

## *The Marijuana Tree*

Denise got the inspiration at her local Trust & Loan. She was off work for the afternoon, due to an untimely trip to the gynecologist, and when she dropped by to make another deposit toward retirement, she noticed the unusual Christmas display they'd set up in the foyer. Bells and bobsleds she could stomach, and yes, even a few sly-faced elves who looked like they might be contemplating a career hike to upper management. But there was no tree, or none to mention, only three fat dollops of tree shrub, no trunk in sight, as if the Republican's famous trickle-down policy had finally dripped into the heart of Christmas and eroded it into pint-sized portions. The treelets looked attractive enough in their white flocking and tasteful bulbs and bows, but she didn't see a lot of evergreen underneath. In fact, she realized, scraping off some of the flocking with a Kleenex, the trees were downright brown, not even needled, but shriveled into the rope-like texture of an ivy vine in winter. She slipped the Kleenex back into the pocket of her beige wool cape—the centerpiece of her new gracefully aging lady wardrobe—and twirled around the display slowly, the way she would at an art gallery if she couldn't quite make a piece out.

A man in a gray striped vest and yellow power tie nodded in her direction. "Afternoon, Miz Crane," he said. Only in Wheeler would this be an abbreviation of "Mrs." rather than an out and out concession to the changing times. Denise bit her tongue and smiled.

"Afternoon, Larry. Management down-scaling? Holding a Christmas benefit for dwarves?"

The banker blushed in a delicate filigree around his male balding pattern. How maudlin, Denise thought, when she noticed herself waxing sentimental about some receding hairline in a crowd. Carl, her husband, had a lovely one, a curling blond flame over each ear, and a pink cervical cap of scalp at the top. More and more, it was this bit of exposed flesh which she called up when she felt obligated to remind herself of her love for him.

"This is your new ecological style Christmas ensemble, ma'am. No harm to the environment, no shedding pine needles, minimal cleanup." He laughed into his handkerchief. "We just roll them away."

"Artificial?" she said, raising an eyebrow. She'd staved off her craving for artificial greenery for years, regarding it as an embarrassing half measure. When she finally gave in, it would be for a wooden crèche, a pinecone wreath and a gallon carton of unspiked eggnog.

"No, ma'am," Larry paused, dramatically, for a banker. "Tumbleweed."

Tumbleweed. They didn't stock them at the supermarket, or heap them up in bundles on the uneven asphalt lot of the volunteer fire station. But you could go chasing them out on Highway 66, as they went rolling out from under your tires like wild turkeys. Which is exactly what Denise did, since she'd lost the afternoon anyway, and had some considerable thinking to do.

She pulled off the road at an observation point and just watched them run for a while, pretending to be a state policeman clocking their speeding violations: 75, 69, a whopping 97. What wonderful power men must feel, rushing through the world at car chase velocities. Denise never speeded. It was bad for her heart, which murmured at any disorderly conduct. She had a number of minor health conditions: heart murmur, insomnia, dysmenorrhea, with which Carl was unsympathetic. He hated any mention of her fragility, and would turn to some pressing project and hum a country ballad every time she had any new development to report.

Not that Denise was frail. She'd raised three children, saved two businesses, jogged through the fitness craze, and mellowed into aerobic walking. But she needed to pace herself. Carl, on the other hand, was a sprinter. He'd work himself into a frenzy with every major law case, discarding first social engagements, then formal meals, sleep, and any unnecessary contact hours with herself and the children. Afterwards, he'd simmer off at a slow boil, sleeping ten hours at a stretch, preparing extravagant meals,

family outings, and demanding athletic sex at all hours. Denise regarded it as a sign of health, a hunter-and-gatherer instinct. She loved feeling the fever break at each one of these pressure points, his body too hot to touch all night, then, in the morning, magically cooled by a fresh sweat smelling of lemon and newly mown grass.

But it was hard on her. There was no denying it was hard to keep up, she thought, as she changed into her tennis shoes, slammed the car door, and went after her Christmas tumbleweed.

By the time she got the thing home she was more enthusiastic. At some point in the quarter-mile chase, her adrenaline had kicked in and infused her with the Christmas spirit. Or maybe it was just Christmas panic. Since her children left home, she'd been leaving preparations later and later, until she was practically buying her gear on the very eve of the blessed event, just in time for their annual bed-and-breakfast in the country. Carl didn't notice anyway, and the kids wouldn't show up until late afternoon on Christmas Day.

