

Christian Hansen

SOMETHING LIKE A RHAPSODY

Our daughter, Angela, telephones us Wednesday afternoon to say she's coming home for the weekend. It's not a holiday, but she's got something important to discuss. "What kind of important?" I say to Angela. I like to get right to the point, especially with family. When Theresa realizes it's Angie she picks up the other phone in the kitchen. "Are you all right?" she says. That's how she starts every conversation with our daughter. "Who's bringing you home?"

There are good reasons why our conversations with Angie begin in this abrupt and concerned way. You see, our daughter is blind. She's the second blind student in the 138-year history of the University of Michigan School of Law. And in spite of, or because of her blindness, her will and determination are perhaps more wolverine than any Michigan law school candidate, past, present, or future. No pun intended. Regardless of her disability, her mother and I know there's no limit to what she can do. And no stopping her, either. About the only thing she can't do is drive. So if she calls to tell us she's coming home for the weekend—a 550 mile trip, eleven hours each way—well, then we want to know who will be driving her home, and for what reasons. (For example, her apartment was once burglarized, and her landlord needed a few days to install an alarm system. And two years ago, she was robbed on the Law Quad, pushed to the ground, her rucksack ripped off her back.) News like this can make you bolt upright in the middle of the night, suddenly and completely uncertain about your child's ability to survive on her own.

"We'll be arriving late tomorrow night," says Angela. "Don't wait up for us." Theresa asks once more about who's doing the driving, but Angie says, "Hey, Mom. It's a little surprise," and then hangs up. For a moment, I sit holding my receiver, listening to it go through its series of disconnections.

Hey Mom. It's a little surprise! Theresa is mimicking her daughter's voice, hunching up her shoulders, plucking glass out of the dishwasher and

setting each piece down rather harshly into the cupboard. It's as if Angie knows exactly how to tease and torture her mother, deliberately withholding information her mother can't live without. If Angie's driver-friend will be a woman, Theresa likes to know in advance so she can prepare the upstairs guest bedroom, next to Angie's room. And if the driver-friend will be a man, then I am to open the sofa-bed in the basement den, where I might also dust off some old copies of *Field & Stream* and *Sports Illustrated*, and cut fresh kindling for the fireplace.

On the other hand, I feel the need to defend our daughter, at least slightly. "Isn't she old enough now, Theresa, to keep a few things to herself? Until she's ready to tell us."

"Ready? What about last year?" This was true. A friend driving her home late at night panicked on a stretch of ice. There were no injuries but the accident deeply unsettled Theresa, and me. Yet it did not seem to prove anything to Angie, such as her precious mortality. "Come on, Richard. How many of her friends really know how to drive up here in the winter? That many miles? In the middle of the night?"

"I agree with what you're saying, Theresa. But I don't see what her surprise has to do with it." She says something back but I ignore her. That's all I'm saying for now. Theresa appears to have already done some drinking this afternoon, while I was reading over at the university. Sometimes, if I'm late returning (which I was, though not by much), she goes ahead and starts without me.

Before dinner, we are seated in the living room, each of us with a glass of wine. Theresa's got her romance novel and I'm surfing our TV, mostly to and from the Weather Channel. The regional forecast for tomorrow is a repeat of every mid-February morning: scattered flurries and possible snow showers near Lake Superior. We know Angie's routine in preparing for her trips home, that she'll talk her surprise-friend into waiting until she's attended all her lectures for the day. As if 550-mile journeys driven in total darkness on snow and ice were indeed nothing more than that. As if all the drunks who drive on this planet, not to mention stray snowmobiles, deer, moose, porcupines, and who knows what else, live in some other hemisphere. But the truth, in the Great White North, is that people drive off the highway to avoid things crossing their *minds*.

What else can we do, being merely our daughter's parents? Since we've both recently retired, our daughter is all we have left to worry about. We considered moving to Ann Arbor to be with Angela for law school, but she insisted that we not do so. "Can I have a few years on my own?" she said. The question, of course, then begged us for only one answer.

Theresa gets up to check our dinner in the oven, asks me to help set the table, and picks up the phone to call Angie. An answering machine picks it up, with a man's voice on it—not usually a problem. (Angela's male classmates have recorded her dozens of messages as a deterrent against prank callers and possible intruders.) However, Theresa hangs up and tries again, saying she must have misdialed. She doesn't like *this* man's voice. And it's the same voice on her second try, and her third. A pot of noise, she says. Car and bus engines revving up, horns honking, footsteps, people talking. Like a city street corner. Then someone walks right up to the microphone and starts yapping.

"Okay. So what's the message?" I say.

"It's just—obscene."

"Try me." I am not taunting her. I've never tried to make her feel less intelligent for teaching English to seventh and eighth graders while I taught literature at Michigan Tech.

She dials Angie's number again and hands me the phone so I can see for myself.

"Hey there, baby. How 'bout gettin' down?

Won't cost you a penny, won't do it like a clown.

Hey there baby? Let's do it, baby, do it!"

