

Anno Domini · *Pamela Gullard*

LET'S START WITH MY WIFE of thirty-seven years—Elizabeth, sweet Lizbett, my Lizbett, my lady with the white belly and the round arms and the spray of freckles across her chest. I remember, oh so long ago, astonishment as those freckles emerged one by one, sliding like little brown angels out of the white lace of her slip, and then the curve of her breast, like a moon, and she, smiling above it, and me almost telling her it had been a mistake; my thumb had caught in the strap as we laughed and wrestled for a place in her father's dark velvet chair in the pink house halfway up Magnolia Hill in Seattle. But no, not telling her, and sliding the other strap back as she waited, her breath held back, her hands clenched on my shoulders. And then me unwrapping her whole astonishing self, and knowing that in all my seventeen years I had never received a gift so good and holy as I received that Saturday afternoon while her folks were away at St. Therese High helping with the crepe paper and hyacinths for her graduation that evening.

It seemed to me, considering the immensity of that afternoon, that surely she would be pregnant. But she wasn't, and I nodded as she told me when we sat beside Green Lake in the spring rain, and she asked me what I was feeling and I couldn't explain that I was embarrassed and sorry.

Ashamed, I couldn't even look at her, but rather watched a duck as it sampled several blades of grass. The cool rain landed on the hot skin of my neck, so hot I expected steam to rise, as I tried to think just how I should address a girl sitting on a bench not three feet from me who had just told me in so many words that she was right then, sitting so clean in her blue raincoat, cursed as a woman.

And I watched the duck gobble a long-necked snail, and beneath the huge flood of my relief was a sorriness like I had never felt before, for now there would be no baby to mark the huge afternoon, no baby for me to hold aloft and show everyone, everyone, that I had touched those golden brown angels, those tender spots of the shining, silver girl who could play the Battle Hymn of the Republic on her own gleaming white piano, the girl whose father was a dentist and whose mother knew how to cook little artichokes in white wine and butter.

But she did marry me, that fall, on my first leave, and we had two

nights together before I had to go back to my ship at Bremerton.

Such dismay I felt as I sat dumb on our marriage bed in the old motel at Lake Crescent and she shook down her silver blond hair as I stared with disbelief at the crinkly black pins she held in her hands, showing me, laughing, how the pins had held up the curls all along, those curls that I had thought floated above her head solely by virtue of their own shining force.

That was yesterday. Then life blinked from youth to middle age, as it has a tendency to do. And so here too, let us shift abruptly to the present.

They brought me tea this morning, Tuesday. I have been allergic to tea all my fifty-five years, but I drank it anyway, hoping—yes, still hoping—for one of those sweet, small victories that come to mean so much, hoping that my poor old body could still remember its own peculiar allergy, an allergy that it had produced so easily for so long, making my small-faced mother-in-law titter each day for years at the wayward man, her daughter's husband, who claimed to be *allergic* to tea.

And sure enough, when my Lizbett came in at 7:05, as she does every morning, she cooed to me that my cheeks were pink and I smiled and thought, allergy. But I didn't say it.

Her hair is short now and dyed a clumsy greenish-brown and I considered opening my mouth to tell her once and for all how much I hated it, but I closed it and smiled again as she bustled around the pale blue, private room moving my things ever so slightly, my shaving kit an inch to the left, the card with the dog on it from my niece an inch to the right, moving all my things just enough, as she has always done, just enough so that I felt ever so slightly ajar, ever so slightly misplaced.

She came to the side of my high bed (they elevate the dying ones) and sat down with a shifting back and forth of her hips, as she does, as if to settle herself permanently in the room, as if to gain purchase on whatever other forces might exist between the walls.

She took my chin in her cool hand and tilted it ever so slightly toward her. "Well, Charles, it's still raining." She sighed. "I like the rain, don't you? It's so soothing. It . . . well, I would say it puts perspective on things. Today on our walk I've arranged to go to the Staff Patio and we can stand under the overhang together and you can smell the rain and maybe get outside yourself for a while."

She sighed again. “I wish you could see how much of this is in your head. You get tense—that’s what makes the pain. You have to learn to *relax*. As I do. Every so often I take three deep breaths and make my mind go utterly blank so that I forget about all my cares and then, after just three breaths, why I feel refreshed and relaxed and ready to go about my business.” She looked at me and frowned.