At least there was no struggle up the stairs, no mechanical difficulty with the tree stand, no chopping and hacking to the proportions of the room. Denise pushed up her sleeve and shook the can of flocking spray, then delivered the blasts with all the energy of the street vandal, her own winter storm. As she worked, she fantasized about being pricked with a pine needle and falling asleep for a hundred years. When she woke up, she'd be a truly old woman, past all the quandaries and embarrassments of transition. Her lawn would be overgrown with mysterious vines, her great-grandchildren would be hosting their golden anniversaries, her retirement fund would have blossomed with interest.

The tumbleweed looked delicious now, like a huge ball of Christmas candy rolled in powdered sugar. Denise went to the kitchen, poured herself a vermouth and dumped in some candied fruit, for color, then climbed up onto a kitchen chair and went digging for ornaments in the cabinet above the refrigerator. Over the years, they'd collected every kind of decoration: glazed gingerbread, styrofoam snowballs, stuffed and embroidered rocking horses and Santas, pipe-cleaner sugar plum fairies with glitter matted in the pink netting of their skirts. At some point, Denise got in the habit of buying each child an ornament every Christmas, and there was a

fuss if everyone's favorites didn't make the tree. Then the children started earning their own incomes and bought her ornaments in return. As her collection got bigger, her trees got smaller. And now that she was reduced to this tree nublet, she didn't know how she'd manage.

She pulled out a snaky strand of red glitter, some glass bulbs, and selected one novelty ornament for each member of the family, including a baby in swaddling clothes for Sally's newborn, her first grandchild. Denise had always wanted to simplify, to plan a color-coordinated Christmas, but the children panicked at any mention of restraint, preferring the usual jumble of unmatched wrapping paper, family memorabilia, and clashing motifs. Maybe she could get to like this new era, she thought, pouring herself another drink, garnished with a sprig of mint this time.

When Carl came in at six-thirty, his camel coat half-unbuttoned and his scarf tangled over his arm, Denise knew he'd started another one of his manic jags. He sat down to beef stew and Caesar salad without even loosening his tie. Denise pleated her napkin in her lap. If she didn't make her move soon, she would lose the advantage of attacking while his mouth was full. She forced herself to eat a carrot or two, but she didn't have much of an appetite for what would follow. Then, with his last sip of iced tea, Carl began a long explanation of his latest frustration: the plaintiff in a libel suit wouldn't settle out of court because he was so interested in the glamour of courtroom procedure. He wanted to edit all the briefs. He wanted to choose Carl's tie for the court date.

"This would never happen in Chicago. I can't believe I'm out here in the provinces doing nickel-and-dime melodrama. We didn't need to raise the legal consciousness of your average small town citizen. We need to lower it. Take the goddamn soap operas off the air."

Denise turned her wrist over and looked at her watch under the table. This could go on for twenty minutes without interruption. She knew. She'd timed it before. Carl's favorite subject these days was the inadvisability of his move to Wheeler, three years ago, to take over his father's law practice. Anything could lead to his long-running, fast-moving disquisition on the woes of small town life.

"The choice of health care providers in Wheeler isn't too tempting either," she said, throwing her napkin onto her plate.

Carl looked down at his salad hopefully, searching for any bits of roughage that he'd missed.

"You've been home for half an hour and you still haven't asked about my day."

He slapped his hands on his knees and pushed away from the table. "My God, what's that?" he said.

He was staring into the living-room, at the tumbleweed balanced among the throw pillows on the window seat.

It did look strange, Denise thought, like some kind of alien space pod masquerading as an igloo. Well, it would do him good to try and figure it out, look at the holidays from a different angle.

He was already at it with his key chain by the time she cleared the plates.

"Don't scrape off all the flocking. I spent all afternoon decorating."

"But decorating what? Where'd you get this thing, Denny? Do you know what it is?"

Denise brushed some hairs off the back of his suit coat and resisted the impulse to tell him it was a plant from the Pentagon, a New Age herb remedy, a bonsai tree imported for Western converts to the Buddhist faith.

"I'm serious, Den. Do you know what it is?"

"Why, you must remember Christmas trees. Very popular among Christians and non-practicing atheists in the late twentieth century."

"Jesus Christ. Where do you get this stuff? Some guy's going to come in here and sell you a rainbow some day and charge you extra for the fucking cloud cover. Come here. Come here, you."

