Our friends will desert us." Yes.

"I am too old, too damaged to start again." Yes.

Yes.

It is not the first time in these three weeks Karmine has felt so bad for Peter, for what Peter is doing to himself, that she has forgotten, for an instant, what Peter is doing to her. And perhaps this is why she has said nothing to anyone: If she cannot find a way to hold him, she can, at least, for a time, protect him.

"I have stopped seeing him," Peter says.

His pianist. Karmine chews on her lip and watches the road.

"I'll understand whatever you decide to do," he says. "But I've stopped seeing him. I've stopped seeing him no matter what you decide. I can live without all of that. I didn't know it before, but I do now. There are too many other things I don't want to live without."

Peter looks at Karmine, she can feel it; he takes his eyes from the road until Karmine's silent, forward stare convinces him that she will not look, too. She wants to know about the "all of that," why a month ago, two months ago (years ago for all she really knows), he couldn't live without it. And she wants to know about the "other things," too, the "many other things" he, at one point, must have been willing to risk for the "all of that." Peter's decision to stay doesn't surprise Karmine. She has expected it. But she wants to know about the "all of that" and the "many other things," the interchangeability, particularly considering what seems to Karmine a ponderous inequality between the two. Had Peter somehow felt it an even trade, a man in exchange for a wife and three children, a life, so many lives?

Karmine rolls down the window and turns her face into the frigid wind.

At Abby's house, Peter parks at the base of the driveway. Karmine and Peter climb from the car. They pause, doors open, to look up the drive to the carport. At the back of the yard, the car stands beside the barn-like workshop, under the pitched overhang. Abby has turned on the carport

lights, and unless the Arab women are ducking, Karmine can see no one sitting in the car.

"Must have heard the Marines were landing," Peter says. He starts up the drive.

"They're probably in the house torturing Mom," Karmine says. She closes the door, and follows Peter.

Abby is waiting at the back door, coat in hand. She has seen them pull in. "That was good thinking," she says. "Blocking the driveway so they can't make off with the car."

Karmine kisses her mother on the cheek and steps into the house. "Peter watches a lot of spy movies," she says. It has been two days since Karmine's last visit. As a rule, she sees her mother three, four times a week; she calls her twice a day. In two days, the house has taken a sour odor. Abby looks tired and disheveled and frantic.

"You should have called us earlier, Mom." From the kitchen window, Karmine can plainly see that no one is sitting in Abby's car.

"When did you first see them?" Peter asks. He has joined Karmine at the window.

"Yesterday night," Abby says. "Or maybe yesterday morning. I keep hoping they'll just go away."

"I think they finally have," Karmine says.

Abby hurries slowly to the window. She looks at the car, then casts her daughter a disgusted glance. Karmine can smell Abby, the sour, acrid odor of the house, but stronger. "You need a closer look," Abby says. She moves to put on her coat; Peter helps.

It has not snowed for nearly a week. The stratified flow of coming and going storms has tattered the customary Utah inversion. It is clear and painfully cold, as Utah can be in January at night without clouds. Abby walks between Karmine and Peter, allowing her children to guide her by the elbows. When they reach the car, Peter produces a key and unlocks the passenger door.

"Look at them," Abby exclaims. She taps angrily on the side window. "Don't they have any respect for other people's property?"

"Mother," Karmine says. She opens the door. She is trying not to plead. "There is no one in the car. There are no middle-eastern women sitting anywhere in this car."

Abby stares at her daughter. Then she turns and stares at the Arabs. "What are you doing in my car?" she demands. "This is America. Don't you know you can't just sit in other people's cars?"

"Look," Karmine insists. She slides into the front seat.

"What is she doing?" Abby asks Peter. "Is she crazy? She's sitting on her lap."

"Karmine," Peter says. He gives Karmine his hand and helps her from the car. "Maybe I should give it a try?"

"Well, somebody needs to do something," Abby says.