—BEEP

I hang up and agree it's a strange message though not necessarily obscene. But Theresa says that if I don't see what's wrong with it then there's something wrong with me. Angie's line could be crossed, she says. With so many cordless and cellular phones now, telephone companies have this problem all the time. So she starts calling telephone companies and it isn't until she's on hold waiting to talk to her fourth or fifth supervisor that I remind her about a certain project of Angie's,

one she told us about a week ago. This project concerned interviewing homeless people in Ann Arbor, asking them directly for their stories. Maybe her machine message is somehow related to it. Angie had already made Law Review, but this was a critical investigative study, she said, one that could benefit her future.

"How can homeless people benefit you?" her mother had asked her. "It doesn't sound very safe." When Angie named two male classmates collaborating on the project with her, Theresa was still unconvinced. "What exactly are you going to say to these people?"

"I can't tell you that," Angie had said. "That's confidential. But it's an issue that needs a lot of work. It's a good issue for me to work on."

Theresa looks at me now and asks if I think talking to homeless people is a good issue for Angie to work on.

"Of course," I say. I look over at Theresa, straight at her. She's still on hold with the receiver, waiting for one last supervisor. "Or what are you really asking me? If I really care about the homeless?"

Theresa glares at me. "Don't talk to me like I'm a dummy," she says. "I care about homeless people as much as anybody." She puts her ear to the phone and I realize, watching her widening eyes and slack mouth, that everything we've just said has been heard by someone else. "Excuse me? No, sorry. I was talking to my husband. Yes, I understand. Sorry." She hangs up and says that not only did Angie's machine record some of what we just said, but the phone company was also listening. She could hear laughter in the background. Suddenly she is so upset that she picks up a glass bowl, throws a handful of rinsed lettuce into it, and smashes the bowl down hard into the sink, where it shatters. "Damn you," she says.

I make a motion toward her, as if I should help her in some way.

"Call the Law Library," she says, picking up her biggest shard of glass and pointing it at me, like a sword. "Tell them to page her. Tell them I want to talk to her."

"What are you going to talk about?"

But she turns and shakes her head. I've finished setting the table so I'm going to leave her alone for a while. Our dinner, the main dish a slab of venison—a gift from my brother, the family's only deer hunter—is still in the oven. I pour myself one more glass of wine and walk alone into the living room. There I stand over the piano, staring at it

for a moment. At last I sit down and prepare to play, however I'm going to limit myself to the minor scales. If I should launch into anything melodic, especially something dramatic and enlightening, something like a rhapsody, Theresa could interpret that as another of my—as she puts it—*prickings*. She might then just walk out of the house. (Although she'll never take her leave until she first does something vengeful, like turn the oven to BROIL our meal.) And she might not return until late tonight or tomorrow morning (she'll go downtown, check into the Best Western). She stays away long enough for her to feel that she's proven I can't live without her. But this time she does not leave, for I do not play anything like a rhapsody. She sets our dinner down on the table, the now-well-done venison in the center, and calls me to come eat. I slide my chair into place as she slaps my plate down in front of me, a very full plate containing a huge burly sphere of charred rump. Theresa's mouth is proudly curled, like an insolent waitress. She says, "That's our special tonight, dear old dad. Or is it dead old deer?"

Angela, bless her, refuses to be seen as having a disability. While she loves animals, she prefers not to own a seeing-eye dog, and uses a walking stick only when necessary. She appreciates the concern of others in helping her navigate her way around, but she won't let, say, a Boy Scout grab her arm and insist he escort her safely across the street. She's a tremendous athlete too, be it cross-country skiing, running, or swimming, and in high school diving she made All State and won a silver medal in the high school regionals. Her high school coach told her that if she weren't blind she might someday compete in the *real* rather than some special Olympics, a comment which led her to try out for the U.S. Olympic diving team. But her required hours of training would have competed with her dream of getting into law school, so she gave up competitive diving.

Late Wednesday evening, following dinner and a sedative, with some TV in between, Theresa dials Angie's number one last time. She starts with an apology for what she recorded earlier. Then she says, "I'm doing all my weekend shopping in the morning, so if you could just call early tomorrow and tell us if your friend eats meat." It's a trick reference to the time Angela brought home a friend who wouldn't eat

Theresa's bacon, who also made a little teepee out of it on her plate. (Another: "Is your friend allergic to dogs?" with regard to Sandy, our cocker spaniel.) However, it's not as if Angie can't discern her mother's motives. It's not as if a great pile of unknown details must be properly unveiled before Theresa can prepare for her daughter's arrival.

I say to Theresa, if her friend's a vegetarian, we've got a lot of baked beans. Vegetarians know how to take care of themselves when it comes to eating. I remind Theresa that she's prepared both the den and guest bedroom before. There's just not that much to do to prepare them. Theresa and I can put fresh sheets on every bed in the house in fifteen minutes. Honestly, I say, shouldn't we be getting ready for what's so *important* about our daughter's surprise, not whether this surprise is a woman, a man, or a dog?

"What?" says Theresa. She is curling her lip again. "What are you talking about?"

I ache to tell my wife about the fantasy I have every time Angie uses the word *surprise*. A fantasy not about a person or an animal, but a miracle of experimental surgery. Don't they perform such experiments nowadays on the lifelong accidentally blind? But Theresa would just scoff and criticize me for making another crude joke. Instead I say, in a daring tone, "Can't you tell? It's no real surprise. Angie's bringing home a boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" This word, may I mention, has come up before.