She took a breath and shifted her weight. “Dr. Fortney (spoken with reverence) says your surgery was a success. You *must feel* the success of it. You know you have a tendency to be too negative and this is one time you just can’t let it get the best of you.”

I looked into her green eyes and blinked. Two slabs of flesh have long since replaced her cheeks and tiny lines streak toward her mouth as she speaks. I said nothing.

She clasped her hands together and I knew that in the back of her mind she was praying for me as she spoke. She used a system whereby she could pray and do other things at the same time. She said it had two advantages: First, it allowed prayer to participate in every aspect of her existence and second, it made it possible for her to get more prayer in with less time specifically allotted to it. Lizbett was a very busy woman. Every day she rode the bus from our little house in Renton all the way to downtown Seattle to the H & R Block office on 3rd and Pine where she worked preparing tax forms. She prayed all the way there and all the way back.

I couldn’t hear her prayers, but I could hear her talk. “Then Father Dhury (spoken with reverence) will be by to talk to you again. Isn’t that wonderful? He’s going late to the retreat at Lake Wenatchee just so that he can see you again.” She stopped for a moment and took my hand. “Charles, you *must* listen to him. I just don’t know how you can not have *any* faith. You, the one I love, how *can* you *choose* this path? I wonder night and day what goes through your head to come up with the idea to forsake the living God, our God.”

She paused, shifting my hand about in her fingers. “Well, perhaps Father is having some effect on you after all. I think he is. You’re too proud to show it, but . . . you know, he always says you have the most wonderful sense of humor. Father Dhury. . . .” She stopped abruptly. The lines spread out like a parachute opening and she sucked in so much breath that I felt there was little air in the room left for me.

“Charles.” She adjusted the sheet over my belly and the movement

made me ache. "Charles . . . (very low) say something to me."

Actually she was the one who gave me the idea. I looked at her. I could tell that she was praying behind her eyes, which glowed. The rain she loved beat against my window. My mouth stayed shut. I remembered how my mouth looked the last time she held up the mirror to me. My lips are thin, forming a slightly bluish line almost cruel at the corners, which turn neither up nor down.

She screamed and fled from the room. Her voice became fainter and fainter as she and the fat-legged nurse charged away down the hall. "We *must* find Dr. Fortney (faint, but sturdy reverence still) . . . my husband . . . can't speak . . . making terrible, animal sounds in his throat, trying, trying to speak to me . . . poor dear . . . my poor little lamb."

I considered what time it was. They don't put clocks in hospital rooms, just T.V.'s that hang, as if strangled, from the ceiling. Doctors all have their own slim, gold digital wristwatches with the black faces that make no sound. Discreetly, they're watching the flip of the numbers to see exactly when you take your last breath, as if by knowing when it happens they can gain some secret hold over it, holding death a silent tick away from their own robust, tanned faces.

Timeless, the Percodan receded and left the pain in my belly exposed, like the tide's withdrawal from the scavenging sea crabs. I wondered if the mountain was out. I tucked my hand under my downside ear and propped my head up to see out the window. But my bed was too far down the wall and all I could make out were three raindrops caught along the far edge of the sill. I longed for the mountain. It dominates Seattle. It has its own weather. Its own personal mists boil around it, obscuring it, and all through the day the people of Seattle look to the south for a glimpse of it. Months go by and there is no sign. But then finally, when we've all given up hope, one morning we awake and there it is, shining forth in its singular majesty, rounded and huge, defining a horizon that we had all forgotten existed.

Hours passed. The medical students marched in one by one. They watched as Dr. Fortney fingered me, masks of official reverence for the sick covering their arrogance and fear of failure. I found their youth astonishing. I myself was never so young.

One of them was a little redhead and she was the only one who looked

into my eyes as Dr. Fortney encouraged me to say my name. I gave out a small puff of breath to him to indicate the sincerity of my efforts and she put her tongue between her small white teeth and concentrated so hard I thought she'd bite the tip off.

Dr. Fortney murmured to his little crew for a moment and then they all went out. Father Dhury swung in. Doctors and priests follow one another around the world trying to clean up each other's messes. I raised my eyebrows. My mind was clearing.

