

Mrs. Moscharelli

*New England Review*

It was January, snow-packed and glinting, with everything down to its essence. The light was as white as a bone. Balvin Insurance was outside town near the highway, in the Daw Street Industrial Park. Driving into her spot, the last to arrive, as usual these days, Marie looked around at the broad old firs in the woods behind the buildings, and knew how much she would miss them. They were glazed with sunlight and ice, mixed and merged—if they were people, the snowdrifts would come to their knees. Under the snow, the oblong cement marker at Marie's parking place said "Moscharelli" in stencilled white paint. Andy, her husband, planned to come here one day with a truck, and take it away for their driveway, but Marie didn't think she would let him.

Something at the window caught her eye. Someone was looking down at her from the Balvin's fifth floor, where the windows of her section were end to end from the corner, like the first four pieces in a row of sideways dominoes. It was Donna, her secretary. Slowly in the glare, Marie made out a sheet of paper with letters in black magic marker. "PRETEND," it said. Here came another one, which said, "TO." The third said "DAVE." The fourth said "NOLAN." Then Donna stepped aside—no, someone had pushed her out of the way. Pam Lefrenier was waving both hands; she had wanted to see for herself that Marie was down there. The next two words that Donna held up were "YOU" and "KNOW," and the final one, held lengthwise, said "EVERYTHING."

Marie thought, This is what I get for never remembering to turn on my cell phone. She pretended to brush back her hair as she flicked to Donna the symbol that means OK. For the first time ever, she appreciated the fact that the windows didn't open. Had the building not been sealed

by its developers, always heating and cooling the same air, Donna would have stuck out her head, and would be screaming at the top of her lungs.

No one at the Balvin had said to Marie, "Times have changed, and we're embarrassed that you rose up so high without a college degree," but that was the reason behind their offer of early retirement.

She saw that she was worse than a fossil. Amid the tailored managers in suits, she stuck out; she walked about the halls like a sea cow, frumping along a beach filled with sleek young seals and arching, long-legged birds. She had never become an expert with computers, had never taken a night class, had never used the company exercise room—and never mind that the turnover rate of her section was the Balvin's lowest ever, or that Dave Nolan, the director of General Auto Claims, knew that Damages and Estimates was the only part of this company no one had to worry about. Dave Nolan was younger than Marie by twelve years. At meetings, she did not understand what he meant when he said things like, "I'm counting on you to get in there and punt for me, Marie." She would think of herself in a straw hat and white slacks on a river in England, like a commercial for "Masterpiece Theatre," languidly poling a boat past towers and ancient trees.

A year ago, the company had taken from Marie her old sub-specialty of theft claims. She didn't miss it, but it was sad to watch the adjustors stop throwing their weight around with customers claiming thefts they'd done themselves. Ed Gresky could tell at a glance if an automobile had been, as he'd put it, self-robbed. He had thought of himself as the Hercule Poirot of cars. Now all those cases went upstairs to Dave Nolan, to a new division. Was it true that, if Marie had been younger, fitter, fashionable, and more of a company-go-along, Theft would still belong to her section?

But you couldn't be mad at a company that would give you a paycheck to stay at home. Marie had worked here for thirty-two years, and in less than six months, she'd be gone. When she tried to imagine what to do with the rest of her life, her mind became a cast-iron pot, on which a lid shut down, just slammed right down and blocked everything.

Marie went inside. Phil Santangelo, at the security desk, was reading a newspaper. He was married to cousin of Andy's. He and Marie thought of themselves as in-laws once removed. Phil said, "Must be nice for you now, rolling in whenever you feel like it."

"I'm hoping you can tell me what's wrong in my section, Phil," said Marie.

"Nolan's been up there, but anything else, I don't know. I've been here since seven last night. They stuck me double-shifting, but I'm not complaining. If I was home, I wouldn't sleep."

Marie said, "How's your mother?"

"You know how it is," Phil said. "One day she's old, she can't wait to drop dead. The next day, she wants me to take her out to a restaurant. It comes and goes."

"I heard about the avalanche," said Marie.

"I figured you would. She's all right, but when I think about it, I get so upset, I could punch in a wall."

"Maybe someone will try to break into the building today," Marie said.

"I'd tell them, be my guest. I'm only getting paid right now to stay awake."

Phil Santangelo's mother had nearly been killed. She was brushing snow off her azalea bushes when a rush of icy snow slid down from the roof of her house and knocked her over. Most of the snowslide landed in a trench between the bushes and the house, and that's where Phil's mother landed, too. She was only wearing a house dress. She was rescued when a neighbor's dog, sniffing around her, had started barking. Marie wondered, but could not say the question out

loud, if the old woman felt thankful for this outcome—or, when they dug her out, had she lunged for the dog's throat, madly and melodramatically, as if dying was what she made up her mind to do, seeing how she was buried already?

Marie took the stairs as she always did. I think I might be getting a little depressed in my general thinking, she was saying to herself. What had been going through her mind when she agreed to retire, not that they'd given her a choice? Her hair would grow scruffy; her chin would be covered with hair; she'd have to shave like a man. Don't women who have never been mothers grow quickly old?

Twice long ago, Marie had miscarried, both times early on. She did not want to think about this, but now it seemed awful that her womb had been neglected, that her breasts were only sucked by her husband. Things inside her could be slowly caving in, like an unbuttressed tunnel. Maybe she should run from the building that moment and jump in her car, and drive away somewhere and find a child and adopt it, and pretend it had been hers all along.

By the door on the second-floor landing, near the Balvin's seminar room, a woman in the gold-colored jacket of Norris, the food services contractor, was smoking a cigarette and balancing, on her other hand, a paper plate containing six lemon danishes. She had flicked some ash on each round filling.