"Come off it, Theresa. Where have you been? About a hundred years behind the rest of us?"

"Haven't you realized?" says Theresa, "that our daughter has never kissed a boy, much less ever considered a boyfriend?"

"How would you know? That is, you and the Queen of England?"

Surprisingly—or shall I say *not* surprisingly?—we do not hear from Angela on Thursday morning. I try her number at 7:40 A.M. but she's already left for the day. We wonder if she's heard the updated weather forecast for this evening and has changed her mind. Canada has suddenly aimed an arctic nor'wester in our direction, and it could hit us tonight. "Michigan's Copper Country is a target today," sneers a Weather Channel meteorologist. "If you're out there flying, you should steer your flaps clear of it." We could get twelve to fifteen inches, with considerable blowing and drifting, starting about 6 P.M.

By 2:30 P.M., I've called Angie's home a few times myself. And I'm starting to agree with Theresa. I'm thinking, Who talks like this? And what is the point? Also, the message has been changed since last night. Now it's some kind of rap. *Hit me baby hit me hit me hit me baby hit me.* BEEP. I decide to call the Law School offices, where I reach an administrator, who says she'll be happy to look for Angie. She'll call our daughter's final lecturer of the day, and then the library. She calls back fifteen minutes later to say Angie attended all her classes today, but was leaving early to get a jump on the weather.

"She's crazy," says Theresa, sharper tongued now. "I can't deal with this."

"Calm down," I say. "At least now we know what she's doing, which is more than we knew five minutes ago." My nerves may be as wracked as hers, but my prescription calls for ordering take-out Chinese, reading or watching TV, waiting up until she calls.

Sandy jumps into her usual spot in between us on the couch. She licks our cheeks, our ears, going back and forth between us, as if she understands everything, that a dog's love can cover for your child once she leaves home. We let Sandy continue for a few minutes, than gently force her head down. There's a late rerun on cable of "Jeopardy," our favorite show, and it buys us another nervous half-hour of total distraction. We close the curtains. Eventually, a late-night reveler's jokes start to put us off, and we decide to go to bed. If Angela is truly headed north tonight, we tell ourselves that her driver has already pulled over, probably before the Mackinac Bridge. But I call the number for the bridge authority to see how things are going. A man there tells me the snow hasn't arrived yet. They're not getting any, far as he knows. I ask him if he's seen a car with a blind girl in it, and he says, "What kinda car you lookin' for?" I tell him, *any* car, and he says, "You say this driver's blind?" I hang up.

At 3 A.M. I'm sitting up in bed. I've yet to fall asleep and there's a plow splashing its lights through our blinds, across our ceiling. A good sign, since the plows don't usually clear our street until long after a storm. They get the highways first, so the highways must be clear. I look out the window, where it has already stopped snowing. There's maybe ten new inches on the ground, and I think maybe I should call our plow service now, in case Angie really does arrive as she said she would, late at night.

Downstairs, I meet Sandy in the kitchen and I'm pouring us each a cup of milk when I hear Theresa coming down too. Sandy sees Theresa turn on the kitchen lights, which I purposely left off, and she thinks it's time for her morning walk.

We wake to the ringing phone. Theresa and I are on the couch in our bathrobes, entangled in a web of shoulders, arms, and legs. We haven't spent a night this close together in years. We scramble for the receiver, knocking it off the end table onto the floor. It hits Sandy and she yelps. Theresa picks it up, and I consider going into the kitchen to get the other end. But I sit up and let Theresa have her daughter to herself. The clock on the mantle says 7:20 A.M.

"Good morning," says Angie. I can hear her. "What was all that?" Theresa ignores her to express her relief, asks where she is. So she and her friend got to the bridge last night. They're still coming up. They're getting in their car now and they can stay until Sunday. They'll arrive in five hours.

"Why didn't you call yesterday?" says Theresa. "The storm had us up all night, worried sick about you."

Angie is trilling through the receiver, repeating an apology to her mother. She says she always has her driver pull over when the weather turns bad. Don't we know that already? "What about last year?" says her mother. Since we're on the subject, Angie says, she's already checked with the State Police. There's an icy spot or two between the bridge and Houghton but it's a beautiful day. The sky is blue. The lakes are white. She and her friend will treat us to lunch at Marie's or the Best Western. Theresa says no, that she'll have a big dinner ready and waiting. Okay, says Angie. See you soon. She hangs up before Theresa can hardly say goodbye.

We sit there on the couch for a few minutes, now unencumbered by each other, observing the softly growing daylight. Perhaps we are both wondering where Angela acquired her simple yet striking ability to describe things she can't see. The sun is not fully up, but we lift our heads and realize that what Angie has just said about the day is true. It's another beautiful day where we may bear witness to the gift of our daughter.

Then Theresa lets out one of her trademark sighs. "There was someone else next to her. I could *hear* that someone."

"What do you mean?" I say.

"She let his name slip out. Kim."

"Kim could be a woman's name."