Peter bends so the Arab women can see his determined, scolding face. "I think you need to leave now," he says. "You've been here long enough."

"Are they going anywhere?" Karmine asks.

Abby slaps at her daughter's hand. "Does it look like they're going anywhere?"

"Maybe they don't understand English," Peter suggests. He clears his throat and begins speaking broken Danish. Karmine is horrified and on the verge of hysterical laughter. Peter, who has spoken little Danish since his Mormon mission, begins gesturing wildly, perhaps to compensate for his limited vocabulary. He steps away from the car and points at the street. He shakes his finger. He offers his hand, a pantomime, twice enacted, in which he helps the invisible women from the car. He stands up and looks cautiously at Abby.

"Just drag them out of there," Abby declares.

"Mom," Karmine pleads. She shakes her head. Peter puts his hands in his pockets.

"Why did you even come to me?" Abby turns and shuffles back toward the house. Karmine tries to take her elbow, but Abby won't have it. Peter shuts and locks the car door, then follows silently, a step or two behind Karmine and Abby.

"They're going to have to pee," Abby says. "What am I going to do when they want to use my toilet?"

After the diagnosis, Karmine calls Harlan and tells him that their mother's kidneys have failed. Too old for transplant, too much damage everywhere else. Bad breath, vomiting, hallucinations, edema. Her bones hurt and her lungs are filling with water. Harlan wants to know if he should come yet.

"We probably have a few months," Karmine says. "But you can come if you want."

Harlan thinks they should start looking for a nursing home. Abby has enough money, and if not, Harlan will cover the rest. Karmine and Peter have sacrificed enough already. *Sacrifice*, Karmine thinks as she listens to her brother, the engineer, drafting their mother's final days. And here's the thing about Karmine's sacrifice: The investment, the expense, has made it impossible to pull up and back out. Though there may be nothing left to gain, there is far too much to lose. Karmine does not explain this to her brother, but she knows she will never put her mother in a nursing home. Abby, and Karmine, too, for that matter, are confused enough as it is.

"Keep me posted," Harlan says.

Sure, Karmine thinks, I'll fax you a memo on Mondays.

Since receiving the diagnosis, there is something of an "I told you so" in Abby's disposition. She cannot be convinced that her kidneys have not failed due to lymphoma. Nor can she be convinced that her hallucinations are not reality. She is rather content to have proof of her dying, and much too content, as far as Karmine is concerned, to be dying. The doctors have given her medication. An obligatory though meager attempt at a cure to go with a most sincere effort to secure her comfort. And though Karmine cannot deny her mother's failings, she is struck by Abby's lucidity, even in the midst of the old woman's great confusion, and by her wellness as she becomes increasingly ill.

"You're going to have to start reading faster," Abby tells Karmine. "At the rate we're both going, I'm liable to die before I get a chance to kill myself."

"It's a sin to kill yourself," Karmine says.

Abby laughs and touches her breast. "This is a sin."

Karmine agrees, though she has little use for sin—Abby's, Peter's, her own. She knows she is supposed to believe in the hand of God, and the danger of sin, and the blessing of trial. Fate, however, has assumed an increasing appeal. It is satisfying, for example, to nod at fate when considering the circumstances that make it convenient, a relief even, for Karmine to spend the nights away from Peter, with Abby. To attribute the same to God only angers Karmine. After so many years of attending church, of spending her time and money and energy to affirm her commitment to a religious society, she is surprised at how little her faith draws her now, at how little she wants anything to do with it. Karmine's non-Mormon parent is dying, her husband has been sleeping with a man, and Karmine can find no contingency plan in the church's version of God's scheme. That the Mormons may throw Peter out does not concern Karmine. Karmine suspects she would not pay much attention even if they suddenly threw her out. It startles her that she can so easily accept this failing after so many years of trying. There is simply neither time nor energy to waste on that which cannot help her.

For two weeks, Karmine stays with Abby, leaving only for short periods of time when she becomes desperate enough to allow Peter or Timothy to take a shift.

