

The Private Lives of Pippa Lee

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Extract

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Wrinkle Village

Pippa had to admit, she liked the house.

This was one of the newer units, they were told. Dishwasher, washing machine, dryer, microwave, electric oven, all new. Carpeting, new. Septic tank. Roof. Yet the floor of the basement had a crack in the concrete, and some of the grouting between the tiles in the bathroom was turning dark with mold. Signs of decay, like in an old mouth with gleaming caps glued over the stumps, Pippa thought. She wondered how many people had died in this house. Marigold Village, retirement community: a prelude to heaven. This place had everything: swimming pool, restaurants, mini-mall, gas station, health food store, yoga classes, tennis courts, nursing staff. There was an on-call grief counselor, two marriage counselors, a sex therapist, and an herbalist. Book club, camera club, garden club, model boatbuilding club. You never had to leave. Pippa and Herb had first encountered Marigold Village when returning to their Long Island beach house from a lunch party in Connecticut twenty years earlier, when Pippa was just past thirty, Herb sixty. Herb had taken a wrong turn, and they found themselves on a narrow, winding road lined with clusters of dun-colored, single-story houses. It was five o'clock in April; the late afternoon light cast a golden filter over the perfectly maintained lawns. The houses looked identical; a hive of numbered mailboxes stood at the end of each shared driveway. Some of the numbers were in the thousands. Herb had been confident that a couple of left turns and a right would put them back on the main road, but every turn he made seemed to suck them deeper into the development.

'It's like one of those fairy tales,' Pippa said.

'What fairy tales?' Herb asked, exasperation in his voice. Pippa

was always seeing poetry in everything. Leave it to her to turn getting lost in a housing development into something out of the Brothers Grimm.

‘You know,’ she said, ‘where the children enter the forest, and everything shifts, all the landmarks magically change, and they get lost, and then there’s usually a witch of some kind.’ The trees rose to hide the last of the sun. The light went dull.

‘At least a witch could give us directions,’ Herb grumbled, turning the steering wheel. His massive hands made it look like a toy.

‘I think we passed that fountain before,’ she said, looking back.

A futile twenty minutes later, they found themselves at the Marigold gas station. A friendly teen in a navy blue uniform showed them the way out. It was so simple: two rights and a left. Herb couldn’t believe he hadn’t figured it out. Days later, when they heard Marigold Village was a retirement community, they laughed. Wrinkle Village, it was called by the locals. ‘We were lost for so long,’ Herb would say when telling the story, ‘we almost had to retire there.’

That story got the biggest laugh yet at the housewarming party Pippa threw on their third Saturday in Marigold Village. Many of their dearest friends were there to quizzically usher in their new life in the development.

Sam Shapiro, an angular, balding man in his fifties, was probably the finest fiction writer in the country. The massive advance Herb had shelled out for his last novel had made the papers. He stood up and raised his glass to Herb and Pippa, his words firing out of him rapidly, in staggered clusters.

‘We all know Herb Lee can be a bastard, but he’s usually right. He hates self-pity more than anything, in writing and in life. That makes him a great editor, and a damn tough human being. I can’t believe you’re eighty, Herb. I guess that means I’m not thirty-five anymore. But I tell you. When it comes to words, Herb’s instincts are pitch-perfect. With women, not so much. I think we all know what I’m talking about.’ Uneasy laughter rippled through the

group, and one man guffawed. Sam continued: 'So when he first told me he was going to marry Pippa, I thought, Here we go again! She seemed like . . . radioactive jam. Sweet, but deadly. Herb, however, disregarding my advice, followed his nose, as usual – a significant nose, I might add, not one of these trivial little noses we see all over town these days – and somehow he ended up with the most spectacular woman. I've known Pippa Lee for a quarter of a century, but I'll never really know her. She's a mystery, a cipher, something which is nearly extinct these days: a person not controlled by ambition or greed or a crass need for attention, but by a desire to experience life completely, and to make life a little easier for the people around her. Pippa has nobility. Pippa has style.'