Father Dhury is a tall, busy man with a gap between his front teeth through which he filters his soft, shapeless words. He took my hand and the warmth of his pious flesh was a comfort to me. I squeezed back and he smiled. It occurred to me that the gap had widened since our last meeting. The bony sockets of his eyes were unmarred by crow's feet.

"So," he said with a little whistle of air. "You're not talking today." He pulled up the molded plastic chair that all my visitors used.

I grunted faintly.

"Charles," he breathed. "It's not a joke. Father in heaven is watching you and is not pleased."

I squinted at him to warn him to cut it out.

He sighed and leaned back; his hand held mine with delicacy. He treated me with the awe the saved feel for the damned. He looked out the window and for a brief moment, a flash of washed sunshine fell like a miracle across the sharp planes of his face. I started. Was the mountain reflected in his holy visage? I sank back. There was no way to tell. There were other things on his mind today.

He turned back to me and licked his upper lip.

"Charles," he said. "Do you have any idea what it's like to be a priest?"

I considered. When we were first married I went to Mass with Lizbett often. I got so I could whip through their procedures manual with the best of them. I sang, I knelt, I crossed, I responded, all on target. It was an exhilarating performance of activated madness for me, who had sat as a child numb on the hard, wooden pews of the gloomy First Lutheran Church of Ballard and listened to the large-browed minister relate in exacting detail the wickedness of the motion pictures.

So, at first I was a fervent visitor to Lizbett's church. At some point, however, I looked around me at the other worshippers. I heard the self-satisfied sighs, the smug clearings of the throat, the deep voice of the big

woman who said her prayers a half-second behind everyone so we could all hear how devoted she was.

The last time I went to Mass with Lizbett she was pregnant with Debby and the varicose veins had begun to bulge along her feet and around her ankles. Her priest at that time was a fat, young man who was vain of his well-shaped hands. He held the wine chalice proudly aloft for interminable moments before allowing his poor, yawning flock to eat the body of Christ and go back home to bed.

I looked at Dhury, who was boring in on me. A priest? An instrument of the Lord? Think of it. The confessional—sitting on the wrong side of a flowered curtain hearing the dismal failures of a thousand lives. I wondered if members of Dhury’s flock really told. (I wondered what Lizbett told.) How odd to tell a stranger. And if they did tell, how could their words pass through the dear priest’s mind without filtering down, down to where the tales would make him rise up and want to reach through the flowers and stroke the lovely throat of the quiet young sinner? I gave a little shrug, no, I did not know what it would be like to be a priest.

Father Dhury’s eyes narrowed and his nostrils widened. Perhaps the shrug and the silence tugged at him for he said, “Oh, Charles, I must tell you. A priest. . . . The disdain of the young. And all those depressed, old, old ladies clutching their handbags, clutching at *me*, staring at me with such hope. . . .”

He paused and sank back, deflating so that his powerful eyes shrank back and the lids slunk down over them. “What you have said is right in some ways,” said he, his shapeless voice coming from a great distance. “Yes,” he smiled into the air, “the flatulence of it. And *I* have an even better vantage than you. I have to stand up high in front of them, and from up there I can see them so clearly, the parts of their just-washed hair . . . ah, the furtive touches of the young ones standing breathlessly close to each other during the Our Father, the sweet mother’s hard knuckles against the neck of her restless son during the Confession of Faith, the sleep moving behind the eyes of the old man. . . .”

“Oh yes, from there, I can see their tiny . . . ah, their shrunken hearts taking the easy way out. You’re right, it’s a little con on me looking at me with their shining faces, holding their children, their *grandchildren* up to me. But Charles. . . .”

He stirred and his eyes re-emerged as if he were suddenly awakening

from a deep sleep. “Charles.” His voice rose. He looked down at me. “We all need our little cons. Even you, you with your incredible integrity, you have your own self-deceptions. False piety isn’t one of them for you, no, but your internal honesty is itself a deception. You think you’re above us all, you think you know more, you think your single-mindedness saves you from pettiness, you think you don’t need love. . . .”

At the word he looked astonished. He fought with himself for a moment, as if struggling with a miracle.

I gave a grunt to encourage him. But he mistook my gesture.

Annoyed, he said softly. “Charles, don’t you think it’s time you took stock?” He coughed, his fists clenched in thin air now. He looked to a spot on the blue wall above me, as if to keep hold of the miracle he had discovered an instant ago. “It’s so simple, really. For God’s sake, it’s eternity we’re talking . . . the kingdom and the glory forever and ever.”

