The Senator's Wife

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Meri, June 1993

From her perch in the middle of the backseat, Meri surveys the two in front—her husband, Nathan, and Sheila, the real estate agent. There is something generally vulnerable about the back of the head and the neck, she thinks. Nathan, for instance, looks a bit schoolboyish and sad from the back—his ears in particular—probably because of the haircut he had before they started out on this house-hunting trip.

They've been at it for two days. Meri has occupied the backseat the whole time—at first because that's just how it happened when they all got in the car, and then by choice. She finds she likes the sense of distance. She likes the view she gets of their faces as they turn to speak to each other or to her—the profiles, the three-quarter angles. She feels she's learning something new about Nathan, watching him this way, hearing him ask his real estate questions. He has so many! Questions about heating costs, about taxes, about the age of appliances, about insulation and school districts.

Why hasn't she thought about any of this?

Because. Because the other reason she's sitting in back is that she can't bring herself to care very deeply about the house—whatever house it's going to be. The whole thing is Nathan's idea. Meri has sometimes spoken of it to him jokingly as "your big, fat idea," and, as it will turn out, that's apt: the house will cost much more than they'd planned on spending.

But even that will have almost nothing to do with her. Nathan's the one with money. Not that he has a lot. But some. He was living penuriously in their midwestern college town when she met him, salting away what he could. He lived penuriously before that in another college town, a saver there too. In the end it has piled up a little bit. But more important, he has a mother willing to give him his "legacy," as she calls it, before her death. She doesn't need it, she has said repeatedly, and he does.

The idea of a parent not only willing, but able, to help you out financially, before or after death, is alien to Meri. A legacy? She will contribute nothing to the purchase of the house—she has nothing, and nothing is coming to her.

None of this means she's unsympathetic to Nathan. She loves him. She understands his impulses and wishes. He was miserable when they met, trapped in the meanest of academic environments, where his brand of scholarship and his popularity with students was looked on with a combination of contempt and envy. To be offered a job at a good college in the East, a job in a department that values the kind of work he does, a tenure-track job, a job with the promise of what might be called *real money* in these circles—this is a coup, an achievement. An escape. They celebrated the news by going out to dinner in the best restaurant in Coleman—the Italian place—and by spending a good deal of the following weekend in bed.

The house they are planning to buy, whatever house it turns out to be, is supposed to be a further celebration of all this—of Nathan's new luck, of his new place in the world. It's supposed to mark, for him anyway, a great change, a beginning.

For Meri, its meaning is less clear. She's sad to be leaving her life in Coleman and her apartment there. She'll miss her job and the people she works with at the alumni magazine. She'll miss their competitive telling of jokes. She'll miss their long meetings, the meandering conversations that would finally and inevitably come around, in some mysterious way that always surprised all of them, to the topics for articles they might do for the magazine.

And she's just a little worried about her marriage. She knows Nathan is planning a life, a life which the house is part of, that she's

not sure she wants to live. She doesn't know whether she can be at home in the place he imagines, in the way he imagines her being. She suspects there's trouble coming. But she feels if they can just hold on to the easy camaraderie and sexual heat of their early days, then they can find a way to keep talking about all this, a way of shaping their marriage to suit them both.

THEIR FIRST DAY with Sheila was a waste of time. They had agreed on this in their room at the inn yesterday evening, lying down exhausted and fully clothed on top of the bedspread, not touching. Nathan's hands were folded on his chest, as though he were arranged for viewing at a funeral home. They agreed they would have to raise their upper limit to get anything they really wanted—or Nathan suggested this and Meri went along. To her, everything they'd seen seemed possible. In each cramped little bungalow or shabby row house, while Nathan was getting visibly depressed, she was thinking how, if you just painted the pine paneling white or ripped up the orange carpet, if you took down the heavy layers of curtains and let the light in, the place could be livable. But because she could see Nathan's sorrow, she didn't try to sound hopeful or cheerful about anything. These weren't qualities he seemed to like in her anyway. And back at the inn she didn't even mention any of this. She agreed with him, she bolstered him. She was the one who finally got up from the bed and made the phone call to Sheila—told her they would need to start over with new rules the next day.

Sheila has quickly pulled together a revised list for today's viewings. They've seen three so far. The first one was too far out of town—they both wanted to be able to walk or bike to work. The second one was just ugly, they all agreed over lunch. Fake-brick siding, a tiny dark kitchen. No. The third one, the one they've just come from, was lovely, a Victorian, but also much too big and in need of repairs. The porch actually bounced slightly as they strode across it, and inside Nathan pointed out the water stains on the ceilings and walls, the rotted window frames.