Pippa's lips compressed slightly, her brow furrowed in a private signal of disapproval. She wanted him to glorify Herb, not her. Sam's quick bird's glance rested on her for a moment; reading her signal, he smiled and went on: 'And Herb had the sense to recognize her for what she was, when it was damn hard to tell. So he can't be all bad. I drink to a man who, even at this late stage of his career, remains entirely unpredictable. I can't decide what I think of your choice to move from Gramercy Park to Marigold Village, Herb. If it's humble, or practical, or perverse. But as long as Pippa keeps making that butterflied lamb, I'll even caddie for you, if that's what it comes to.'

'I don't think you'd be much of a caddie, Sam,' said Herb, his mouth creasing into a lopsided grin, as it did whenever he made a crack.

'Never underestimate a hungry Jew!' called out Sam Shapiro.

'I think it's sort of amazing,' said a hurt, adenoidal voice. Moira Dulles was a poet who had been living with Sam for the past few years. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, at Herb's feet. 'I mean, you left everything behind. Pippa, you are so courageous to just get up and go, start a new life . . .'

Pippa watched her fragile friend with concern. She hoped Sam

didn't hear the tears in her voice. 'It feels free,' said Pippa. 'No more big households to take care of.'

'Don't wreck my illusions,' said Sam. 'You are the icon of the Artist's Wife: placid, giving, intelligent, beautiful. Great cook. They don't make 'em like that anymore.' Moira Dulles gave him a black look, which he ignored. 'And Herb doesn't even deserve her, he's not an artist. I never thought of that before! The one true artist's wife left in the modern world, and she goes to a publisher!' He cackled, then scraped his breath in with a donkey's bray.

'She wasn't like that when I married her,' said Herb. 'I tamed her.'

'Oh, shut up,' Pippa smiled, drifting into the kitchen and wondering if Sam was teasing Herb too hard. Ben, Pippa and Herb's son, was scouring the roasting tin, glancing up at the party through the hatch that looked out on the dining area. Still in law school, he already had the bad posture and good-natured pessimism of a middle-aged man. He scrutinized his mother through round, professorial glasses.

'I hope Herb is okay,' Pippa said, lighting a small blowtorch and turning it on fifteen pots of crème brûlée. The layer of sugar on each one bubbled and darkened to the color of molasses.

'Mom, he's fine. Nothing could put a dent in his ego.'

'That's what you think.'

'It's you I'm worried about.'

'Oh, I'm fine, sweetheart.'

'Your problem is, you're too adaptable. The adaptable cipher.' Pippa patted Ben's arm. He was always protecting her from harm, whether she wanted him to or not. In the next room, Herb was talking intently to Sam, hunched forward in his chair. He was still so handsome, Pippa thought. Eighty years old with a full head of hair, his own teeth. When was it all going to implode?

'You should do it too,' he was telling Sam. 'If you manage to get old. I recommend it. Turned my whole life into cash. Giving

it to them in increments. Otherwise it takes years for the estate to be processed, and then the state takes half.'

'I thought you loved paying taxes!' interjected Don Sexton, a screenwriter whose elongated vowels made him sound like he belonged in *The Philadelphia Story*.

'That's right!' said Phyllis, his sharp-witted wife. 'You always said you wished the government would tax *more*.'

'I'm not funding this fucking war,' Herb said.

'Ah – so it comes down to ethics, after all,' said Sam. 'I was rooting for perversity, myself.'

'Stop boiling it all down,' growled Herb. But he was enjoying being kidded. Pippa suddenly adored Sam Shapiro. He was hitting just the right tone of jocular disrespect with Herb. She had been so worried that people would start to act differently now that the invincible man was in an old people's facility. Treating it like a crazy joke – that was just the thing. The great Herb Lee, heroic owner of one of the last independent publishing houses in the country, virile champion of the Great American Novel – admitting to being old. It seemed unreal to everyone in that room. His frailty made their own middle age palpable. They were up next.