"Maybe we need to hire a nurse's aide," Peter suggests. "Someone to watch her during the day, so you can have a break."

Karmine has not been sleeping well. She has not been feeling well. She will not let Peter take her place for much longer than an hour, two at the most, even on the weekends. She is afraid Abby, whose increasingly vigorous campaign to enlist Karmine's help in dying, will turn to Peter

instead. It is strange to Karmine that after twenty-five years of marriage she does not know what Peter will do if Abby asks. Peter's suggestion, a nurse's aide, offers a wisdom and a compromise Karmine thinks she can accept. There have been moments of desperation and anger so compelling that Karmine has been forced to flee, leaving Abby alone, though only for minutes, while Karmine has walked, run, driven around the block.

"How would you feel if we hired a nurse to spend some time with you during the day?" Karmine asks Abby.

Abby has taken to sitting by the kitchen window, where she can watch the Arab women. In her favorite chair (Peter and Timothy moved the chair at Abby's request), she sits and watches and waits for them to need her bathroom. Peter has offered to drive them away, to park the car elsewhere, but Abby is far too interested in these exotic women who can sit for weeks without food or water or toilet.

"That would depend," Abby says, "on whether I could find someone more willing to help me than you seem to be."

Karmine is too tired to hide the anger. "You might. Or you might find someone who thinks you should be locked away in a nursing home for your own protection."

"You wouldn't do that?" Abby whispers.

"No," Karmine says. She begins to cry. "I will never put you in a nursing home."

"I don't want a nurse's aide," Abby says. She turns back to the window. "I don't want anyone else."

Karmine goes for a walk around the block.

Peter visits daily, bringing groceries and books, videos. On occasion, Karmine allows him to touch her.

When Timothy can stay with Abby, Peter takes Karmine places—to dinner, to movies, for long drives. Karmine is worried about Timothy, about his eating and his school work and his emotional well-being. But Peter is reassuring: The past weeks, though difficult, have been good for Peter and Timothy. Lots of time together, lots of learning.

"Sometimes there are good things, too," Peter tells Karmine.

It is becoming easier for Karmine to acknowledge, with favor, Peter's efforts. He is solicitous without presumption. Committed, consistent. He has canceled his freelance work to be more available to Karmine and Timothy and Abby. And less available to anyone else. Peter's face seems older to Karmine, worried and strained, and she is inclined, in her own need, to allow him to derive whatever he can from the comfort she accepts from him.

"Mom's seeing something new these days," she tells him.

Peter, as usual, is interested.

"Hippies in the back yard having a party," Karmine says. "They've rigged lights to the house. Last night, it was non-stop drinking and screwing and frolicking in the snow until dawn."

"Wow," Peter says. He's impressed. And amused, which, for reasons Karmine can't explain, pleases her.

"That's not all," Karmine continues. "There was music, very loud music. Mom was frantic the cops were going to come."

"It's not possible to have a party without loud music," Peter says.

"Henry Mancini," Karmine says. "Judy Garland. Frank Sinatra. Nat King Cole."

"Hippie music." Peter grins.

"This morning, after they gave up and left, she wanted to go out and take a look. When we got out there, she says, 'Tricky bastards.'"

"Tricky bastards?" Peter whistles. He loves it when Abby curses.

"What do you mean?" I ask her.

Peter takes Karmine's hand; she does not stop him.

"She says, 'No footprints,'" Karmine continues. "'You're right,' I say. I'm a little surprised she doesn't see footprints. I figure maybe the medication has started working. Then she tells me that the last two hippies to leave this morning spread a long rope between them and pulled it across the yard, under the snow. They re-fluffed the snow."

"Tricky bastards," Peter says with admiration.

Karmine nods her head. "Now she's in a panic about the electric bill. All those lights."

"Well," Peter says. "Tell her if the bill goes up, we'll pay the difference."