"He was kissing her neck while she was talking. He was kissing her cheeks and nose. He was kissing the *phone*."

"For crying out loud, Theresa. So his name is Kim. He's probably another law student. And maybe you should at least wait until he gets here before you strap him to the electric chair." I look squarely at my wife, a woman with whom I have lived for almost thirty-five years, a woman who has always struggled hard with the truth. She looks as if she's about to cry. "Come on," I say. "I'll make us some breakfast. Then call our plow service and shovel the walk."

"You know what this means, don't you?" Her eyes are bloodshot. Poking through her torn hairnet is a gray stack of hay.

"No."

"Come on, Richard. Don't pretend this doesn't bother you."

"I'm not pretending," I say. "I'm just wishing our dear Angie would save herself for Prince Charles."

We project their arrival to be about 2 P.M., after hearing a radio report confirming the condition of the highways. I hire a neighbor boy out of school for the day to help me shovel our paths and sidewalk. Our plow service clears the driveway. Though Theresa is extremely tired, she pulls herself together. Following a quick breakfast of muffins and juice, she starts right in on preparing that big dinner she promised Angie. It'll be ready the minute she and her friend walk in the door. We'll have roast leg of lamb (Angie's favorite), baked potatoes, creamed corn and onion soup, and Angie's favorite dessert, apple-strawberry pie with real whipped cream. Whenever Angie's home, we have strawberry-something every day. While Angie was growing up, Theresa took her down to Chassell every July and they'd pick strawberries for one full day, sunrise to sunset. Then Theresa would serve them in one form or another the better part of every week year round. Naturally, by March or April, I was ready to shoot anybody who merely uttered the word *strawberry*.

At ten to two, we hear a car engine loudly gunning its way up our driveway. We each run to a window to see, in an old beast of a wagon, about the size of a UPS truck, pulling up to park, the driver struggling

to get the thing settled in one place. At least the brake lights work. Or should I say that as the driver applies the brakes, four brilliant red protrusions light up from the vehicle's rear. It takes me another second or two to realize that these protrusions are made from gallon wine bottles. Otherwise the vehicle looks like a contrivance made from Play-Doh and Tinker Toys, padded into shape and painted every color known to man, with strange objects glued to the side, like seashells and mime masks.

"Oh, god! It's a junker," Theresa says from the kitchen window.

From the dining room, I watch the vehicle roll back a few more feet. Obviously it has no parking brake and needs the flat spot on the driveway. I go into the kitchen.

"It's like the sixties," says Theresa.

Whenever Angie arrives (if we're awake, which we always are), the custom is that I go outside and greet her, while Theresa waits at the front door. But this time neither of us is moving a muscle. I don't know what should happen first. A few minutes pass. No one's getting out of the vehicle. Are they waiting for us?

"What's wrong?" says Theresa, breaking our silence. "Why doesn't he get out and help her?" Another few seconds go by before we see the passenger door open and Angela slowly emerging. She is wearing a day-glo orange stocking cap and her familiar burgundy down coat, the collar wrapped tightly around her neck. She closes the door, then feels her way to the front right fender, in a familiar, intended fashion. She slowly works her way around to the other side, at last opening the driver's door.

"Richard, what is going on? Why is she doing that?"

"How should I know?"

I turn to the rear stairwell. But when my coat and boots are on, Theresa hollers at me. "Wait," she says.

"What?"

"There's a crutch," shouts Theresa. "Angie's taking a crutch from the driver."

"A crutch?" I say. I've opened the back door, unlatched the storm.

"Richard! Oh, god! Come back here."

"My boots are tied," I say. "Let me go help them. I've got the door open."

"No! Come back here *first!*"

"Make up your mind."

I storm up the rear steps in my wet coat and boots. I'm raining melted snow all over her new floor. She's gasping as I look out the window for myself.

There's the crutch. And there's the driver, sitting sideways in the driver's seat. One pant leg is extended and bent slightly at the knee. The other pant leg is empty, folded up and pinned to his side.

Theresa makes another exclamation, as if for my benefit.

Briefly, I close my eyes. Is it my turn to speak? I turn away and by the time I ramble back down the rear stairs and open the door—twenty seconds or so—I have made my decision. Okay, so this man is missing one leg. He probably lost it in Vietnam. That should permit me to accept him even more. As I make my approach, this man shifts his smile at Angie to grin at me.

I give my daughter a bear hug and tell her how good it is to see her. I also hear noises coming from inside the house, and tapping at the window. I don't want to make my opening point of conversation about last night, so I wait to see what Angie has to say first. "Daddy, this is Kim Davis. Kim, this is my father."

Then she says—before I can offer a single word—"Daddy, actually, I need to tell you something. Kim is my surprise. Kim and I are going to be married."