Moving to a retirement community was the last thing Pippa had expected from Herb, but then again, she had learned to accept swift changes in tack from her husband. Beneath Herb's steady-handed, unflappable demeanor lurked a profound impulsiveness; he had bought manuscripts, left publishing houses and even marriages with sudden, lurching decisiveness all his life. Pippa knew that Herb trusted his own instincts deeply, to the point of superstition; perhaps that was all he trusted. Once his internal compass needle moved, that was it – something was going to change. So when he came home, laughing, a pamphlet for Marigold Retirement Village in his fist, saying, 'This is that place we got lost that time!' – then spent the afternoon flipping through the glossy pages in his study, she sensed something was brewing. In the end, he sold the idea to her as a practical solution: 'I've got

five, ten years at the most. What do we need the beach house for anymore? The kids are gone. Manhattan is a pain in the ass. We're hemorrhaging money you could use down the line. We liquidate our assets, Pippa, and then when I go, you have most of the money in your pocket. You can travel, buy a small place downtown. If we sell everything, you'll be free.' But Pippa smelled a whiff of fear in this bluster; Herb had had two heart attacks in the space of a week the previous year. For the six subsequent months, she'd had to do everything for him. He couldn't make it up a flight of stairs. Now he napped more than he used to, but he was vigorous again, stronger in some ways, what with his near-perfect diet and all the exercise he was doing, but those excruciating days, when sudden, extreme age was foisted on him and Pippa, had made an indelible mark on their lives. Herb was, Pippa knew, terrified of having her become his nurse. Marigold Village was a sort of preemptive strike against decrepitude, cutting to the chase. It was, in fact, pure Herb: he was unsentimental, realistic, and utterly unwilling to be unmanned.

The fact that Sam Shapiro, who had become Herb's best friend over the past three decades, happened to live fifteen minutes away, was both a boon and a bit of an embarrassment, Pippa knew. Because Sam had followed Herb from one publishing house to another for years before Herb started his own press. Sam had been so loyal to Herb, in fact, that people began to wonder if the great Shapiro needed his editor a little too badly. The air of triumph that Sam exuded upon learning of the move – as if Herb had moved to follow *him* – irritated Herb, even if he *was* just ribbing. In all his relationships, Herb was the master, the desired one. To topple this pyramid would shake the foundations of his personality. Pippa watched Sam carefully for any evidence of a shift in the dynamic of the friendship. She, too, needed Herb to maintain his aura of strength. Tending him in the months after his heart attacks had been confusing. She had loved him perhaps more deeply than ever before, but the shape of their relationship

had begun to warp in troubling ways. When they met, he had been her rescuer. For him to be dependent on her embarrassed both of them.

So they sold the house in Sag Harbor with its gray shingles, its cozy rooms layered, decade by decade, with paintings, rugs, objects, photographs. The children's rooms, still cluttered with horse jumping medals and band posters, the expansive master bedroom with its vast bed, the picture window Pippa sat in front of every Sunday, reading the paper or gazing at the birds – the whole of it snapped up one rainy Tuesday by a real estate developer and his wife. The apartment on Gramercy Park went to a couple of childless ophthalmologists. Though Pippa was heart-sick to lose these places she had loved, she was surprised to feel released as well. To shed much of what they owned, to be free from superfluity – the impulse had rung out faintly within her for years, like the occasional beep of a cell phone lost deep in an apartment. But it was muffled by the joys, the comforts, the dilemmas of everyday life as a happily married, well-off woman, a dedicated mother, generous hostess, a woman who seemed to those who knew her to be among the most gracious, the kindest, the loveliest, the most unpretentious and most reassuring ladies they had ever met.

Pippa returned to the dining room carrying the tray of crème brûlée. Herb wasn't meant to have so many eggs and so much fat, but she figured that once in a while he should have what he loved, the way he always had, before the doctors caught up with him. Besides, Pippa loved giving pleasure, and every cook knows that lamb and crème brûlée elicit more sighs at the table than flounder and fruit salad. She watched as the guests broke through the little rinks of caramelized sugar with their spoons, bringing the thick, vanilla-scented cream into their mouths.