His voice rose as he bore in on that wall. “You’re standing at the edge of the abyss, man, don’t you see it? And here I, the Church, offer you . . . it’s such a small price for such a large gain, such a bargain, such a reasonable, prudent. . . .” He broke off, as if suddenly perplexed. He seemed to expand and contract—live his life—before my very eyes. I said nothing.

His throat swelled with the effort of his perplexity, like a young robin ready to mate. “Do it for Elizabeth; she wants it so. She . . . it would make all her years of patience worthwhile. . . .” Startled now, he looked at me for just the second time. He made a sound as if choking. The flesh of his face shrank again. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he transmogrified.

“Charles,” he whispered, grabbing the bedclothes, “save your *soul*.”

He groaned and rose, tottering the chair back. With a sob, he caught the chair with his long bony hand, and then strode quickly out of the room.

The best time of my life was those first years I had the movie house out on Queene Anne hill. I bought it in ’59 with the little pile of savings my silent, hesitant father, a high school English teacher, left me. I called it “The Queen,” which few people knew was actually named after Bogie’s best picture. I showed cowboys and Indians to the kids Saturday afternoons, and showed anything I liked—old or new—in the evenings. I got a little following of people who came to see what I picked for the night, “The Dolly Sisters” followed by “The Odd Couple,” Annette Funicello in a beach movie with “Modern Times.”

Every show I would stand at the door of the theatre and people coming in would shake my hand. Lizbett would come to the early show on Friday and sit in the very back row and I'd bring her buttered popcorn with just two shakes of salt as she liked it. She would hold my hand. She would whisper something to me and I'd reply, "Sh-h, listen to Lawrence. (The dust would swirl.) He doesn't say much so you have to catch every word." And she would sigh and grumble and shift in her seat and just as the lump had swelled to breaking in your throat and the credits were peeling down the screen, she would say how much money they must make downtown showing double features you would expect together. And I would nod to her and smile and take her other hand to rest on my thigh.

She would watch the Heckle and Jeckle cartoon for the next show and then she'd leave, telling me not to be too late, and I'd finish counting the take and climb up to the small anteroom of the projection booth and sit on a stool and read. I read the Seattle Public Library a shelf at a time. *Earth, Moon, and Planets, The Origin of the Solar System, Solar Facts . . . A Soldier's Story, History of the Second World War, Two-Ocean War . . . Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, Poetry of the Giants, Poetry and You*. I would fill myself with facts and stories and autobiographies until I felt like an entire universe packed into that dim little room. Sometimes I'd tell Eddie at the end of the night that I'd rewind the film myself just so that I could read some more sitting next to the projector as the celluloid whish, whished onto the reel.

I dozed and in my mind I made a little picture of Lawrence standing over the priest who was buried up to his ears in a sand dune. Lizbett's face appeared in the here and now. I dropped the picture and prepared myself for her.

Her cheeks were white, her pale green eyes large and wet. She walked hesitatingly. She settled herself into the plastic chair with so little motion that I needed very little adjustment to accommodate her presence. Why hadn't I thought of silence sooner?

She put her finger to the side of her nose. She pushed a little so that when she drew her hand away a round white spot glowed and then faded. "Charles," she said softly. "Charles, can you hear me?"

I pressed my lips together to show I was with her.

Then I allowed myself to become one with the pain. You mustn't fight

it, for it will always win. You must simply wait until you emerge on the other side. Patience. Be patient, patient.

"I talked to Father Dhury," said my wife. "He was very upset. He's not going to Lake Wenatchee at all." Her eyes opened wide. "He says you don't understand the human condition." A wisp of greenish hair stood out back-lighted by the gray light from the window.

"Oh Charles, they've found more," she cried. She closed her eyes. The vein running to her temple throbbed. "Dr. Fortney just told us. Who would have believed it? We had no way of knowing." She blinked her eyes.

I looked into them to tell her that this was no news to me.

She clutched my hand. "Oh Charles . . . Dr. Fortney . . . the scan, they found nodules all along the muscles in your groin. They . . . it's . . . we must think about this." She let her head sink down on my shoulder and I turned toward her. Her soft eyelashes fluttered near my face and I remembered the rain beaded on her silky arms, her morning touch. . . . She lifted her head. "I understand, Charles. Mom is listening. Mom hears you."