He cut off a sprig with the nail clipper on his key chain and held it up to her nose. Denise was smelling very little but vermouth at this point.

"Mistletoe?" she said.

"Well, there won't be any at my office party. It's cannabis, sweetheart. Herb, hemp, weed."

Denise's nose itched. She was going to laugh, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it. "Where do you get that from, a *Dragnet* rerun?"

"Very funny, Den. Do you remember that I'm a representative of the law? How do you think it looks for me to have illegal substances displayed in my picture window? Not to mention fines and penalties. The real possibility of being disbarred."

"For what? Illegal importation of holiday cheer? Hunting down shrubbery without a license?"

"Possession. That's a lot of reefer, love. Ignorance is no excuse in the

mind of the law. It doesn't matter if I'm blindfolded in the bedroom and you're out here passing out quarter baggies. I'm still responsible."

"So, now you suspect me of dealing weed? Sure, that's what I'm planning on giving as Christmas gifts. Little bags of marijuana dolled up as party favors. I hide them in the Christmas ornaments. Want to see?"

"Never mind. I'll take care of it for you. Just let me get on my work clothes."

"This is not a marijuana plant. This is a tumbleweed I picked up out on the highway."

"So you just picked it up somewhere. How do you know what it is? You're not a botanist."

"No, but believe me, I recognize our friend Mary Jane. I'm the veteran of three teenagers, remember?"

Carl pushed her arm away and gave her his wrinkled forehead glare. The man was all concern, and the waves broke further and further up his forehead as he aged. "Just what are you trying to tell me?" he said.

"Oh nothing that you'll pay any attention to, dear. Why don't you run upstairs and put on your play clothes. Then you can go putter in your study."

"I'm not the one who's going senile."

"Humor me," she said. "Or if you can't do that, muster a little fear. You're not going to ruin Christmas again for me."

Carl touched the oversized art brooch on her blouse. "You want to come upstairs and help me change?"

*Marijuana, the kids used to sing. L-S-D. All the teachers have it. Why can't we? This before they had any idea what they were talking about. Marriage-you-wanna? Meet me in Tijuana. You can bring your own iguana. Where the air is like a sauna. And the honeymoon is sweet.* A jump-rope chant she'd heard Sally and Darla yelling in the street, before she got them in their father's study and explained. Tim was worse. At fifteen, he used to come home with his pupils dilated like chocolate chips expanding in the oven and sit down to eat all the cereal in the house. When she brought her magazines and her cup of tea into the kitchen and tried to engage him in conversation, he'd laugh at all the wrong spots, as if he was listening to the seedy underside of what she said. She was afraid for him, but she

was also embarrassed for herself, trapped in a frame of mind where she couldn't understand her own son.

So when she found a couple of joints in his jeans pocket, she looked around the laundry room and decided to give it a try. She turned into a suffragette out there sneaking a smoke. At first, she didn't feel anything, just a prickly irritation in her throat. The stuff sure smelled good, like the tea shop in Marshall Field's. She certainly preferred it to beer. Then, when she was ironing one of the girls' church dresses, it dawned on her: the peachy glow of illumination. Her fingertips were transparent on the handle of the iron. The knot on the back of her neck unwound, nerve by nerve, until she worried it was the only thing holding her together. The more she ironed one side of the frilly dress, the more wrinkled the other one became. And this suggested some kind of truth to her, as if the smooth, well-tailored self she'd made up over the years of her marriage was just one half of the garment: the fresh face she put on all the irregularities of body and soul. If I were standing on the other side of the ironing board, she wondered, would I be the same person? The light bulb stuttered and a strobe kept beating a consistent rhythm in her head. Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? it said, like one of the riddles they told to the children.

A three-legged stool. A teapot. Twenty white horses stomping on a red hill.

I'm just Timmy's mother, and I'm here to take him home.

That's when Tim barged in the laundry room, looked toward the washer, and spotted the joint in a canning lid on the end of the ironing board. He gave a small, embarrassed smile and held up his hands, arrested. Denise will always remember the rip under the arm of his blue work shirt, the sparse blond hairs poking out underneath, and the change that started somewhere behind his eyes and swept up toward his father's forehead when she began to giggle.

"You thought I was going to be mad, didn't you?"

"What are you doing with this stuff?"

"Oh, I ran across it in your dirty clothes and I thought it was some kind of tip. I didn't want to look a gift-horse in the mouth."

"Geez, Mom. You're stoned as a fish."