Cake

Next morning, Pippa was alone in the living room, supine as an odalisque in a turquoise raw silk kimono shirt and jeans. Her rather flat, feline face, with its high cheekbones and almond-shaped, upturned gray eyes, was framed by hair tinted the color of rose gold. Even in middle age, she resembled a Madonna in a Flemish painting, but rounder, juicier. Her head resting on a Moroccan pillow whose geometric pattern was intended to break up the monotony of the taupe Swedish Modern couch she'd bought to go with the clean lines of the condo, she surveyed her living room with satisfaction. Nothing here was extraneous. She had deliberately rescued each vase, bowl, painting from the morass of belongings that the family had built up over the years, most of which she had given to the children or donated to charity with uncharacteristic abandon when they moved to Marigold Village, storing only the few important pieces she thought she or the kids might one day miss. Each object Pippa had selected to survive this merciless culling now seemed charged with memory, isolated as it was from its peers in this sterile backdrop devoid of associations, walls painted dove gray: the luminous red glass ashtray Herb and Pippa bought in Venice on their honeymoon; her mother's treasured heart-shaped candy dish decorated with tiny shamrocks; the conch shell that her children had held up to their ears long ago, transported expressions on their faces, as they listened to the rush of the sea.

This house makes me feel strange, Pippa thought languorously, propping herself up on her elbow and taking a pair of brand-new binoculars from the glass coffee table. The sliding glass doors were open, and Pippa squinted through the powerful lenses at a

wall of emerald green lawn with an opal of sparkling blue, a tiny, artificial lake – one of the many that dotted Marigold Village – at its center. She jerked the binoculars back and forth until she spied a bird, an oriole, nervously hopping on a willow branch. The bird had a black hood and saffron yellow chest feathers, fading into white at the abdomen. It looked precisely like the glossy picture of a Baltimore Oriole in Pippa's manual, *Birds of the East Coast*, which she had bought at the Marigold bookstore only a week before.

On the day she purchased the manual, she noticed a sign on the bulletin board in the bookstore: 'Marigold reading group meets every Thursday evening at seven. New members welcome.' This caught her interest. It might be a good way to meet people. The following Thursday, she was knocking on the door of the prescribed unit, wearing one of Herb's shirts and a loose linen skirt. She felt she should hide her still solid body from the old women. It seemed only kind. A tiny lady with the tight white curls and pull-on trousers of the nearly aged swung open the door. 'Another young one!' she pronounced rather loudly, half-looking over her shoulder. 'Come on in. Very exciting, us old crones like new blood.' Pippa introduced herself, walked into the living room, and saw a group of women in their sixties, seventies, and eighties seated in a circle like a witches' coven, purses tucked by their sides; in each of their laps lay a paperback copy of Sam Shapiro's latest novel, *Mr Bernbaum Presents*. Pippa nearly bust out laughing. This was too much.

'I'm Lucy Childers,' said the woman who had answered the door. 'This is, let's see . . . Emily Wasserman, Ethel Cohen, Jean Yelding, Cora O'Hara, and – Where's Chloe?' Just then, the other 'young one' came out from behind the bathroom door. Chloe was of an indeterminate age; her taut face was frozen in a semi-smile, having been ratcheted up several notches and enhanced by prominent cheekbones that looked like Ping-Pong balls under her skin. The two swollen halves of her upper lip drooped suggestively, like

a set of red velvet curtains tied at the corners of her mouth, Pippa thought. The tip of her nose was pinched, as though a pair of fingers had squeezed a clay sculpture as a prank. Her eyelids seemed Krazy-Glued open a little too wide. She spoke in a very quiet, level voice, as one might speak to a child having a tantrum.

‘It’s lovely to meet you,’ she said, her startled eyes staring out of that approximation of a face like a prisoner peering out of a chink in a stone wall. Pippa said something polite and looked away, feeling a mix of pity and repulsion.

‘This is Chloe’s last meeting with the club,’ Lucy Childers said. ‘Her husband has recently passed and she’s moving back to the city.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Pippa.

‘Thank you,’ whispered Chloe.