She stood up, smoothed herself, and headed to the door where Fortney appeared. "Mrs. Haugen, I don't think you've really thought this through. It takes nothing away and it gives so much. Don't you see? He's withering under the pain now. It's his only friend; it's all he can think about; he can hardly. . . ."

Doctors treat pain as a remote but living thing, as it is.

Fortney looked down on my wife, coercing her in measured tones. "The patient emerges from the sleep in about 48 hours. That's all you lose, and then you'll have the *lucidity* you want; he'll be comfortable."

"No," she said. I could just barely see her straight body. She spoke with her head held high. "Charles told me just now, 'Mom, I want *you* to take care of me.'"

Fortney's hand jerked to his chin. He frowned and his voice came more measured. "So—he's speaking now, is he?"

"I can understand him."

I imagined her small, left hand clutching her right wrist, her gesture of resolution.

"Mrs. Haugen. At this juncture, addiction is not our *priority*."

She spoke with a deliberation equal to his. "Dr. Fortney, Charles does not want to spend the rest of his life *drugged*."

My daughter, Debby, wears a Mickey Mouse watch, given to her by her young son. The creature's three-fingered, gloved hand was pointing to three when I awoke. My daughter smiled at me. She is the only child Lizbett's God granted us. She is divorced. She is tall and has my thin lips. She was a sophomore in high school in 1964, the year I lost the theatre. She took a part-time job in the afternoons doing Classifieds for the *Seattle Times*. Now she's the office manager. Back during her high school days when I would come home late at night smelling of vomit and Certs, my face white and haggard, she would be sitting hunched and stiff at the breakfast table, waiting. "Go to bed," she would say to me.

She moves now with the grace of one who learned early to make her own world. She has forgiven me as much as a thoroughly graceful person can forgive anyone.

She talked to me for some time, all the while surveying the creases and shadows of the sheet that lay over me. She talked of the details of my funeral. She had been told to do this by the hospital counsellor on death and dying, a young blond who could be expected to live to 150. This talk was not Debby's way. It wasn't mine either. She said a friend of hers could sing Ave Maria if I liked. I blinked. I admired her courage.

Finally, with a sigh, she allowed herself to change the subject. She told me of young Charley's first day in the first grade at the new school at Northgate. I wished she had brought him with her. I had always been his friend. Debby smiled as she related how solemnly he told her not to worry about him he wasn't going anyplace, how he drew a flower with the petals jettisoning into the air like rockets, how he insisted when she picked him up that he had made three friends but didn't like two of them. She turned away every so often as she spoke as if looking for someone who never came.

"So . . ." she said, "Best I go. Mom's taking care of him in the lobby — as I left she was explaining why a person should always draw a flower so it *looks* like a flower." She smiled. "You know how long that will last and, oh Dad. . . ."

The tears welled. "Don't go . . . not just yet. I'm not ready. I thought I was, for years, but. . . . How could I not have known how valuable you are to me? How could you not have known how valuable I am to you? Why does it come to this?" She stopped talking; she looked out the window. I could hear the rain. With great will she composed herself, then kissed my forehead, and left.

Tuesday faded into Wednesday and then Thursday and Friday came and went. My visitors walked in and out in succession, gesturing, crying, speaking high and speaking low. The priest, his large nose quivering, pleaded with me, confided in me, asked if I loved him (I nodded yes). Lizbett grew grief-stricken and self-assured. Debby was allowed to bring young Charley once and he stood back at the opposite wall and said in a soft voice, "Grandpa, I don't like the way you look."

Saturday. The sun across the room was sharp and bright. I felt better than usual. I could imagine the soft sun on my face. Perhaps in the afternoon it would angle my way. Was the mountain out?

Lizbett came in at 7:05. She was wearing her light blue suit with the soft blouse I liked. It made her look pleasantly blurry. I hoped she would kiss me but she didn't.

She sat in the chair in silence for a moment. Perhaps it was catching. My heart swelled as her lilac perfume drifted over me. I felt that my soul was close to her soul.

Her face was a little shiny. She was not praying. She surveyed my face, blinking. She was more quiet than I had ever seen her before. She was on the verge of something. She sat for twenty minutes, as I could see by her silver watch, which had belonged to her mother. Then, in silence, she got up and left.