"Oh, is that what this is? Hmm, it's pretty zippy, huh?"

"Oh, yeah, it's real be-bop material."

"So I'm stoned. You've been stoned for the last six months now, haven't you? You've been stonewalling me."

"Well, off and on. You know, that's what kids do now." He leaned back against the dryer, prepared to settle for a while.

"So, how do you like it?"

"What?"

"Being stoned as a fish?"

"It's OK. OK, Mom, could you just go ahead and ground me or something?"

"Here, why don't you come over here and smoke a peace-pipe so we can make it up."

He edged up to the ironing board, reached over and rubbed the back of her neck with a deep, muscle-drenching kindness, the way he'd done when he was small. But by now, he was so strong that the force reconnected her bone by bone. "Hey, I'm sorry. It doesn't mean I'm going to turn out to be an axe murderer or anything."

He still smelled of baking soda, something she remembered from his first days of life. As if he was always meant to grow up this sweet and expansive, extended beyond her ken. Denise felt her tear glands squeeze open. She figured the drug made her more susceptible, and dismissed it as an allergic reaction. She pushed the half-smoked joint toward Tim. "Shut up and take your medicine, boy."

Tim inhaled in an audible and expert manner that made her heart complain. But in the middle of the second drag, his handsome face turned red and he started choking. "We're not going to tell the D.A.D. about this, are we?"

Lying in bed with her leg crossed over Carl's, she realized that her loyalties must have shifted long before that point. Once she's completed her family, what use does a woman have for a man? she asked herself, reversing the doctor's rhetorical question. Even money wasn't a consideration, since she'd been nourishing her own nest egg at the Trust & Loan. But tonight, just as she'd almost given up on him, she felt a physical twinge toward her husband, as if someone was wringing out a dishtowel in the general location of her womb. Her legs were still good, but when he lifted and twisted them in love-making, she noticed new licks of cellulite at

the tops of her thighs. In certain lights, her breasts looked similar. And now fibroids were proliferating in her uterus.

Carl touched her eyes and closed them as if she were dead already. "Relax," he said. "If you could have anything you want for Christmas, what would it be?"

Possibly, her life wasn't even two-thirds over yet. She might need all her remaining organs for the long nights ahead.

"Anything?"

"*Carte blanche* for a white Christmas."

Denise ran her hand over his chest, and felt the hairs springing up under her fingers, thicker than she remembered. When she married him, there was just a trickle of gold running down in a gully toward his groin, but now it looked like he'd be a hairy man, before he was done. "A marijuana tree," she said.

Later, when Carl wandered off to his study as she'd predicted, she went down to the kitchen and called Tim in Chicago. They let it ring four times before picking up. Then Miranda answered. The two of them weren't formally married, but they had both voices on the answering machine in a kind of electronic prose poem, and Denise assumed that amounted to almost the same thing, these days. She wondered if she'd interrupted something.

"Hi, Mother Crane. He's just coming in from the lab. It's your mom, Mr. T."

Denise supposed Miranda was a good choice: a girl with a crisp mind and farmer's market beauty, the kind that would wear well. Tim was too wise, even at twenty-five, to be running after the flashier models. But Denise worried about the proprietary note in her voice, as if she had to cajole the boy into talking to his own mother. Denise would never take that maternal tone with her son. But maybe that's what Tim was looking for. Maybe he'd been missing it all along.

"Hey, Mom. Did you get my message?"

"Seven o'clock Christmas day? I guess that gives me time to come across with the goodies."

"We'll bring the wine. There's something I want you to try."

"Tim, I have to tell you that this Christmas might be different."

"Did you forget the mistletoe again?"

"Worse, the tree."

"Well, we'll bring Miranda's rhododendron. That ought to do her."

"And I went to the doctor's today, and got, not really bad news. But he's trying to convince me to yank out the spare room."

Tim paused. "Hysterectomy?"

"What do you think?"

"Just a minute," he said. "Let me switch to the other phone."

While she waited, Denise scraped at the coagulated stew stuck to the counter. It was Carl's night for the dishes, though he hadn't gotten around to it yet. Perhaps he thought the sex would act, miraculously, as a substitute. When the children were home and he was in an amorous mood, he'd say: "Your mother and I are going upstairs now . . ." and the kids groaned, knowing he was about to put half-an-hour of soapy water between them and their evening's play. Denise sometimes pretended they were still down there, little blonde elves clattering away at the china and cutlery while he did the inventory of her body. Who would ever notice if a cup or plate turned up missing some day?