Lucy Childers perched herself on the edge of the couch, back straight, her small feet in their white leather nurse’s shoes lined up beside each other neatly, and opened the discussion with her own erudite thoughts, one tiny, stiff hand chopping the air each time she made a point, then moving it swiftly to the side, as though scraping peelings off a table. Lucy admired the symmetry of the book, the careful pacing, the slow but steady drip feed of information – not too much, not too little; she called it a ‘mystery of character.’ Then she turned to Chloe, who murmured, ‘It’s a mean book, but I liked it.’ Pippa tried to shrug off the unwelcome mix of dread and kinship she felt with this person.

The oriole flew off. Pippa moved the binoculars down a bit, found Herb’s red Converse sneakers. She followed his brown, skinny legs, the little hill of his belly, until she came to his rugged face, lower jaw clamped over front teeth in a grimace of concentration as he read a four-inch-thick manuscript on the lawn chair. The truth was, Herb hadn’t retired. He was running the company from here, buying manuscripts, making deals.

A household list filed through Pippa’s mind on an endless loop,

the way the breaking headlines run under the TV news: *dry cleaning . . . toilet paper . . . plant fertilizer . . . cheese . . .* She had been lying in this luxurious position dreamily for half an hour, having cleaned the house and planned dinner by ten. The circle of the artificial pond, Herb's legs, the brilliant, green lawn . . . Pippa wished she could paint it. It was an odd desire for her; she always said of herself, almost proudly, surrounded as she was by creative folk, that she had no talent of any kind.

The buzz of the doorbell startled her. She sat up and swiveled around to see Dot Nadeau waiting behind the screen door. Dot was a bleach blonde with leathery skin and a sultry, New Jersey voice. She lived just across the artificial lake, in 1272. In their late sixties, Dot and her husband, Johnny, were among the younger residents. Pippa, at fifty, was practically a child bride.

'Do you have a minute?' Dot asked in a muted tone. She looked harried.

'Sure. I'm supposed to be doing errands. But who cares,' said Pippa.

They sat down in the kitchen. Pippa poured out a cup of coffee and handed it to Dot. 'Is everything okay?' she asked.

'Well, we're fine, but . . . my son, Chris. Remember I told you about him?'

'In Utah?'

'Yes. He's thinking of relocating and . . . he might be coming east.'

'Oh, well, that would be nice, if they would move near you.'

'The thing is, he's having trouble . . . It's just a mess, Pippa, a real mess.' There were tears in Dot's eyes. Pippa checked to see that Herb was still ensconced on his lawn chair and fetched Dot a Kleenex.

'What is it?' asked Pippa. She felt awkward. She didn't know Dot very well. They'd had coffee a couple of times, but they'd never gotten past the pleasantries stage.

'He's had some kind of crisis with his wife, and he's left her,

and he's lost his job – it wasn't even a real job, he was working in a men's shelter. How do you lose a job like that? I think he's living in his car. Thank God there are no kids. I don't know what to do.'

'Well, he's an adult, I mean . . . what can you do?'

'He was always sort of half-baked, you know what I mean?'

Pippa wondered what Dot meant. Was the boy retarded? A drunk? Stunted in some way?

'It's painful, but sometimes you just have to accept that they are who they are. I mean, I feel that about mine.' Tender Ben and tyrannical Grace. Now and forever. Nothing to be done. As if on cue, Ben walked in pulling a well-worn seersucker jacket over his sloped shoulders. Whenever Pippa saw him, she was amazed he was no longer a boy. 'Hello, darling,' she said. 'Dot, this is my son, Ben.'

'The lawyer!' said Dot, gazing at him admiringly.

'Not yet,' said Ben.

'Columbia, right?' asked Dot. Immediately Pippa felt a pang of guilt for having a son in law school when Dot's boy was unemployed and possibly homeless.

Dot turned to Pippa. 'You're right,' said Dot. 'I knew I should come to you. I had a feeling. I'm just going to let him cry it out on his own. He can't come running to me every time his life falls apart. It's no favor to him.'

'Of course he knows if he's ever really in trouble . . .'

'He has me.' Dot hugged Pippa and left.