"Well, congratulations," I say. I'm stunned, truly. I reach out to shake his hand but Kim doesn't appear to be able to lift his hand in return. He's shivering slightly, and he looks up at Angie, who's already sensed the problem. She says, "We have to help him stand up." I ask what I should do to help as Angie grabs hold of Kim's shoulders. She's obviously done this before. She's breathing into his ear, whispering to him, and he's smiling back, as if to acknowledge some secret. Then he makes a sharp little bow. She is pulling and he is pushing and they are both grunting determinedly. At last Kim is standing, and Angie holds his arm with both hands as he works to steady himself on the one leg. He quickly inserts one arm, and the other, into the brace of each crutch, and shoves the cleats firmly down onto the snowy driveway. Angie sighs and says that everything is now all right. Kim is just a little stiff from the long drive.

"You don't have to help him stand up every time?"

Kim and Angie both laugh, facing each other. "I just told you, Daddy," says Angie. "It's been a long drive. Kim's a little stiff."

I wonder how clean Kim's amputation is. I wonder why he doesn't have an artificial limb.

Otherwise Kim is a thin, rather odd-looking fellow with high, darkly sunken eyes, though most of his face is obscured by a full peppery beard. He's obviously older than Angie, by ten or fifteen years. He'd have to be at least fifteen years older to have fought in Vietnam. What's more, his Russian leather jacket and fur hat, his sidelong Tolstoyan shoulders, make him look more like a Siberian Hell's Angel than a Michigan law student. The ends of his mustache are coiled up like little tornadoes. With both legs, Stalin might have drafted him into his army. (On the other hand, in his condition, Stalin might have abandoned him in this Siberian cold.) The sun suddenly unmask itself over the roof of the house, beaming onto Kim's forehead, which is even darker than I first realized. He has straight, white teeth, a broad smile, and a sweet though raspy thank-you for my having come outside to greet them. "No problem. I do it every time," I say. He tells me the drive was longer than he thought it would be. "Next time we fly," he says. "Do or die." I like that comment, yet I wonder aloud who will pay the plane fare. He laughs loudly, his teeth jumping right in my face. "I've got a pilot's license," he says. "Though I haven't used it in a while."

I laugh, inspiring Kim to hold his smile. The spirit of the moment gives me an extra couple of seconds to examine him more closely. Why are his teeth so white through the thick window of his beard? And why does the whiteness of these teeth so greatly enhance and offset the color of his skin? Am I finally realizing what I've already half suspected? This man is not white. He's black. Maybe not all black. But definitely not white.

And he has only one leg.

And he's planning to marry my daughter.

* * *

"Are you staying with us?" I ask Kim. I am thinking of Theresa, knowing what she will say or do when she sees Kim close up for herself. I'm

not sure if I should be warning Kim about Theresa, or the other way around.

"Daddy," says Angie. "Don't be silly. Do you think I'd bring my future husband home to meet you and Mom, then send him to a motel?"

"No, I guess not," I say. "Though you mentioned the Best Western when you called this morning." I smile at Angie, and then remember, absurdly, that she can't see me smile. When she was a girl, I would show her my smile by putting her fingers to my lips. "Can I bring something in? Your luggage?"

"Thank you, Daddy. I was wondering when you were going to offer. We have one bag in the back of the car."

"One bag?" I say.

"Daddy, you're being very strange. Please show some courtesy. Also, Kim is extremely tired from driving. As you can see. We drove from the bridge without stopping."

"Where were you stationed?" I say. I know this is not the best time to ask but Kim and I have looked each other over enough. He's a victim of that war nobody can or will or should ever leave behind. And I'm the anxious, curious father of his future bride. I have to know. The question doesn't seem to surprise him, or Angie, who's smiling.

"Are you referring to my leg?" he says.

"Yes."

He chuckles, glances down, then looks at me. "I was born this way."

"Really?" For a second, I believe I've heard him incorrectly. I mean, he *looks* like a victim. Also, he's easily over forty, maybe even fifty. If he's fifty he's just twelve years younger than I am.

He says, "My twin brother was born with the other one."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry," says Kim. His temperament is almost too accepting, his voice too relaxed. "Someday I'll give a prize to the one-millionth person who asks. I was born joined at the hip with my twin brother. They separated us a few months later. I was the lucky one."

"Oh. You mean, like Siamese twins?"

"Yes."

"Daddy, I'm getting cold," says Angie. "Can we go inside?" Angie shivers hard, as if to exaggerate her point.

“Sure thing, darling.” But my head is spinning. Where is a world I completely understand?

Angie takes hold of Kim’s shoulder as they begin walking. She looks straight ahead, pointing Kim toward the front door, which is still pretty icy and more than twice as far as the rear door. But Angie knows we favor the front entrance for guests.

“Are you bringing our bag?” says Angie. I had almost forgotten. “To open the hatch, pull the rope hanging down over the bumper.” My hands are shaking and I can’t tell if it’s my nerves or the cold. I find the rope, but there is no bumper. And it doesn’t look like there ever was one.

Theresa usually waits at the front door, ready to open it and greet Angie, ready to plaster her daughter with hugs and kisses, then give an affectionate handshake to whatever friend has brought her to us. But today I know Theresa’s not going to be there. The distance to the front door takes us some time, because I’m dealing with a large duffle bag, treacherous flagstones, a stranger on crutches, Angie herself, and a surging, swelling, billowing fear. Angie pauses at the top of the steps and awaits her mother. “Mom?” she says. She waits a minute longer, before she says, “Where’s Mom?”