Now Sheila is saying that this next one, the one she's driving them

to, is a little out of their range, but she thinks it's so perfect for them that she just wants them to take a peek. She mentions a price that makes Meri flinch in the backseat. She looks quickly at Nathan.

His face is in profile to her as he looks over at Sheila. Meri can see a small, bitter smile move across it. A danger sign, though Sheila doesn't know that. But Meri can sense what's coming. He's about to tell Sheila it's a *lot* out of their range. He's about to ask her not to waste their time. Maybe he's even about to say that they're tired, that they've seen enough for one day.

But Sheila isn't looking at him. Her small, childish voice rolls on, an innocent and unstoppable flow. Meri thinks of clear, shallow water. "It's a double house, actually," she says. "You know, attached. The other side is owned by that old senator who's retired now. Oh, I bet you know him: what's his name? The famous one, more or less the Kennedy era. He even looked kind of like a Kennedy. Oh, shoot!" She smacks the steering wheel.

Meri watches as Nathan's face changes, as the little smile disappears. He says, "Tom Naughton?"

"That's it!" Sheila says. She turns and smiles at him. "They've owned it forever. I've got no idea how long. Since way before my time."

There's a silence. Nathan turns to look at Meri. She can admire the sculpted line of his cheek, his jaw. "It wouldn't hurt to look, I guess," he says.

"You know me," Meri answers. "Real estate *voyeuse.*" She tries to make her voice sound ridiculously sexy, she shimmies her shoulders, and Nathan laughs. That's good. He hasn't laughed, it seems to her, for a few days.

But who's Tom Naughton?

She'll have to look him up.

WHEN SHE MET NATHAN, Meri was living alone, in a place she loved—one vast room in an old brick building whose tall, bare windows looked out over the mostly empty main street of what was euphemistically called downtown Coleman. At one time the building

had been a factory—harmoniums had been built there—and, factory-like, it had uselessly high ceilings, of pressed tin. In winter, the warm air rose up and sat just under these ceilings, far above Meri's head. Or at least she assumed that's where the warm air went. There was certainly none down where she lived. There, chilly breezes crisscrossed the room, on a stormy winter day sometimes actually stirring the piles of papers stacked everywhere. Meri wore multiple layers of clothes at home through the coldest months of the year, and huge green down booties all day and well into the night. She wore them to bed. She didn't remove them until she had been under the covers for a while and the heat of her body had begun to tent her safely.

It was for this reason, among others, that she was grateful to have met Nathan in the early summer, when, even though it had no cross-ventilation, the apartment stayed cool and airy with the outsize windows thrown open. When she went barefoot at home, loving the feel of the painted wood under her feet. When she wore skimpy dresses that showed off how tall she was, how strongly built. When you could lie naked in comfort.

They had known each other for only a month, lying naked in comfort for much of that time, when he moved in with her. They had married a month after that. They had been married for ten months when they flew to Williston to spend this long weekend looking at houses they might live in.

When Sheila pulls up at the curb, Nathan sits quietly for a moment before getting out, looking up the walk. *As though in reverence,* Meri thinks. She follows his gaze. There's a for-sale sign planted in the deep lawn, and behind it rise the two attached brick town houses, built at the turn of the twentieth century, probably, with lots of white carved-stone trim around the windows and doors—curlicues and animal shapes. There's even a small couchant lion at the top of the stone steps up to the porch.

They get out and go up the long walk under a wide oak tree. Moss is growing between the bricks under their feet. Sheila is talking to Nathan about the number of bathrooms, about the kitchen, which

they would probably eventually want to renovate. Meri walks behind them, fishing a cigarette—one of the four cigarettes she allows herself daily—from her purse. "I'll come in in a minute," she says as Sheila works the front door with her key.

They don't answer. Nathan disapproves of her smoking. Well, who wouldn't? But the sign of this is that he pretends not to notice it, that he not only ignores her when she's doing it, but any reference to it. It's as though the cigarette is an invisibility device, she thinks. Presto!

Meri watches them step inside the house. She hears Nathan say, "Zowie." She finds her matches. She listens as they talk for a moment—he's asking Sheila about the age of the house; something about the floors—and then their echoing footsteps and voices move back into the house's depths.