"Did you get a second opinion?" Tim said. "Is there any particular reason the guy's harping on it now?"

"'Tis the season, like they say. No, I've been having some pains, nothing serious. But he thinks it'll improve family existence for your father and me. His wife did it last year and he's never been happier."

"I'll bet. You've got to come up here and talk to someone else, someone who's read a little literature in the past twenty years."

"Well, the good doctor is quite the bedside companion. 'Think of it as an orange,' he says. 'Once you eat the fruit, you can throw the peel away.'"

"Mom, he didn't say that."

"I wish I'd had a tape recorder."

"Why don't you fly up here and see your old doctor, then we'll take you back for Christmas?"

"Well, that might not be a bad idea. You're always the practical one. You know, I suppose it would make more sense to call your sisters, but Sally's so taken up with the baby and Darla is just discovering her sexuality and all. I don't want to put a damper on the process."

"What about Dad?"

"Lost in space. He's more worried about my drug consumption."

"You've got to tell him sometime."

Denise heard a creak on the stairs. "There's the old Clause now. I'll get back to you. Thanks a lot, Timmy."

"At least give the guy a chance to screw up first," he said, and Denise wondered if his loyalties weren't shifting too.

Every morning for almost a week, Carl offered to throw the Christmas tree out on his way to the garage, and every night, Denise talked him down again, took him upstairs for consultation. She pulled out gowns and camisoles she hadn't worn in years, brought dessert to bed, lit scented candles all around the room, narrated him through the erotic scenarios of a lifetime. By now, she knew all the springs and catches to his libido and she built her stories accordingly, with the levers and false leads of a mousetrap: her imaginary love affair with the schoolgirl vampire haunting the old hotel in Charleston, the commuter train ride where she'd put his hand up her skirt, then carry on a conversation about the shocking stuff they were showing on television with the woman next to her. The time they'd pretended to be brother and sister on a trip to Spain, not touching until their shadows tickled on one another's skin.

Carl started leaving his shoes at the door, his tie draped over the mantle of the fireplace.

Denise stopped spending her usual half hour in the bathroom each morning and put her makeup on in the car instead, the way she'd done in her twenties, rushing from bed to board and back again.

Her flesh hummed as she drove. Her breasts responded when she lifted a coffee cup or picked up the phone. It was like the desire to have a child, only in reverse. She craved everything burnt and bitter: coffee grounds, popcorn kernels from the bottom of the pan, rhubarb crisp. She walked around in a fever of feeling, her skin worn thin as an old Victorian gown, so all the light came through.

She didn't tell him about the doctor.

He didn't insist about the tumbleweed.

They arranged their usual Christmas Eve outing to a little Swedish town devoted to tourism—the closest thing to a resort within a hundred-mile radius of Wheeler. There, they'd stay at a bed-and-breakfast with hand-carved furniture, eat cinnamon rolls served to them by air-brushed blondes in embroidered aprons, and shop for hand crafts and more extraneous Christmas decorations, then hear the *Messiah* sung by a choir of

Lutherans who descended like Mayflies from all over the country. It was usually a treat, but this year, Denise was reluctant to go, nervous that any alien element would upset their rare equilibrium.

Carl, who took his leisure seriously, packed a cooler full of champagne and told her she was faking.

"You know you'll be fine once we're there. You did this with New Orleans and Europe too. The minute we're up in the air you think you left something burning in the oven."

"I left the coffee pot on that once."

"And who called the Delaharts to come in and turn it off? When will you learn that details are just details? Whatever it is, I can expedite it, Den."

Denise untied the scarf around her throat and rearranged it over her head. She was practicing posing as an old peasant woman. She only hoped he could get to like that too. "You think everything's just logistics. Some situations are real, well, situations. You can't just write a memo and make it go away."

Carl shifted behind the wheel, his long legs jammed up against the steering column. "What are we talking about here?"

She set her purse in her lap and started going through the contents: Kleenex, Tampax, nasal spray. "Famine, for one thing. And then there are plagues, like AIDS. World wars. The greenhouse effect. Old age."

"Oh, not that again. I thought we already did the middle-age crisis routine."

Denise snapped the purse shut: you could tell the old lady models because they made a more resounding cackle as they closed. "Excuse me. You went through the middle-age crisis routine. I sat home with bated breath waiting for you to renounce your racquet-ball partner."