Patience, Peter is waiting. Karmine knows he will wait, without asking, without pressing, without knowing, forever if necessary. This is the quality in Peter that Karmine, of late, values most, and distrusts the most as well, for it is but more of the same patience and silence and determination that has led them through the past twenty-five years. It is a gift, Karmine thinks, to be able to embrace uncertainty, as Peter has. Certainty—Karmine's own certainty, for example, in Peter's regret, in his good intentions, her certainty that her mother's death is quickly approaching—is difficult enough to embrace.

"You've been wonderful with my mother," Karmine says.

"I love your mother."

"I know." Karmine nods her head. "But thank you anyway."

Peter is silent for a moment. "She's going to die soon, Karmine. She's getting bad quickly now. Everything's going to stop all of a sudden, whether we're ready for it to stop or not."

"I know, Peter," Karmine says.

Peter looks at Karmine. "Some day, maybe, you'll forgive me?" He

seems very sad, suddenly. Karmine sees him soaking in the bathtub, lights out, weeping.

"Forgiveness isn't the problem," Karmine says. "I forgave you a long time ago."

When Harlan calls, he talks to Abby first. He doesn't mention a nursing home to his mother, but when Karmine takes the phone, he is agitated. Karmine pictures him on the other end, frothing into the receiver.

"This is getting out of control," he tells Karmine. "She told me the hippies just 'hang it out and pee in the snow.'"

"This is better than it seems, Harlan," Karmine says. "At least they're not asking to use the bathroom."

"Shit!" Harlan says. "Admit it, Karmine: It's time for a nursing home. This is just too much for you guys to take care of."

"We're doing fine, Harlan."

Harlan pauses on the other end. "Look," he says. He is trying to be calm. "I think I need to insist, Honey. I know you're doing everything you can, but when it comes right down to it, I'm less worried about you than I am Mom."

"I know what you're worried about." Karmine looks at Abby. The kitchen light is off, and the old woman is sitting next to the window; she is watching the hippies drink and dance and screw on her snow. Peter sits beside the old woman, watching with equal intensity. "Mother is dying, Harlan, and I can think of a hell of a lot of ways to make the dying more miserable. I haven't come up with too many ways to make it less miserable."

"All right," Harlan sighs. "Maybe I can get away the end of next week. I guess this isn't something we can decide over the phone, anyway."

"It'll be nice to see you," Karmine says.

She lights the candle in the potpourri dish while Harlan restates his position one last time before saying goodbye. Without returning the phone to its cradle, she leans on the counter, over the fragrance. The small ceramic pot is barely warm, but she can already smell the cinnamon. The potpourri is a gift from Peter. Karmine admires the design and the efficiency—that a single candle under a miniature pot can relieve at least one of the senses from the by-products of deterioration. Karmine watches the flame in the tiny stove, the patterns it plays upon the surrounding tile, and thinks that Harlan would be offended most of all by the odor.

Karmine joins Abby and Peter by the window. It has begun to snow, large flakes, untroubled by wind, falling evenly through the glow of the carport light.

"Harlan says he may come the end of next week."

Abby points out the window. "Those clothes they don't wear. It's amazing those people don't get sick."

"Maybe they're related to that one society," Karmine says. "Those people who cut away the ice in frozen lakes and go swimming."

"I can think of better things to do," Abby grunts, pulling herself from the chair. "Like sleeping. It's past my bedtime."

Together, Karmine and Peter put Abby to bed. Karmine unrolls the foam-rubber mattress, makes the bed beside the heat vent. Abby still insists on the living room floor, though the getting down and the getting up have become too much. On the couch, Karmine spreads a sheet and lays a folded blanket across the arm rest. A symptom of her failing kidneys, Abby seldom needs to use the bathroom, but she will wake up, nonetheless, to check on the hippies and to cover her sleeping husband with a blanket.