She sits down on the stone balustrade that encircles the large, rectangular porch. It's cool and damp under her buttocks. The porch is divided—Senator Naughton's half, their half—by a shorter balustrade projecting out from the wall between the two heavy wooden front doors. The lion rests on top of this, his mouth slightly open, as if he's just seen something that surprises him. She inhales deeply.

She inhales deeply and thinks about sex with Nathan. There's been a drought, the last week or so, and she misses it. She misses him, she thinks. He has gone away from her, into thinking about his future.

Their future, she corrects herself.

From her perch, she can see up the long, broad street where nothing is happening, though somewhere children are yelling. The branches of the trees arch over from each side of the street and meet in the middle. The houses all sit back behind their imposing front yards. The Senator Naughton house is in a series of single and double houses that sit closer together at what must once have been seen as the less-fashionable end of the street. She turns and looks again into the opened doorway. She can see all the way through it, into a room full of light at the back of the house. The kitchen, no doubt. The kitchen they will want to renovate.

Meri thinks about this word: *renovate.* She's not sure she wants to be a person who renovates anything. Renovating is different from painting the paneling or pulling up the orange wall-to-wall carpeting.

Different how?

Different because it takes money. That's the problem, isn't it? She's stepping into a bourgeois life, and she's being a little testy about it. Is it because the money isn't hers? couldn't be hers?

She doesn't know. She inhales again, relishing the acrid taste.

Sex is what did it, of course. They couldn't have been a more unlikely pair, more different. Nathan has what Meri has come to think of as credentials: a distinguished, or at least a solidly reputable, academic for a father—long deceased—a mother who has a silver tea service, inherited from her parents. Who used this tea service on the occasion when she met Meri. A mother who could say, when Meri admired it, "Oh, it's just plate," as though that made it less remarkable.

In spite of herself and the choices she's made in her own life, Meri has a nearly inborn respect for all this, probably as a result of watching too much television in the seventies. When she and her sister played with their Barbies, Meri's Ken doll was always a doctor or a lawyer. Even then, even at eight or nine, she was a sucker for a notion of security derived from prime time. Meri's sister, Lou, was contemptuous. Her Ken was a movie star, or a cowboy, or a guy who raced motorcycles. Meri's Ken, she said, was a dult. This was a word they both used well into their teens. It was born of Meri's childhood misunderstanding of the word *adult,* which she heard as two words, article and noun. Lou had co-opted it to simultaneously point at, and offer judgment on, the world of the grown-ups. *Dults,* almost all of them.

The part of the world of grown-ups that Meri's father came from was very different from Nathan's. He was more like Lou's Ken doll than Meri's—a long-haul trucker, gone on the road for weeks, and then a hard drinker during his restless days at home. And her mother's life had no relation to a life either Meri or her sister was interested in. She altered and made clothes for the ladies in the small Illinois town where they lived. She made all of Meri's clothes, and

Lou's too, until the girls were old enough to babysit and earn a little money. After that they bought their own, mostly jeans and tops as provocative as they could get away with. They'd been wild girls in high school, bad girls, and Meri sees it as a matter of great good luck that somehow she didn't get pregnant, didn't have to drop out, wasn't twice divorced and collecting unemployment, all of which had happened to Lou. Instead Meri took slow, incrementally more ambitious steps—through a community junior college, then the state university, then graduate school in journalism. All this got her to where she was when she met Nathan: a scratched-together life, making most of her money editing the alumni magazine and writing for it—articles on conferences at the college, on faculty projects and publications, on guest lecturers. Occasionally she placed a special-interest piece in the *Des Moines Register,* or even, a few times, in the *Chicago Tribune.*

Meri is short for Meribeth, Lou for Louisa. What was their mother thinking, giving them names like these—feminine, soft, pretty? "I thought you kids would get in the kitchen and help me out once in a while, instead of whatever it is you do all day. Your nails. Your hair."

But that wasn't really what she wanted. Not at all. When they did try to help her, to cook or do the dishes, she stormed into their midst, whacking them with whatever was handy, scolding them for the mess they were making or the insufficiently clean pots and pans. No, what she liked was for them to go away and leave her alone. Fine with them. She liked—at any rate she *seemed* to like—standing at the sink with a cigarette planted in her mouth, the smoke curling up around her squinted eyes, her hands in dishwater, the radio on, her mind far away from them, far away from the tissuey patterns that lay waiting for her on the dining room table, from the women who came and went, talking intimately of their lives while she knelt before them and pinned their clothes to fit.