Carl blushed, then blanched, so that she could see the long, double-branched vein standing out in his temple and then glanced back to check his blind spot, pretending that he wanted to change lanes. "I kept my marriage vows, that's something not many men can say."

"I kept my mouth shut, but then a whole gaggle of women have that to brag about."

"Let's continue the trend, shall we?" Carl turned into the left lane, a little recklessly.

"Well, you sure wanted to go on about it at the time."

"I was being open and honest, like all your self-help books are always preaching."

"You were trying to negotiate your position."

"Maybe you really don't want to take this trip?"

"What about you? Do you want to go back to Chicago? You can drop me off at the nearest rest home."

He put his hand on her knee and her nerves flinched all the way up to her armpits. "Denny, it's been three years. Have some mercy. Haven't I been a good husband to you?"

She untied the scarf again, and wiped at her eyes with one corner, then unwadded the silk to see how much damage her mascara had done. She had no idea what it meant anymore, to be a good husband. Someone who tilled the womb well, didn't overgraze or sew wild seed, grafted his ragtag genetic material into sturdier stock? At this point, she'd rather have a houseplant.

"Don't worry," she said. "No one can ever tell you that you haven't done your job."

The hotel wasn't as crowded this year, and as Carl unwound his butter twist, Denise sipped the strong, fennel-scented coffee and surveyed the other patrons: a young couple with identical sweatshirts and tawny collar-length hair who couldn't afford a more exotic honeymoon, a pudgy man and wife badgered by two pre-teenagers playing war games across the tablecloth, a thirtyish grade-school teacher type with an older woman, perhaps her mother, in tow. The mother woman kept going on in a squeaky leather voice, like bare skin peeling off a car seat. "They're clean, they're decent, they're trustworthy, but they like their coffee breaks, these Swedes. From ten to eleven, then from two to three in the afternoon. Makes you wonder how they find time for lunch in between. Could be we'd have a lighter skin population right now if the Vikings weren't always off on some meadfest killing time."

The younger woman held her coffee cup in both hands and looked into its depths. Then she tipped the cup toward her, spilling it, deliberately, Denise thought, from the tick flickering in the dimple of her pretty cheek.

"Goodness, Lucy. Your table manners haven't improved much since the harvest banquet in seventh grade. What do you ever do when men take

you out for dinner? Or is that still happening much these days?"

Carl wiped his fingers on his napkin and touched his knee to Denise's. She strained to catch Lucy's reply.

"No, nowadays we usually cut straight to the cappuccino," Lucy said. "That's actually more difficult for them, since they have the extra added problem of keeping the cream off their mustaches."

Denise made an effort not to laugh and felt the caffeine hit her capillaries in grand style, producing more space in her head than she thought possible. She hoped she wasn't this way with her daughters, especially Darla, who was so sensitive she'd turn white and start pinching the backs of her calves when anything remotely squirmy turned up in conversation. Denise gave Carl's knee a nudge. The skin behind her ears burned, and there was a little preliminary gnawing in her personal forest of fibroid tumors. The doctor told her that coffee only exacerbated her condition, but she couldn't give up the feeling of expansion, her consciousness doubled and trebled.

"Don't you ever hear chords?" she asked Carl.

"Only when I'm with you."

"I mean, do you think it's possible to read someone's mind?"

He looked right into her eyes, the way he'd done when they were dating and they held long staring contests in her dorm room, in his Plymouth, in the First Methodist parking lot, where the first one to look away had to give in and say what they were thinking. His milk-blue irises iced over and the sunburst wrinkles around his eyes flexed. "After all this time, why would you want to?" he said.

During the afternoon of Christmas Eve, Carl bought an antique end table and a pipe stand; Denise found a pair of hand-carved candlesticks and a brooch made out of pheasant feathers. No more Christmas ornaments, to her relief, though the little town seemed to be on permanent Yule time with its festive blue and yellow tiles, potted pines, and the red Swedish rocking horses painted on every possible surface. This was even odder, Carl pointed out, because the snows here were so sparse. The early settlers must have missed their native climate, and built this town as an island of winter on the plains. Denise liked the idea. She'd just as soon live here as in Wheeler, as long as they were off in semi-retirement repenting of their sins.