“Inside,” I say. “Still recovering from last night. She didn’t get much sleep, worrying about you and your friend. You should have called.”

“Okay,” she says, a touch defensive. “It’s just—we got such a late start, and I wanted—”

“It’s all right,” I say. “You’re here now.”

She stops, as if to consider my response, before continuing. She knows exactly how many steps it is to the door, and where the door handle is. Maybe she’s also starting to realize why her mother isn’t waiting for her. “You were right, Kim. We should have called.” Kim nods his head and smiles, but at no one in particular. He’s not familiar with our routine. He’s concentrating his eyes on the cleats of his crutches as we cross the porch.

I open the door. “Hello!” shouts Angie. She takes hold of Kim’s arm and awaits her mother.

After twenty or thirty long seconds, Theresa appears from the kitchen. She’s wiping her hands on her apron. She gives Angie a dry hello.

"So who's this?" says Theresa. It's not a friendly greeting.

"Kim," says Angie, "this is my mother. Mom, meet Kim Davis. Or I'm sorry. That's not right. I should say, Mom, meet Kim, the man I'm going to marry." Kim has already pulled his right arm out of his crutch, balanced the crutch against his side, and now reaches out to shake Theresa's hand. He's much more limber than he was a few minutes ago. "A pleasure," says Kim.

"Angie?" says Theresa, letting go of Kim's hand after a limp half-second. Theresa concentrates on Angie, looking directly down on her, as if this will make a difference. She's going to deliver a lecture. "You said you were coming home to discuss something important. You said you had a surprise."

"*Kim* is the something important," says Angie. "My surprise is bringing him home to meet you."

Theresa suddenly halts herself and backs up, offers a few short words of congratulations, and says she'd like to talk about this some more after dinner. She states that dinner is almost ready. She excuses herself and returns to the kitchen. But Angie rises above her mother's restrained affection, shrugging her off. She knows her mother well, knows how poorly her mother controls her lack of affection for certain people, certain things. I sense that Kim must have been clued in beforehand because he's not showing any signs of distress.

Angie, her hand tucked loosely into Kim's armpit, asks him to turn to the living room, and directs him, informing him—with a giggle—not to bump into things Kim can see for himself. Kim, advancing slowly with his crutches, tells Angie that she's tickling him so much they'll knock over the piano or at least the coffee table unless she stops. It's as if they've invented their own style of courting. They've already forgotten about me, as I stand by the front door watching them, and it appears they've forgotten Theresa. As I hear more of Kim's voice, I have the urge to call Angie's home number to check her answering machine. When they reach the couch, Kim plops right down and Angie falls into his lap.

I go to the kitchen to help Theresa finish preparing dinner. She avoids looking at me and says nothing. She pulls the lamb out of the oven and bastes it one last time. Then her eyes suddenly swerve into me, hitting me directly with one of her short, hard, unfathomable stares.

She turns away only to reopen the oven door, letting it fall with a bang. She uncovers the lamb, and looks at it solemnly. A few tears suddenly drop off her cheek into the pan, and grease bubbles up briefly from the bottom. She covers the roast again and places it back in the oven.

"I'm sorry," I say.

She doesn't say anything. She stirs the soup, shaking her head. I want to take hold of her shoulders, shake her, tell her to wake up, tell her I still love her, convince her somehow that I understand her. But I don't understand her. Not in the least. I say, "I think we should best be careful, Theresa."

"Damn you with your best be careful," she says.

We take our seats in the dining room as Theresa announces that because of the occasion, she will serve everyone their plates. The food will remain in the kitchen. Clearly, she has just decided to do it this way. I watched her remove her own place setting from the table a few minutes earlier. After serving us, she returns to the kitchen. We can hear her doing dishes, banging pots. Angie is or should be angry, but she's determined not to show it. Kim is going with the flow, somehow staying clear of our heady mesh of brainwaves.

I quickly down my first helping. We eat in near silence, me for lack of something to say, Angie and Kim perhaps out of respect for me. I really don't want to blow it with Kim. I don't want to make myself appear any more ignorant than I already have. Besides, everyone is hungry. I go in for a second helping, and there's Theresa, sitting in the nook with her own plate of food. Now she has the nook TV on with the sound off. A shopping channel, which I've never seen her watch.

"What's going on?" I say.

"I'm hungry."

"Why don't you eat with us?"

"I'm your server. What do you want? Sit down. I'll get it for you." She's looking disheveled again. Her tears have carved her dark eyes into canyons.

"Mom," shouts Angie from the dining room.

"Yes," says Theresa.

"Excellent lamb," shouts Kim.

"You broke his curse," says Angie.

"Curse?" says Theresa, almost under her breath.

"Kim's a vegetarian," shouts Angie. "But we didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"For god's sake," says Theresa. She stops herself from smiling, or so it seems.

"And Mom?"

"What?" says Theresa, with sudden irritation. Perhaps she suspects Angie is about to catch her eating alone. Perhaps she's afraid Angie is going to unleash her temper (which, I should say, would be out of character for Angie, though not for Theresa).