She had died of breast cancer three years earlier, and Meri had a strange and powerful reaction to losing her, delayed by four or five months and then confusing in its intensity. "It wasn't as though we were close," she said in wonderment to Lou on the phone. She had called her, in tears.

"How could you be?" Lou said. "She never talked."

Was that it? Meri wondered. Was it just a yearning for what hadn't been?

One of the nicest things her mother ever said to her was when she told her she had good teeth. "Smile," she had commanded over coffee one morning, and Meri obeyed. "Straight," her mother said, already turning away. "Not like Lou with her overbite." That was it.

For years in her adulthood, Meri swung between attractions to men like her sister's Ken doll and those like her own. Between danger and safety. When she met Nathan—safety—she was attracted for all her own sorry reasons.

They were both in the audience at a lecture given by a former presidential press secretary on post-Reagan politics. Meri was there because she was going to write about it. Nathan came up to her afterward at the reception and said, "Who are you, taking all those notes? You're too old to be a student."

From across the room, Meri had been watching him talking to the press secretary, taking him in—his wild hair, his tall, shapely body, the quick, slightly vulpine smile that suddenly made his pretty face interesting.

"I'm nineteen," she said in an offended voice. "I've had a hard life, if you must know."

He had flashed the smile. He was at least four inches taller than she was, and she was five eleven. "Would you like to have a drink?" he asked. "There's nothing I like better than a hard-luck tale."

Though Meri was dazzled by him, she consented to go out with him almost reluctantly, knowing she'd be bored—or that she'd get bored, quickly: she always did with the safe ones—and then she'd have the problem of extrication, which she wasn't any good at. Things always dragged on much too long in her life. It was a waste of increasingly precious time. She was, in fact, thirty-six.

But that wasn't how it had turned out, once he touched her, once he kissed her, once they made love—which happened, that first time, in her apartment, in the late afternoon, with the sunlight striping across the painted floor and the sounds of the street drifting up occasionally.

She is thinking about this, her breathing a little irregular, her precious second cigarette of the day neglected, turning to ash between her fingers, when the door opens on the other side of the porch and a woman steps out. She starts, seeing Meri, and then says hello. Meri says, "Hi," and the woman turns away to lock her door behind her. She must be about seventy, Meri thinks. She's tall and erect and somehow compelling.

Meri herself is what she thinks of as an *almost-pretty* woman. A lover had once told her that she looked like an attractive version of Pete Rose. She doesn't think it's that bad, though her features are a little imprecise. *Smudgy* is a word she's used for them more than once. Because of this, she's learned to invent ways of being noticed, of being found appealing without ever being thought beautiful, and this has made her a connoisseur of other women and their beauty. This old woman—she has turned to Meri again—is someone who was a beauty once, Meri would put money on it. A beauty of the handsome, commanding sort. Maybe a little intimidating, actually. She probably still draws attention walking down the street. Her face is deeply lined, but she has strong, regular, lovely features. She's wearing bright red lipstick. Her hair is a mass of curly white, and there's a quality in her expression and carriage of energy, of curiosity and sexual power. She's dressed irregularly for someone her age—a slightly clingy print blouse and flared skirt. Flat hemp-soled shoes, French-looking.

"Are you looking at the house?" she asks. There's something patrician in her pronunciation.

"Yes," Meri says.

"But on the other hand"—she tilts her head—"you're *not* looking."

Meri smiles at her, charmed. "We've had a long day at it. I needed a rest." She waggles what's left of her cigarette. "I needed to be bad for a minute, I've been so damned good all day."

The woman laughs quickly. "Ah, yes. Goodness is so hard to sustain," she says. "Still, when you do finally get around to looking, you'll like it, I think." She smiles. "But I would say that, wouldn't I? It mirrors mine, and I like mine. I've liked it for almost thirty years."

"Thirty years!" Meri says. "Wow. I can't imagine living in any one place for thirty years."

"But I doubt you can imagine living itself for thirty years, can you?"

"That and then some," Meri says, in a stylized, tough-broad voice.

"Which I don't believe for one second," the older woman says.

"Well, you should. I'm thirty-seven."

"Ah, thirty-seven." She nods. "It's a wonderful age, isn't it?"

"It is?" Meri flicks the last of the ash off the cigarette.