The sun made it only so far as the rounded edge of my metal bedside table and stopped. In the evening, I cried.

It was pouring the next day. As soon as I awoke, I propped myself up on one elbow and fumbled in the drawer of the little table. Yes, there was a pen, dark blue. On its side were the gold letters, "You can win \$50,000. Call (800) 767-4411."

There was no paper, not even a magazine. I considered writing on the card from my niece but it didn't seem right. I rested for a couple of minutes.

What was right? I slid the card toward me and wrote under the nose of the get-well dog, a dachshund, "Mount Rainier?" I thought about it for a minute. Would they understand? Would they think this was a general question or a specific one? Under Mount Rainier, I wrote, "To window please." Yes, that was what I meant, exactly. Now, what neutral party could I get to accept my message in confidence? Who could be trusted?

Perhaps the fat nurse. Her touch on the world was so blunt she could hardly be expected to bother with so delicate a matter as one's precious broken silence. When was her shift? Oh yes, she would be coming soon. She always arrived with the breakfast clatter of crude spoons and heavy cups. I shoved the note under my huge, clean pillow, which smelled slightly of cleaning fluid, and lay back to wait.

But she didn't come. Perhaps she had Sunday off. The dark-haired nurse with the sharp nose fed me toast bit by bit. I refused the tea.

They all arrived after early Mass—Lizbett, Dhury, Debby and young Charley. They had Charley give me a bunch of white daisies from the florist and there was a great flurry of talk and commotion as they tried to think of where to get a vase. Finally, Debby returned with a large, green pebbly one and the talk died down. There weren't any other chairs; the relatives of the woman across the hall had taken my extras for her birthday party. It was decided that Lizbett would take my one plastic one and the rest would stand. As she came close to me I saw she had a white, stricken look. She was praying fervently. In her hands was her rosary. She let Charley put it around his neck. The large, silver-colored cross hung past his belly. He twirled the cross and the black beads gleamed. Debby said he'd better give it back to Grandma and he protested but he let her lift it off him. Finally, Debby and Lizbett decided they should take Charley to the cafeteria to get a hot chocolate. Lizbett said to me, "Mom will be right back." I was left with Dhury.

He came forward from the shadows of the far wall. In the last week his cheeks had sunk so that it looked as if they hurt him. His Adam's apple pressed painfully across the top of his stiff collar. His lips were dry and cracked. The fringe of his hair had grown out too long and it looked oily and uncared for. What was happening to him?

His tongue came forward through the gap of his teeth and then retreated. I considered giving him my message but decided against it. He didn't strike me as one who could keep a secret.

He sat down and leaned over me. The painful stretch of his skin made him wince. He had been crying.

"Charles," he said. "I served my first Mass when I was twenty-six years old. It was at the Church of the Redemption at La Push, a fishing village in the farthest northwest corner of the states. That is, it was the farthest northwest corner before they added Alaska." He paused. Adding Alaska

seemed to give him pain. He passed his hand over his mouth as if to clear it of bad air. He licked his lips.

“My mother came from Holman, Wisconsin to be at the Mass. That’s 2,000 miles, man. She had never before been farther than Black Falls, Minnesota. I remember how small she looked to be in her tweed coat. She was so happy. She drank punch with the old fishermen and their wives in the basement with the painted floor. Later, my mother and I walked along the beach. She had never seen the ocean and she said that she hadn’t expected it to be in the air too. She told me she would die happy now. And she did die happy. And it was all because of me. My God, Charles, can you understand what that means?”

I looked away. His anguish was too much for me to bear.

He passed his hand across his mouth again. “I have not been honest a day in my life.” He stopped. There was terror in his eyes. I took his hand.

That seemed to electrify him. “*Not* a day,” he cried. “Maybe it was the first honest thing I’ve ever done.” His bony face was bathed in sweat. I let go of his hand.

“Dear God,” he said, his face next to mine. “Elizabeth. . . .” He threw himself to the linoleum floor on his knee. His face looked up at mine. His hand slid along the sheet, which pulled at my skin.

“Charles, don’t you understand?” he asked, searching my face.

I turned away.

He grabbed my shoulder to turn me back. “Charles, I have *touched your wife.*”

I tried to hit him, but my hand fell ineffectually against his jawbone. I pushed at his face.