But Angie does not answer. A few minutes go by and then Angie begins speaking to Kim, or rather to no one, as loudly and inflectively as her mother has virtually always done with her. She wants Theresa to hear every word. She tells a story about her own recent conversion to being a vegetarian, then describes the drive up (they saw three deer). Angie suggests a call to our pastor after dinner, to find out when our church, the one we hardly ever go to anymore, might be available for a wedding.

"When?" says Theresa, under her breath.

"This summer," says Angie, as if she could hear her mother. "Or maybe we should get married in Ann Arbor. There's a pleasant Justice of the Peace there. He'll even provide witnesses for you if you don't bring them yourself. Who's going to drive all the way to Houghton, anyway, for some silly summer wedding?"

As Angie is speaking I get up again and walk over to the threshold between the dining room and the kitchen. I am watching Angie tell her politely livid story, and watching Theresa listen to it. Angie is all the more extraordinary because beneath her anger I know she is happy, alert, in love, still eating her lamb and soup (with bacon), while Theresa, sour, loathing, silent, sits in her cold little nook staring at her mute little TV. Each word out of Angie pinches another wrinkle into the sidewall of Theresa's mouth.

"Mom?" says Angie, now standing. She is coming toward me and I step out of the way. Angie "sees" me as she goes by, squeezes my hand, enters the kitchen, gropes for the island. The island is her landmark. She used to sit on a special high stool when she was a girl and help her

mother make strawberry pies. Her fingers brush the top of the pie her mother made today, and she leans over, takes a deep breath over the warm, seeping crust. She straightens up and faces her mother. Her glass eyes are alive and blazing, reflecting our heads in their most miniature form.

"Yes?" says Theresa.

"You made this pie for me, didn't you?"

Theresa hesitates. "I did."

"So are you going to sit with us for dessert?"

"I don't know."

Angie looks at me but doesn't say anything, as if she really can see me. Clearly her eyes are asking for my help.

Remarkably, Theresa recovers. Either that or she interprets Angie's invitation as a threat. She brings the pie and whipped cream into the dining room, and sits down with us. I serve pie as Theresa pours coffee.

"So Kim?" says Theresa. "How do you like law school?" My hope, in spite of the obviously now-forced timbre of Theresa's questions, is that she really cares about Kim, that she's not too late.

He says, "I'm not in law school."

"What do you do then?" Theresa appears annoyed.

"I own a gallery."

"A gallery? Oh?"

"He does a lot of things," says Angie, cutting in. "He's a sculptor. Look at his car. He built that from scratch. Took the chassis from a stripped van in Detroit. And he's a performance artist."

"What's a performance artist?" says Theresa blankly.

"I make most of my living from the gallery," he says.

"Gallery," says Theresa, a deadpan echo of Kim. Then, perking up, "It sounds interesting. We don't have too many galleries around here. What sort of gallery?"

"Art gallery," says Angie, answering for Kim.

"And that's what you do? That's how you met our Angela?"

"Actually, no," says Angie. "I first met Kim as a performance artist."

"Oh," says Theresa.

"Where do you perform?" I say. I'm going to break all this up.

"Different places," says Kim. "Mostly on the street."

"Interesting," I say.

"On the street?" says Theresa, now wide-eyed.

"In front of buildings. The post office, banks, on campus, you know."

"Is that so?"

"Like I said, the gallery is how I make my living." He shivers once, very hard, as if to warn us of something. "I've owned it for a long time, eighteen years. The street performances are for recreation. And personal enlightenment. Angie thought I was homeless. The day she saw me, I was doing a rap that personified the plight of a few homeless people I know."

"So there are a *lot* of homeless people in Ann Arbor?" says Theresa. She makes a sallow face. "It's such a beautiful town, you'd never know."

"Go on," I say.

"I've already done some of what Angie's doing now. Interviewing the homeless in Ann Arbor and Detroit. I weave their true stories into stories of my own. I invite them to participate in my street performances, my workshops, and art classes."

"Were you begging for money?"

"Mom!"

"Well?"

"No," says Kim. "Like I said, the gallery."

There's a tentative pause, with everyone remarking about how good the pie is, before Theresa slowly, calmly, looks like she might yield something. But she is still alternately querulous and condescending, her posture stiffly upright. It remains to be seen if she will permit Kim, and Angie, to tell the full story of his life. If only she would listen.

We hear about his parents (American diplomat father, Cuban school-teacher mother), and his birth in Havana. We hear about the operation which separated him from, and which sacrificed, his twin brother. His parents couldn't raise him so he was sent to live with his grandmother in Detroit. When his grandmother died, the DSS bounced him in and out of foster homes, which treated him like a boy missing one leg must also be missing his brain. Finally, an eighth grade teacher noticed his drawing talent, and took him to Cranbrook for an evaluation. He remained there through high school, attended its Art Academy, then stayed ten more years to teach. He piloted an art program using found ob-

jects, leading his students on field trips through railroad yards, abandoned buildings, junkyards, city dumps. In 1978 he married and moved to Ann Arbor. He opened a gallery called Found Arts. The first of its kind in the world. Early shows featured art made from objects excavated from dumps and landfills all over the world, things buried from seventy to over one hundred years ago. Objects like ceramic inlaid skulls and crossbones, made from the bones of reputed gangsters, and a replica of an English castle, built with petrified peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. It was hard to imagine. Yet collectors, curators, and media people flew in regularly from all over the world to see his shows.