Ben bit into an apple. 'What were you right about?'

'I have no idea,' said Pippa. 'She said her son was half-baked, and I said sometimes you have to accept things the way they are.'

'Well, she left satisfied, anyway.'

'Half-baked?' said Herb, who had come in when he heard Ben's voice. 'Is that code for half-wit?'

Pippa took a blood pressure cuff from a drawer, Velcroed it onto Herb's arm, and started pumping it up. Ben stood to read the dial with her.

‘Since when are you two on the staff of Mount Sinai?’ asked Herb. ‘Don’t get mad,’ said Pippa. ‘Your blood pressure goes up.’

‘How about if I hang myself?’ said Herb with a grim smile. ‘What happens then?’

‘A little appreciation for your ministering angel, Dad,’ said Ben in a jocular, warning tone. Herb slid the local paper across the table, scanned the front page, grimacing. He hated having his blood pressure taken in front of people, even the kids. Pippa could feel his petulance rise up in her like a tide. She should have waited till Ben had gone. Shit, she thought. Oh, well. She poured Ben a bowl of Grape-Nuts cereal and listened to the swift animal crunch his teeth made when he ate it, the same crunch they had made when he was five. She loved that sound. ‘Oh, by the way,’ Ben said. ‘Stephanie brought a cat home from the pound.’

‘Another one!’ she exclaimed, laughing. Ben’s girlfriend couldn’t resist lame animals. She was a dear, earnest person. Pippa was sure they would produce a fine family, as long as Ben didn’t get distracted by someone more exciting. But he didn’t seem to crave thrills, strangely enough.

Ben stood up. ‘Back to the salt mines,’ he said.

‘Are you still working on that same paper?’ she asked.

He nodded, pushing his glasses back up his nub nose. ‘The paper that ate Ben Lee.’

‘You’re just thorough,’ Pippa said.

‘I actually think I might be onto something,’ he said.

‘Isn’t that great,’ she said, beaming. As she walked him out to his car, he put his arm around her.

‘Mom,’ he said. ‘Come to the city next week and we can have lunch. Or dinner. You can stay over.’

‘We’re having lunch with Grace on Wednesday.’

‘Oh. Right. If you want to get together another time, call me, okay?’

‘I will,’ she said. ‘Of course I will. Stop worrying about me, will you?’

‘I just want you to have a little fun,’ he said.

After Ben drove off, Pippa stood quietly staring after him. The list, which had rolled by under Dot a couple of times while she was talking, came into full view now: *cheese . . . dry cleaning . . . plant fertilizer . . .*

It was only three minutes to the mini-mall. Pippa drove over, picked up all the things she needed at the grocery store, dropped off the dry cleaning, then eased herself back onto the searing car seat and started creeping through the parking lot. She was in terror of mowing over one of the aged people, dressed in pink and pistachio, their tanned faces collapsed, shriveled skin coming away from knees and elbows.

*

The relentless buzzing of a lawn mower dragged Pippa from a black sleep like a body from a river. As she opened her eyes, she felt a dull pain in her temples. She wanted water, and coffee. Sitting up in the bed, she glanced at Herb. As a rule she tried not to look at him when he was sleeping. Eyes shut tight, mouth slack, he looked like an ancient, fragile old man. She turned away and stood. She knew that when his icy blue eyes, with their conquering stare, opened, she would feel reassured again. She loved this man so much. It was a condition she had tried to cure herself of many times; the symptoms could be painful. But she’d given up the fight long ago. She was the woman who loved Herb Lee. Oh, and many other things besides, she thought to herself as she pulled on her cotton robe the color of new leaves. Mother. Two decent, productive human beings living in the world because of me. That’s not nothing. She walked into the kitchen, squinting in the blinding light. Everything was white. Formica table, counter, tile floor, lost their edges, bled into a field of light, their perspective flattened. Shadows from the window casings threw a blue grid over the room. With her vision blurred from sleep, the effect was so dazzlingly abstract that she had to take a moment to get

her bearings, and when she did she was so confused by what she saw that she questioned her own memory.