"Would you like me to turn up the thermostat?" Karmine asks. She covers her mother with a quilt. Abby's eyes are already closed, and she doesn't hear Karmine's offer.

Karmine waves Peter from the room, then lingers for a moment watching her mother breathe. This watching—it seems a remarkable need, an instinct. Countless parents standing every night over sleeping children, watching them breathe. Countless children standing every night over sleeping parents, watching them breathe. Sometimes, standing over *her* sleeping children, Karmine has whispered secrets, voiced the impossible for the simple necessity of forming the words in the presence of another human being. It is her diary, of sorts, scribbled deeply, beyond access, somewhere inside her children's minds. Unconsciously, her children know things about their mother, and Karmine is satisfied to believe that her secrets have forever changed her offspring, and their offspring, even if but slightly.

"Momma," Karmine whispers. "I think I know what I'm going to do."

In the hallway, Peter is waiting, and Karmine allows him to touch her. He touches Karmine's hair first, and then her face. When he kisses Karmine, she moves closer. Peter is weeping, but Karmine takes his hand, anyway, and leads him to the bedroom.

It is her childhood bedroom, and, Abby, in Karmine's absence, has covered the walls with photographs of Karmine and Harlan, Karmine's family, Harlan's family. Karmine kisses Peter, and begins to remove his clothes. Peter does not help, but makes himself available like a young child being undressed for a bath. There is a sequence, an order of operations, and Karmine moves deliberately.

When Karmine, too, is finally undressed, she lies back and closes her eyes. With her eyes closed, she can concentrate on Peter's movements; they are small and refined and accurate. She can hear Peter above her, sobbing silently but for an occasional hitching of breath. She runs her fingers down

his ribs, to the swell of his hips. Karmine loves Peter, and she is sorry for him. But, for once, she has the benefit of prescience, and she knows, for all his efforts and all of her own, that this particular desperation is inevitable . . . inconsequential . . . temporary.

"You're going to be fine, Peter," she says. "You're going to be much better than you think."

Peter laughs, apologetically, more sob than laugh. He puts his head down, chin to chest, and his hair brushes Karmine's forehead. He moves on, the steady, familiar motion of their twenty-five-years together. The motion, Karmine thinks, of water, the Strong One, with the power to wash away earth, extinguish fires, ignore the wind. Strong like water. But weak like water, too, flowing always undirected, down the paths of least resistance.

Afterwards, Karmine caresses Peter, waiting. She holds him until he climbs from the bed.

"I'm sorry," he says. He picks his clothing from the floor. "I've got to get hold of myself." He stops and rubs his face, then he bends and kisses Karmine. "I'll come early tomorrow and shovel. I think it's going to snow hard." He leaves quickly; Karmine hears him pull the back door closed behind him.

Alone, Karmine listens to the popping, the settling of an old house under the accumulations of a hard winter. The furnace ignites, and Karmine hears this too, a rumbling, comforting sound that warms even before the air escapes the vents. As a child she would stand barefoot on the floor vents, the air burning the arches of her feet, filling her nightgown with warmth. It was always a temptation, when the heat clicked off, to turn up the thermostat and ignite the furnace again.

Karmine gets up. She takes a blanket from the bed and wraps herself in it. The vents have stopped blowing, so she pauses in the hall to turn up the thermostat. She waits for the furnace to rumble, then switches on the kitchen light. From the refrigerator, she takes the milk, fills a glass, returns both the carton and the glass to the refrigerator. She has been thinking about this for some time: She knows which medications will most immediately, most efficiently do the job. She removes the lids and dumps the pills in a salad bowl, the reds with the blues with the greens with the whites. Changing her mind, she shifts the pills to a candy dish. Abby has a sense of humor: She will enjoy emptying a candy dish much more than a salad bowl. It will be a short wait, Karmine knows, so she turns off the light and sits in Abby's chair by the window. She smiles and shakes her head. She cannot help but imagine how strange all those hippies frolicking naked in the snow must seem to the two Arab women.