"Yes, it is. It's a perfectly balanced age, to my way of thinking. With any luck, you've left foolish youth and vain hopes about your life behind you. You're done with all that kind of pain. But on the other hand, you're still young, you're still strong." She pauses, she looks out over the front yard, then back at Meri. "Ready for real life to begin."

Real life? What does that mean?

"I'm Delia Naughton," the woman says abruptly. She steps toward the lion that separates her from Meri, and Meri steps toward her. Over his head, they shake hands, and Meri tells Delia her own name. She spells it too. She always does.

"Will you be doing something at the college?" Delia asks. Her eyes are a piercing, hard blue.

"Well, I'm not sure about myself," Meri answers. "I've got a job hunt ahead of me. But my husband will. He'll be teaching. In political science and history." She's proud of this, glad to be able to announce it.

"Ah!" Delia says. She nods, several times. "Well," she says, "I hope you *are* interested." She steps back, gesturing at the house. "It would be lovely to have young people on that side of the wall. And if you do buy it, I'll be happy to help you get settled however I can. At the very least direct you to the grocery store and the dry cleaner and that very boring but essential kind of thing."

"Thank you," Meri says. "You're very kind."

"Not at all," Delia answers. She goes down the stairs, a little slowly, gripping the decorative iron rail. She starts walking down the brick path. Meri finds herself wanting to stop her as she moves away, to offer her something. "Mrs. Naughton!" she calls out.

The older woman turns. She takes a step back toward Meri. "Please call me Delia."

"Delia," Meri says. "I just wanted to say that my husband"—she

tilts her head back toward the house behind her—"is apparently a great fan of your husband."

Something changes in Delia Naughton's face. She looks a little blank for a few seconds, as though she's forgotten she has a husband, a husband Nathan might have heard of. At any rate, Meri sees that this isn't quite the gift she intended it to be.

But now she smiles. "Ah, well," she says, and looks away, down the block. "He joins a multitude of great fans, I'm afraid. They are my husband's specialty." She waves her hand and continues down the walk. At its end, she turns right, toward the busier street that leads, Meri knows, to the college and the center of town.

Meri watches her until she disappears. Then she puts the filter, which is all that remains of her cigarette, into the little box she carries in her purse for butts. She gets up and goes inside.

She's more interested now. She feels suddenly energetic, a feeling given to her, no doubt, by Delia Naughton. She tries to tell herself that after all, Delia was just being polite, but she can't help her response. The attention of older women always does this to her. Makes her feel, somehow, blessed. *This is what comes of maternal deprivation,* she thinks.

She stands in the living room. She can hear footsteps and doors opening and closing upstairs, and then the low murmur of Sheila's and Nathan's alternating voices. She looks around. The room is large, but in some ways awkwardly arranged. It sits open to the front door—there is no hall—and it features a long curving bench under the six front windows. The bench is made of the same yellowish wood as the wide, ornate mantel. This wood is everywhere. It continues past the mantel as wainscoting, and then as a panel on the side of the landing of the stairs, which projects out into the living room. The next room back, which Meri takes to be the dining room, has three windows that form a bay. She goes through it, her footsteps loud on the bare wood. Just after it there's a closet, then a lavatory, and opposite that, a dark butler's pantry with glass-fronted cupboards. She works the old-fashioned latch on one of the cupboard doors. There's a musty but not unpleasant smell as it swings open. The shelves are lined with a faded, figured paper, splotched and

stained here and there. A large refrigerator with chrome trim sits in the pantry too, its door hanging slightly ajar. She hears Nathan laughing somewhere upstairs.

Meri goes into the kitchen itself, which is a long room, full of light. The back of it is almost like a greenhouse, it's so windowed. The yard outside this wall of windows glows radiantly green—a sycamore arches over it, with its beautiful pale, scaling bark and the sun filtering through its leaves. Meri steps over to the glass and looks out. The yard is weedy and overgrown. A weathered stockade fence separates it from the Naughtons' yard next door. Their kitchen doesn't extend as far back as this one, and directly below where Meri is standing, they have a wide fieldstone terrace, rather formal, encircled by a box hedge. Two wooden chairs bleached to a silvery gray sit on it, and Meri thinks of Delia Naughton there, having a drink with someone older and distinguished, someone like Ted Kennedy, only much, much thinner.