"His gallery is the most famous found-arts gallery in the world," says Angie. "It's right in Ann Arbor, and I didn't even know it."

"What happened to your wife?" asks Theresa.

"We divorced three years ago."

"So you are divorced?"

"Yes."

"You have any children?"

"I have a fifteen-year-old son."

"Where is he?"

"He lives with his mother, in Ann Arbor."

"How long have you known each other?"

"It'll be three months this Tuesday."

"Three months? And you're already planning this—what did you call it?—silly summer wedding?"

"Mom!" says Angie. Kim winces unappreciably.

"Maybe it's time for a break," I say.

Angie wishes to spend the afternoon alone with Kim in the basement den. I stoke up a fire as Angie is feeling her way through her record and CD collection, completely alphabetized and coded with labels in Braille. Their stack of logs should last until supper but I tell them to holler up the stairs if they need anything else. As I exit I hear Angie ask Kim if he likes (something called) the Talking Heads.

Upstairs I find Theresa in her bed. She's tucked herself in for a nap. She's cleaned up the kitchen and now she wants to go immediately to sleep. She's turned the light off and closed the louvers, though a low western sun outside our center window is throwing yellow splinters of light across her bed.

"How are you feeling?" I say.

She doesn't answer. I know she's not sleeping.

I take my shoes off and lie down next to her, atop the bedspread. She makes a point of turning her back to me. I tell her, granting her advance permission not to respond, that I know this isn't the way she imagined it would be for our daughter. But how could we have planned it any other way? Is it our duty, I say, through some form of magic in our dreams for her, to summon her only certain candidates for marriage? I agree that, yes, she arrived home and informed us, like a lawyer presenting evidence in a case, that her imminent marriage to this man is a fact. But I refuse to play the part of an unhappy parent. I want only the best for Angie. I want what she wants.

"You're trying to get used to it," she says, keeping her back to me. "I can see that you're trying to get used to it."

I think about that for a moment. "Maybe you're right. Maybe that's it. I know it's hard, but I'm doing my best to see what *she* sees in him, accepting him for what he is."

She doesn't answer me.

"I don't know what else to do," I say.

"Well, I'm *not* getting used to it. I don't care if he's the nicest guy in the world. He seems nice. But he didn't even ask us." She pauses, as if to catch her breath. "And there's other things that make me feel it's just *not* right."

I don't know what to say to this, so I say nothing. I let her words dangle right there, right over her head. She's going to bury herself alive with her anger. I get up to leave, opening the door as she calls out my name. She lifts her head, half-turning herself towards me. But she doesn't look at me, instead looks at the ceiling, where one shiny splinter of light skewers her right between the eyes.

"Yes?" I say.

"They're not sleeping together. Not in my house. Will you please see to that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to tell them."

"Theresa, you're making this a lot more difficult than it has to be."

I close the door and wait in the hall a minute. When her crying turns to sobbing, I move quickly down the stairs. I put my coat and

boots on. I'm going to take a walk. Maybe go down along the river and up to my office. I still have an office, because Tech provides their Professors Emeriti with quiet rooms of their own where they can read and do research when they really need to be alone. I'll find some Socrates and hole up with it for a while. Maybe stop for a beer at the Best Western on my way home, see who's there and who might be in the mood for some difficult questions.

Early the next morning, I wake up to an engine firing, then backfiring, several times. It's coming from the near distance, in front of our house, or a house or two over. My first thought is this is Kim's vehicle. I sit up and glance over Theresa's shoulder at the clock. 6:05 A.M. I climb out of bed quickly and pull back one of the curtains, raise the louver. It's dark as hell outside, but this vehicle, by the time I raise the louver and push my face to the glass, has already gone up our block and down the next. I can still hear it, winding up to five or six thousand RPMs, backfiring a bunch, then winding up again. After fifteen seconds or so, it's not hard to figure out where it's headed.

"What is it?" says Theresa. She's awake, holding her head up.

"They're gone."

"Gone?" she says. "Who?"

I don't answer.

"What time is it?" she says. Her alarm clock is right next to her head.

"It's Saturday."

"Saturday?"

"Don't you remember?" I say, trying not to raise my voice. "You slept through supper. You went to bed yesterday afternoon and nobody's seen you since."

She sits up, as if she's just realized something. "I'm sorry," she says. "I guess I wasn't feeling well."

"I told them they couldn't sleep together."

"What?"

"That's what you wanted. I told them they couldn't sleep together in our house. Not until they were married."

"You told them that?"

"That's what you said. After you said it, you cried yourself to sleep."

“So now they’re going to get married?”

“I don’t know. All I know is, they’re gone.”

“Oh, god,” she says. “Forgive me.” She rubs her eyes. Her face is as white as marble. Damaged, chiseled marble, however. She must have spent the whole night in tears. Maybe she was dreaming of another lifetime, where her eyes, her face, her whole body, could be made smooth as silver by the rain.