The table had been set chaotically, plates scattered at random, as if tossed by a furious domestic. Some of them had chocolate cake on them. Others were bare. Pippa noticed something the color of peanut butter spread on one of the slices of chocolate cake. She sniffed it cautiously. It was peanut butter. Yet she distinctly remembered sponging down the table the night before. The place had been immaculate. A chill went up her spine, and she swiveled around, imagining a malevolent pair of psychotic eyes staring at her from the living room – some escaped lunatic, brandishing a dirty cake knife. Seeing no one, she went to the kitchen door, tried it. Locked. She walked around the house, checked every door, every window. All locked. No one had come in. It must have been Herb. But they had gone to bed together at eleven. Herb had fallen asleep first. She tried to imagine him getting up to let people in, after midnight, for chocolate cake and peanut butter. It was out of the question. Then how had the cake gotten there? She cleared the table, scraped plates into the garbage, and stacked them in the dishwasher. Made coffee.

She was sitting at the table drinking a cup when Herb walked in, opened the front door, and dragged the local paper off the mat.

‘So,’ she said. ‘I can’t believe you had a party and didn’t invite me.’

‘What are you talking about?’ he said, putting on his reading glasses.

‘You left all the plates out.’

‘What plates?’

‘Herb, there were six plates with chocolate cake on the table this morning. Or there were six plates. Two of them didn’t have any cake on them. One of the slices had peanut butter on it.’

Herb sat and looked at her. ‘Have you gone stark raving mad?’ he said, laughing.

‘At first I thought someone came into the house, but the doors are all locked.’ There was a pause as this sank in.

‘Does anyone else have a key?’

‘Well, I guess the maintenance people. And Miss Fanning.’

‘The cleaning lady? She lives in New Milford. Why would she drive all the way over here for chocolate cake? We better check if anything is missing.’ Nothing was missing. Pippa called Miss Fanning and pretended she was confirming her for Monday. Then she casually asked her what she’d been up to the night before. There was a pause. ‘Bowling?’ the woman answered tentatively. Herb called the administrative offices to register a complaint. They asked if he wanted to call the police. Herb declined. ‘I suppose you could call it a victimless crime,’ he said, his nostrils expanding slightly. The man on the other end of the phone chuckled politely.

Pippa called a locksmith, had the locks changed. This time, they gave no one a key. A week went by. Pippa kept thinking about the cake. It had to be Herb. He had forgotten. He was losing his mind. Pippa watched him with special care now. Every time he misplaced his glasses or forgot someone’s name, she felt her suspicion grow. Then, the next Sunday morning, she walked into the kitchen and found carrot sticks planted in a bowl of vanilla frosting. A frying pan with the remains of fried ham cemented to the bottom. More dirty plates. This time she woke Herb and showed him. They looked at each other.

‘Maybe you should see a doctor,’ she said.

Herb was furious. ‘Okay, if I have Alzheimer’s so be it, I’ll kill myself. But first I need to see the evidence.’ He drove straight to the electronics store in the mini-mall and bought a small surveillance camera with a wall mount, then paid the man from the store to install it in the corner, where the wall met the ceiling. The guy was up on a ladder, sweat pouring down his face. Pippa turned on the air conditioner. ‘This must seem a little strange to you,’ she said.

‘You’d be surprised what people do for entertainment in this place,’ said the man.

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, but I’ve never seen it in the kitchen before.’

‘Oh. No. It’s not – it’s –’ Pippa let it go. She’d rather have him think they were filming themselves humping on the kitchen table than chronicling her husband’s descent into inanity.