She walks away from the windows to explore the cooking area of the room, such as it is. Wedged against the common wall, there's a tiny white enamel stove with four burners and a narrow oven door, and next to it, a wide low porcelain sink on legs, clearly from some earlier era. That's it. There's no counter to speak of. It reminds Meri, actually, of the kitchen area at the back wall of her apartment in Coleman. There she had made a counter and storage out of a solid-core door placed over two bureaus she bought at the funky antique shop in town. Here, of course, Nathan will have a say in all the arrangements, and she realizes that she has no sense of what his inclinations will be, his taste. Will they junk her bureaus? She hopes not. She's fond of them.

Maybe more important, they're hers.

There's a closed door on the wall the pantry backs up to, and Meri opens it. A narrow, steep stairway twists up to the left. She mounts it, using the handrail. On the second floor, she looks quickly through the four bedrooms and two baths that open off the long hall. They are pretty rooms, nicely shaped, especially the largest one at the front, which has the same curved row of windows as the living room. They're all in need of new wallpaper and fresh paint, though. The

ghosts of old paintings sit as brighter squares or rectangles on the faded walls, and here and there the edge of the wallpaper is curling back, showing another color or pattern beneath it.

The bathrooms are old-fashioned, with linoleum floors and claw-foot tubs. Meri likes claw-foot tubs. One of the sink faucets has a steady, slow drip that has marked the porcelain with a wide rust stain.

She finds Sheila and Nathan on the third floor in an open, finished room lined with bookcases. Nathan turns to her. He looks happy. The sign of this, besides the grin, is the dishevelment of his hair. When he's excited, he can't keep his hands from running through it, pulling it. Sometimes when she meets him after a class that's gone well, he looks as frazzled as when he first wakes in the morning.

"Be a nice study, wouldn't it?" he asks her, sweeping his arm out.

Clearly he and Sheila have been talking about this. She's primed. She jumps in, pointing out the skylights, the view out into the trees that line the street. She speculates about the logical place for a couch, a desk.

"And tell Meri about the owners," Nathan says to her.

Obediently, Sheila narrates, in her childish, prim voice. The husband was an architect. "A noted architect," she says. The wife was a musician. No children. They lived here all their married life. He died in the sixties, and she lived on alone until her death the year before. He was the one who'd changed the house, Sheila says. This room, for instance, was the attic before he converted it into his office. He'd taken out the walls on the ground floor and expanded the kitchen, all in the late fifties. "After that, nothing. I don't think it's even been painted since then."

"That's why it's so cheap," Nathan says, smiling at her.

She stares at him for just a moment. Cheap?

It's clear that the decision has been made. She gets a breath mint out of her bag, and smiles at Sheila and Nathan as they go on talking.

BACK AT THE INN, as they mount the stairs, as they walk single file down the long, narrow corridor to their room, Nathan is excited,

throwing his observations on the merits of the house back to her. Almost as soon as they're inside, he excuses himself to call his mother—he'll need to ask her about the price, which is more than she had counted on. Meri pulls a chair over by the window and peels an orange while he talks. He describes the house lovingly—the crown moldings, the leaded glass windows in the kitchen, the height of the ceilings. "It's beautiful, its bones are right there, but it's also the kind of place where the lights in the bathroom are those overhead fluorescent circles. That's what makes it so great," he says. "It just needs sprucing up, but it's basically very solid, very distinguished."

Their room is on the second floor of the inn. The floor is bare wood. It creaks as Nathan paces back and forth, needing motion as he always does when he's happy. She's seen him teach, and he's always in motion then too.

The window in front of Meri is open. She props her bare feet on the sill. The curtains rise and fall around her, sometimes brushing her legs as she listens to her husband. Oil sparks out from the skin of the orange as she bends it, sparks out and disappears in the air, leaving its scent behind. There's white pith under her fingernail. She eats the sections slowly, carefully peeling off all the threads. Nathan and his mother are talking about money now, about interest rates and monthly payments. Outside, someone passing by is whistling, and across the street, the canopy of leaves on the town common moves slowly in the wind, one mass of green. There were four or five students playing Frisbee on the lawn under these trees when they came in.

Nathan and his mother have agreed on things, it seems. At least Nathan is making agreeing noises, winding-it-up noises. He hangs up, and the room is quiet for a long moment except for the students' faint cries floating in from outside.

Then she feels his hand on her shoulder. "Hey," he says gently. She reaches up and touches him with her own orange-smelling fingers.

"Hey, turn around," he says.