They came back to the hotel room and took off their clothes for a nap before dinner; just as Denise suspected, now that they were on actual vacation, Carl wasn't interested anymore. He lay on top of the bedspread with his hands crossed over his stomach. Denise listened to his wispy breath deepening into a long, uncanny snore. She had the covers stripped off her side of the bed and had to keep adjusting them to the changes in her body temperature: the whole bedspread combination, twisted-back blanket, bare cotton sheet. Her torso was a low-lying plain subject to the slightest atmospheric shift, with cold fronts coming in from the north, unexpected heat waves flashing up from the stippled mountains of her thighs. She smelled of green tornadoes and thunderstorms. She rolled over and bit the corner of one pillow, pulled another down between her legs.

When she finally fell asleep, she heard Carl rustling on the other side of the bed, getting up and running the shower. In her dream, this was the noise of the locker room behind her. A woman in a white shorts set came out of the steam, her sandy hair frizzed up in a halo around her face, her low-cut sweater revealing freckles sifted deep into the snowdrift of her cleavage. She took a balloon out of her pocket and proceeded to fill it at the sink. As she did, her breasts wobbled, and her lips moved. Denise's abdomen pulsated in response, its walls pushed and polished to the texture of chewing gum. Then the woman held the balloon up to the fluorescent light, a warm red water bottle, with a round belly and a long turkey's neck stretched out with the water's weight.

"Do you know the ceremony?" she said.

"I'm not paying for anything," Denise told her. "Just remember that."

"Hold out your hands."

The woman let the bottom of the balloon rest on Denise's cupped hands, and Denise felt suddenly dirty, as if she was touching herself in a way she hadn't done since she was twelve, and spent all those hours in the bathtub letting the water run between her legs, opening the secret panels of her labia to find the second belly button inside.

"Tell the truth, do you really want to go?"

In those days, the nursery song about Alice kept running through her head, and she was convinced that she'd be another one to go slipping down the drain if she didn't stop just in time, before she fell into a trance and forgot her milk money, before her mother called out for her to stop

priming and come set the table, before she turned into a grown woman who had to cross her knees in public, even in slacks, and sleep on her back to avoid squashing her bosoms.

"I want to stay," Denise said. "It's not even dinnertime yet."

The woman lifted the balloon above her head and swallowed it, like a circus seal swallowing a fish. Then she followed it with a steak knife, a thermometer, a syringe.

Denise felt herself getting warmer. "Why are you punishing me? You're the one going around stealing husbands. You're the one who has to go."

The woman pointed to her full cheek, and Denise saw the dimple winking in its hollow.

"OK, just this once, you can talk with your mouth full."

Then the racquet ball partner pulled something off her tongue, like a hair that had gotten caught there during love-making. She held it out to Denise.

It was a whole branch of evergreen, a shred of shriveled red balloon caught in its needles.

"One for the road," she said.

Denise woke with a strain in her belly, as if she was in labor again and a fourth child had set about unraveling her intestines like a pretty strand of glitter. She was marinated in sweat, and the sheets were wet underneath her. Everything smelled acidic, like her urine in asparagus season, and she was convinced she was going to die.

Carl sat at the foot of the bed fiddling with his cufflinks. When he saw her eyes open, he gave the springs a couple of bounces and grabbed her around the ankle.

"My God, Den. You're soaked. What, did you have a little private work-out session without me?"

"I think I'm having a miscarriage," she said. "You better take me home."

In the car, Denise lay in the back seat and grasped onto her purse. She felt the pain build and burst in fever blisters underneath her. At the moment of the fiercest pressure, she bore down hard, knowing she was about to get the payoff of a couple seconds of relief. It took all her concentration just

to ride the contractions, which she imagined as a series of men far too young for her. If she let down her guard, they would notice her gray roots and kill her off right away. But Carl kept calling to her over the seat, wanting reassurance that she was still conscious. She couldn't really talk, but she managed the single syllable: "Hi." Even at this late date, he was getting her signals crossed.

"Do you want me to turn the heat up? Are you OK back there?"

"No."

"Denny, we've got this thing under control. The hospital's only three miles away. Den, you just hold on there. Remember, you can do this. You've done it before."

"No." Denise knew there was something else, outside the rhythm of her pain, that she had to think about. Did she want to die without having it out with Carl, letting him off the hook for eternity?

"There's something," she said.

"Something important?"

"Something to say."

"Denny, love, you should just maintain back there."

"Got a bank account."

"Money's not a problem. We don't need to talk about money now."

Denise lifted her head off the seat so she could speak louder. "Saving up to leave."