An hour later, Pippa was straightening out the living room when she looked out the plate-glass window. Across the pond, in the Nadeaus’ driveway, a U-Haul was hitched up to a bright yellow truck with an orange shell clamped over the bed. The shell had windows with ratty blue and red gingham curtains pulled shut inside. Pippa could see Dot gesturing to a dark-haired man who was carrying a cardboard box. Pippa picked her bird-watching binoculars off the coffee table and trained them on the young man. He had a T-shirt with ‘What?’ printed on the back of it. So the half-baked son was moving in after all! It was funny about Dot, she thought. It felt so natural, talking to her. It made Pippa feel like a different person. Dot knew her out of context. A few months ago, in her old life, she would no sooner have had a friendship with Dot Nadeau than flown around the room. Their friends were editors, novelists, critics, poets. Yet Pippa had never felt fully at ease in their hypercivilized company. Only with her twins, when they were young – only then had she felt fully secure in who she was. Grace and Ben had looked up at her with such certainty in their little faces, and called her Mama. They knew, so she knew. Now her babies were gone. They called sometimes, came home to visit. Occasionally they all went out to lunch together. But they didn’t look at Pippa the way they once had. Ben was still so sweet to her. He had always needed little, expected everything, received what he expected. He was born thoughtful, but secure. Pippa’s feeling for him was simple, ample, easy. But Grace – that was a real fuckup. Pippa felt stupid and bumbling in her daughter’s company, and somehow guilty, as though she had let Grace down by amounting to so little. And there was something more.

As a very young child, Grace had been needy, clutching at her

mother like a baby monkey. Her love for Pippa was possessive and competitive. Though she adored her twin, she tried to edge Ben out of her mother's embraces, desperate to bask in her love alone. The day after her fourth birthday she sat down at Pippa's feet, opened a book, and read the whole thing out loud. Pippa was astounded; the child had been completely intractable when it came to reading, refusing to sound out letters at all. Little Grace looked up at her mother then and, with furrowed brow, asked, 'Now do you love me more than Ben?' Pippa swept the girl up into her lap and hugged her, feeling a sting of guilt like a poisoned needle in her sternum. Because she knew what Grace was getting at. There were flashes of jealous intensity in her daughter's love that Pippa found domineering, devouring, even repellent in moments that came and, mercifully, dissolved again into the otherwise sunny landscape of their daily lives. Once, watching a ship disappear over the lip of the ocean, Grace said to Pippa, 'I own you as far as the eye can see.'

Though she did not recognize it, in some secret part of Pippa's mind, her daughter's wish to possess her utterly echoed another love, a deadly, sweet, and voracious passion that had all but suffocated Pippa in her youth.

Yet, never mind, in spite of it all, now that Grace was grown she was a triumph! So sophisticated, so courageous. Pippa found herself watching her sneakily, out of the corner of her eye. And occasionally, in her daughter's recklessness, her lust for adventure, her desire for experience, she recognized herself, a self that had vanished long ago. How had it happened? How could she have changed so much? She remembered the morning she looked in the mirror and saw three white, bent hairs sticking out of her head. They had looked obscene to her, like stray pubic hairs escaping from the crotch of a bathing suit. Now, beneath the reddish blond tint, her hair was white. Pippa was a placid, middle-aged woman. And Herb was eighty years old. The thought of it made her laugh. Life was getting so unreal.

More and more, the past was flooding into her, diluting the present like water poured into wine.

Herb walked in then. Pippa turned. 'Do you need anything?' she asked.

Herb sat down and patted the pillow beside him. 'How's my pal?' he asked.

'I'm okay,' she said.

'Are you sad that you're living in Wrinkle Village?'

'I have to fill up my days more. But I'm not sad. I think it's sort of romantic, starting again like this, with so little stuff.' Herb smiled sadly and lay back on the cushions. His skin, bronzed from all that time on the patio, was creased like a rock face, his eyes points of light.

'Always looking on the bright side,' he said to her.

'Why can't it be?' There was a pause.

'Maybe we should move back to the city,' he said.

She laughed. 'We just sold our apartment!'

'So we buy another one.'

'Really?'

'No, of course not. It's just hard thinking this is the end of the line.'

Pippa put her hand on his knee and looked around the room. She wondered what she could make for him. Maybe a glass of carrot juice. She had begun to feel a kind of desperation when they were alone sometimes, as if everything that they could possibly say to each other had already been said, and now language was useless.

'That was good cheese yesterday,' Herb said.

'It was vacherin – I was so excited to find it.'

'I love that cheese.'