Meri does, gripping the arms of the chair, picking it up and turning it with her. She sits back and looks at him. Nathan is beautiful. You shouldn't love someone for the accident of his beauty, Meri

knows this, but it's what drew her to him. How could it not? His eyes are a brown so light as to be nearly gold. He's sitting on the edge of the double bed, facing her. Their knees are almost touching. They would be touching if the bed weren't so high. It's a four-poster, with a white chenille bedspread.

"It's all okay with my mother," he says.

"I gather."

"Are you ready to own a house?" He reaches over and strokes her leg, her jeans. "This is something you want to do, right?"

Meri nods.

He rocks her leg back and forth a little. "Right?" he asks again. He wants more from her.

"Oh, you know me, Nate." Meri makes a face. "I'm always nervous about change. I'd have had us grow old in my apartment."

"I would have had that commute, though. Hard on me."

"Yeah. That would have been the wrinkle." She feels the curtains around her like a quick caress, and then they die back.

"Don't be nervous," he says softly.

"Oh," she says brightly. "Okay."

He laughs. Then his face grows serious and he says, "It's our house, Meri. I wouldn't have wanted a house if we weren't together. It's for us."

She offers him a wedge of orange, and he takes it. They're quiet for a moment, eating.

"Let's celebrate," he says abruptly. "I'll call Sheila and make the offer, and then let's go downstairs and have champagne."

"You think they have champagne downstairs?" The inn's bar is dark and utilitarian. At lunch it was full of people who might have been faculty, having hamburgers and iced tea or beer in heavy mugs.

"We can but try. Put on something hot. Let's be festive."

As she's changing out of her jeans, she calls to Nathan, washing his sticky hands, "Maybe it's because I don't have a job yet. Maybe that makes me feel . . . less *real* about living here."

He's come to stand in the doorway to the bathroom, holding a towel. "You'll find a job."

She opens the closet to get her dress out, smiling at him. "I'm so glad that's settled."

"Well, it is."

Downstairs, the bar is half full. They sit at a square table, its surface a single thick slab of wood, scarred and fissured, with a shiny finish. Nathan goes over to the bar and leans on it. She watches his back and his strong rounded buttocks as he shifts his weight to rest one foot on the rail. The window next to her is open. In the distance, there's the sound of someone running a leaf blower.

Nathan comes back with two champagne glasses, the bubbles coursing frantically upward in each. He hands one to her and sits down. Though it has the weight of glass, Meri's flute feels like plastic to her, and when she touches it to Nathan's to toast the future, there's a dull noise, nothing musical.

But it's good champagne, dry and flavorful. "Yum," she says.

"*You* are yum," he answers, and raises his glass again. "My mistress of the house."

"Now, why does that sound so much more interesting than *wife*?" she asks.

"It doesn't," he says.

She snorts and has another sip of champagne. As she sets her glass down, she says, "I have another question: who's Tom Naughton? Besides being an ex-senator."

"You don't know?"

"I'm asking."

"He's one of the really good guys. He was. I think he had two, but it might have been three terms at the time of all the Great Society stuff in the sixties and seventies. He was part of the whole discussion on poverty, of how it should be dealt with, which *was* the argument for the few seconds they had all that money to throw at it. He was always known to be a straight shooter. Even the guys who disagreed with him respected him."

"And then?"

"Well, basically I think he just retired. Maybe he saw the handwriting on the wall." He frowned. "Or there might have been some

personal issues, I'm thinking. I can't quite remember. Anyway, the whole thing died in the seventies, and his heyday was over." Nathan twirls his glass slowly. He shrugs. "He's still around, with some fancy D.C. law firm, part of various commissions. You hear about him every now and then, advising, writing policy papers. Like Hart. Or Rudman." He looks at Meri and grins. "It'll be neat to meet him."

Now they start to talk about the house again, about specific rooms and how they might use them. Meri makes her voice casual as she brings up the solid-core door, the bureaus. When Nathan says, "Yeah, we'll sure need them, won't we?" she feels a rush of something like gratitude. She lifts his hand to her mouth and kisses his fingertips.

But as she releases his hand, then as they sip the last of the champagne, as they leave the bar and head upstairs, she is thinking, as she has at certain moments ever since she married Nathan, of how separate she and he are. She is thinking that she doesn't want to be grateful to him for what he allows her. She doesn't want not to have been consulted about the house.