He took a breath, his eyes wide. He scrambled up. “Charles, please, say something to me,” he cried. “You *must*. I know you can. You’ve been hiding out from Elizabeth. But you *mustn’t hide from me*. Charles. Please.”

With all my strength, I put the pillow over my head.

He fled.

I lay still for a long time listening only to my own gasping breath. Then I shoved the pillow off my ear. The sheet was wet with my saliva and tears. I cried, my face to the ceiling, the tears running down my temples.

Lizbett came in quietly. She’d put lipstick on. She pulled the chair right next to me and sat down. She took a Kleenex out of her handbag and

wiped my cheek. I reached for her arm but she moved swiftly away and my hand fell weakly on the bed. I was so exhausted now that I had only a few gestures left to me.

She began rocking slightly in her chair. She was praying as never before. She began to sing very softly, a hymn, an endless, soft hymn. She touched her collarbone delicately.

She reached to fluff the pillow. I heard the card crinkle but she did not bring it out. She fluffed and hummed, her face strained and preoccupied.

Her blouse fell open above my face. I saw the legion of angels spread on her chest. I reached to pat one, a divine blotch. "I love you," I tried to say to my wife, but my throat grabbed and the air went the wrong way. I gasped. She put her arm beneath my neck so that my head rested on her shoulder and I tried again but all that came out were groans and spluttering that scared me as I had never been scared before.

She sat up and stopped her song. Her hands flew in the air. She clasped me. Her eyes were wide and unfocussed. "Mom *heard* you. Mom *knew* all along that you couldn't stay away. Say it again, Charles: 'I love the Lord.' Oh, I thought you might never let go." Without waiting for me, she closed her eyes and took up her humming again. She draped herself over me and I couldn't move. I was terrified. Her heart beat against my ear. I could not speak. I could not breathe.

Finally, she rose with a sigh, her face transfixed. I gasped. I worked to say that no she'd gotten it all wrong — that wasn't what I meant, not at all what I meant, the farthest thing from what I meant. But my words were cracked and rotten and I sounded like a wounded dog crying. My horrible voice rose and she took it to be my ecstasy and she said, "Let us pray together. Our Father Who art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name, Thy Kingdom. . . ."

She went out, her hands clasped in front of her, leaving me shrunken on the bed. I would have died at that very moment if young Charley hadn't appeared at the doorway. He marched right in and used the chair as a stepping place to get up on the bed. He leaned his small back gently against my side. This was the first time since my sickness that he hadn't been shy with me. I had missed him.

He spoke softly in my ear. "Grandpa, I'm not sure I want to go to school," he said. "No one else knows how to read." He was wearing the cross again. It hung over his t-shirt of gold and blue stripes. He rubbed his stomach beneath it. "They're just babies," he said.

He spied the card. The mattress shifted on my side as he leaned over to get it. "You'll be in the doghouse with me," he read. He turned the page. ". . . if you don't get well now. Mount . . ." He squinted one eye and concentrated. "Rain . . ." He made small sounds to force the word out. "Rain . . . Rain . . ." He grunted with the effort. "Rainier," he said triumphantly. "Mount Rainier." He looked at me. Then he read, "To window please."

He patted my chest, then jumped up and ran to the window and looked out. He didn't say whether it was there or not. He looked at the card again. "Grandpa, did you write this?" He was thinking hard. He looked out. He did not tell me what he saw.

Instead, he came to me and knelt with both knees on the plastic chair. "Should I draw you a mountain, Grandpa?" He seized the pen off the table. "I'll draw you a mountain that *looks* like a mountain," he said happily, as if we shared a secret.

He turned the card to its back. His soft, unmarred hands with the dainty fingernails grasped the stiff paper. He frowned at the pen. Then he drew a line that started up across the paper, bounced off and travelled up the sheet of my bed and up across my arm and up, gently, across my face to the steel bars of the head of the bed.

He slid off the chair and reached through the bars with his free hand and grabbed the pen and drew across the formica table, and crouched down to draw across the linoleum floor and up the blue wall and over the sill and behind the T.V. and all around the room until he was standing on the chair again and twirling, twirling, the cross flinging out into the air.

He stopped, and stood still. I smiled at him.

"Now *that's* a mountain, Grandpa," he said, laughing, and a brief flash of sunlight burst from the window and shone against his hair.