"Leave where?"

"Back to Chicago." She waited for the downbeat of the contraction to make sure, then added: "I'm not dead yet."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Give it to Darla. She'll need it now."

"Denny, don't you know how much I love you? How much I need you to stay?"

Denise dropped back down to the seat. She didn't doubt him, but it seemed too late, and beside the point somehow. He couldn't help her now, she was riding out beyond his reach, where she was probably headed all along. The highway was spun glass beneath her, and she felt herself hydroplaning up off the surface of her pain. It was like the moment when the aircraft tipped up off the runway, her Darvon kicked in, and the question of elevation didn't matter anymore. She was finally speeding, tumbling faster than any spin cycle or rambling weed, and she didn't want to stop.



They did the operation on an out-patient basis, so Denise was scheduled to be home for Christmas after all. Her doctor wasn't too enthusiastic about being consulted at ten o'clock on Christmas Eve.

"This is going to keep haunting you until you have the surgery," he said. "You need more R-and-R after every D-and-C."

"Thanks for the tip. Don't call me, I'll call you."

"You really can't take care of it soon enough. What does your husband say?"

"If you don't mind, I'm in pain. Merry X-mas, doctor."

"Suit yourself, but I'm going on the record recommending surgery."

"And I'm bloody exhibit one."

The nurse took the phone away from her and handed it back to the intern-on-call.

"All over, Miz Crane." she said, "We can get you ready to go home now."

Denise looked into the nurse's unlined face and grimaced. Was she going to have to go through the rest of her life hating younger women for an ignorance they couldn't conceal? Her breath curdled in her mouth, and she remembered a year when her mother wouldn't go shopping for clothes with her anymore, when she stayed in her bedroom wearing a mottled green housecoat and transferring photos from one album to another, sorting out items for Good Will. Was that the year it had happened to her? Did she have to separate herself from Denise to make the change? And then—Denise felt her heart burn, thinking of it—she met Carl and started confiding her problems with Mother in him. Her sadness shaded into a deep, warm melancholy where some new feeling could begin.

The nurse touched Denise's forehead and looked at her chart. "Now, we need you to take it easy for a while. Let that cute husband of yours baste the turkey for a change."

When Denise woke up, it wasn't morning anymore, and she was lying on the couch staring at the daguerreotypes of the three children on the wall: a cowlick, a headband, a ponytail. They were period pieces by now, with

no particular resemblance to anyone in the family. But she kept them on because they reminded her of a black-and-white segment of her life when she was too busy to bother much with the color details. Strange smells were coming from the kitchen. She got up and dragged the grate away from the fireplace, poked around the fire until she felt a stitch in her gut. Then she went over to the marijuana tree. Lucky it was so light, she told herself, not much to weigh her down here.

The tumbleweed bristled against her robe, and a couple of ornaments rolled off onto the floor, knocking against the furniture and tinkling like icicles breaking on the pavement. It was difficult to get a handle on the thing. It had no shape, no stem, no bottom and no top. Denise ended up holding it in her arms as if it were a fat baby, picking stars and ballerinas out of its hair. She gave it a final dusting, tweaked one of its branches, and rolled it into the fire. The flame flapped against her face, lighting up her whole nervous system with the hot pipes and blown fuses it was specializing in lately. But the weed didn't catch fire right away. It rolled toward the flue, resettled, crackled and crinkled. There was an industrial smell from the flocking that wafted up and stung her eyes.

Then a spark jumped from a yule log to one spiny strand of the tumbleweed and followed it all the way around the maze of curves. Another licked up next to it, lit out on a second circuit of branches. A different scent rose from the fireplace now, something spicy and woodsy and too close to the earth for perfume, like a black-eyed cow flower, or Denise's own sour sweat. She stood back and admired the tree. She could see the whole thing now, its broad girth and delicate filigree of embers. She could remember what had mattered in her life.

She sat back down on the sofa to enjoy the show, and as she did, Carl came running into the living-room, the tail of his work shirt flapping behind him, and the curls over his ears flying like a winged Mercury.

"Don't panic. Don't panic. I'll get it," he said. He reached into the fireplace and lifted the tree by its top branches, those that hadn't been touched yet. The sparks shot into the living room, blind fireflies nose-diving into the carpet and the drapes. And just for once, as he stood there holding the burning bush up over the hearth, unable to admit he couldn't save anything, Denise was glad of his speed.