But she let it happen, didn't she—the situation of her own disenfranchisement about these things? In order to be truly honest with Nathan about all her feelings, she would need to be willing to fight it out, to argue over every small thing. And she hadn't realized, until she got married, just how many small things there were. It makes her feel tired to think of it.

Upstairs they stand on opposite sides of the bed and move quickly out of their clothes. Meri crawls across the coverlet to Nathan. She lies down on her side, looking up at him, opening her knees as he reaches for her.

The air from the open window is cool, but Nathan's body is warm, he radiates heat. He's hard, and she reaches down to help him, to shift him into place. She feels a kind of relief as he enters her. This is what she wants. This is the way she feels honest with him, safe. Here, she thinks. Yes. As he begins to move in her, she whispers it: "Yes. Yes!"

They make love quickly, fueled by his urgency, and when he comes, Nathan cries out so loudly that Meri can imagine someone on the sidewalk below stopping, listening under the darkening trees.

Afterward they lie still, side by side. Meri is looking up at the ceiling, which is low and veined with cracks that have been patched in. She thinks of the ceiling in her apartment, the patterned tin squares. Nathan's stomach rumbles. Meri's mind begins the cartwheels through her life that routinely follow sex. She's remembering how it was to make love with the man she was dating before she met Nathan. Rick was his name. She thinks of his cock versus Nathan's—shorter, fatter. She thinks of the comment he made about the inadequacy of her stereo speakers, a comment that deeply offended her and led directly to their breakup. Then—how? is there any possible connection?—she's off on the article she's in the midst of writing about the research of a young archaeologist at the college. She'll finish this article and one more, a summary of recent faculty publications, and then she will be done, her job will end.

Nathan says, "You like it, don't you?"

She looks over at him. "The house?" she asks. Her voice is croaky.

"God! What else?"

She clears her throat. "I don't know." He's silent. "Sex?" She's smiling, but he doesn't look at her. "This room?" She turns on her side to him. "Don't be cranky, Nate. Maybe I just feel less . . . connected to the idea of homeownership than you." She thinks abruptly of Elias, the gay man who works with her at the magazine. When he wants to ask discreetly whether someone else is also gay, he says, "Is he a homeowner?"

She is about to tell Nathan this, but he's moved on, he's started to talk about the house again. This time his angle is the amazement—"I mean, how likely is it?"—of moving in next to Tom Naughton.

"Yes," she answers. She thinks of Delia Naughton's face changing at the mention of her husband's name. She runs her hand over Nathan's belly, smooth and white and hairless. His whole body is long and beautiful this way. He makes her think of an El Greco saint. Her head is propped up on her other hand. "Yeah, I like her, anyway."

"What do you mean, you like her?"

"Oh." Her hand lifts and her fingers make quote marks. "*The wife.* I talked to her for a minute today. When you and Sheila were inside. She was . . . I guess you would say, *welcoming.* Nice."

Nathan is silent for a moment. He gets up abruptly. He goes into the bathroom. She can hear him splashing water around in there. Now he's standing in the doorway, filling it with his long body, wiping his face with a towel.

He's looking at her.

"What?" she says.

"Why didn't you tell me this, earlier?"

He's wounded. As Meri knew he would be. As she had intended, she realizes. Almost as soon as she mentioned Delia Naughton—"the wife"—certainly when he responded with silence, she knew she had wanted this moment, this moment of a kind of revenge. On Nathan. Whom she loves. She can't help it; even now she feels a kind of pleasure.

At what? That she knew something he didn't? Nyah, nyah. Is it that petty? Is *she* that petty?

"I didn't think to, until just now," Meri says. This isn't true and she knows it. There were several moments when she could have offered it to Nathan and she didn't. She didn't because he had made her feel excluded.

Nathan stands watching her for another moment. Then he sits on the foot of the bed. "What did you talk about?" He half smiles. "With *the wife*?" His voice is sarcastic, but he's trying to forgive her, trying to get back to where they were.

"Oh, nothing, really. It was a minute. 'Hi, how are you, let me know if I can help, blah, blah, blah.' Just, she gave it a little more than that. She has serious charm."

He doesn't answer.

"Nathan, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I should have told you earlier. But it doesn't matter, does it? We've bought a house. We just made love. I would file this under 'trivial,' this mistake. Not so very wicked, after all."

He reaches down and grips her feet, moves them gently. His hands are warm. "Only a little," he says. "Only a little wicked." He smiles at her in the twilit room. She loves him. That's all that counts. She loves him.