"It's called aversion therapy," the woman said. "I know it's disgusting, but these were left over from a meeting, and I was scared I'd eat them all." She put out the cigarette in the center of a danish, and it hissed a little. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't expect anyone to see me." Marie looked away.

Yesterday afternoon, Dave Nolan had called Marie's section to the second floor for a meeting. "Informal Seminar, Damages and Estimates: Meeting Business Needs of the Future," the

card on the door had said. Dave had greeted them like the host of a party. There was a wide-screen tv; the room was set up for a video. There was a buzz in the air. No one expected a good time, but they'd been freed for an hour from their desks, and could put up their feet and get paid for it. Dave Nolan picked up the remote control and said, "This is my new method of giving you guys a pep talk."

"Oh, for Christ sake, we need a raise, not a rally," said Mary Pat Flaherty. She was the senior adjustor. She had a deep voice that suited her body; she was five feet ten and quite broad. It was the sort of voice that should be regularly let out in open spaces, but Mary Pat boxed it up so much, it was low and gravelly, and she always sounded like someone muttering curses. Marie, at five feet two, thought of Mary Pat as someone she would like to wake up as one day, not to be like her, but to see what it's like to be big.

Pam, Linda, and Terri, all customer reps, sat together. Pam said, "The last time Kenny Bascomb in Payroll got his people together for a pep talk, you know he did? It was a four-hour seminar and he wouldn't let anyone go to the bathroom."

Donna, sitting next to Marie, as she always did, said, "If someone tells me I can't, that's it, I'm going every five minutes."

"I thought you'd talk about what's happening to us when Marie's gone, Dave," said Linda.

Pam made a face. "You make it sound like she's dying. Marie, don't you hate the way she said that?"

"No," said Marie.

"It's not about that, we don't know about that yet," said Dave, and John said, "Whatever you have to say, I am not interested in pep, and this is how I'm hearing it." He slunk down and lifted his arms and wrapped them around his head. John Poli, the third adjustor, was the slowest

human being Marie had ever known. His work was meticulous, but you felt glad you didn't live with him, like you'd sit down to a meal, and it would still be going on a week later.

"Please put your arms down, John, and I'm too polite to say why," said Donna, and he did.

Dave said, "Hey, Terri. I heard you're getting married to a cop."

"He's a registry guy," said Terri.

Dave said, "Well, congratulations anyway."

Terri was the youngest in the section, and would go off next month to one of those states that start with an I, where her family was, for her wedding. She was probably imagining the things that were bound to go wrong.

"It feels like someone's missing," said Mary Pat.

"I am," said Eric.

"Are you going to sit in a chair like a normal person?"

"I like it back here." Eric was on the floor behind Marie, leaning against the wall, with his long legs stretched out. He was the newest in the section; he'd been working for Marie for three years. He was only thirty-two, but before this, he'd been an electrician: a licensed master with his own company and three trucks. If you asked him why he'd come to the Balvin to answer phones all day at a third of his old income he just said, "I changed my mind." He reminded Donna of Gumby, and Marie could see why. There was something rubbery about him--not just physically, but in his personality, like if someone or something knocked him flat, he'd get up again. He wasn't the best of the reps; he couldn't touch Linda for surly, cold-blooded efficiency, or Pam and Terri for speed. But customers liked him. When a customer called to report a broken windshield he'd say, "Oh, no, did you get hit with any glass?" If they went over the edge into complex descriptions of their accidents, he soothed them and said, "Everything you're telling me, I believe."

No one knew anything about his private life. He wore a wedding ring, but it was easy to never look at that finger. When he'd stretched out his legs, he had touched the lower rung of Marie's chair with the side of his foot. Crossing his ankles, he had bumped her again. Then he'd placed a foot against her chair's left leg. Marie felt it only slightly. But she knew it was there.

"I can't believe you're so tall and you never played basketball, Eric," said Pam.

"I have terrible eye-hand coordination," said Eric.

Dave Nolan flicked the lights off. A picture appeared on the screen of a healthy, middle-aged man in a sweatsuit, jogging by the side of a lake.

"This jogger looks like a Marine, Dave," said Pam. "This better not be some yucko macho training thing for just guys. If it is, I'm walking out."

Ed said, "You know who that guy is? He used to coach at Notre Dame. I read somewhere that he opened a consulting business."

"I hate Notre Dame," said John. "Notre Dame is too Irish and the Irish hate everyone except the Irish."

"It reminds me of a movie from like a century ago where they wore those old-fashioned helmets, like that's what you'd wear if you had a lobotomy," said Mary Pat.

"I think of Ronald Reagan," said Linda. "Remember the gross way he had that skin on his neck, and every time he talked, it would wiggle?"

"Come on, guys. Settle down and watch the movie," said Dave.

It was nothing, Marie thought. It was completely accidental. Eric had touched her chair twice, and now his feet were leaning against it; but she wished that the chair legs were her own. She pictured Eric in semi-darkness behind her, half-sitting, half-reclining; if he started to move away, she might grab for his sock, or an end of his shoelace, and tug him back.

But he didn't move away. Sometimes when she thought about him, she didn't picture herself making love with him, although that's what was happening now. His desk in the section was diagonal to her office. Sometimes, when she looked through her doorway at him, sideways, as if spying on him through a lateral periscope, she didn't imagine that he said to her, in a loud voice, something normal, like, "I need to go over these customer surveys with you, Marie," then said, in a whisper, "Can we meet behind the building after work?" Sometimes it could be more than enough, it could be strangely most satisfying, just to look at him. Marie sat there. She thought, I have to stop this. She thought, The next time Eric's in my office with me, I'd better make sure that my door stays open.

"Marie, if you're falling asleep, try to do it so your eyes stay open," whispered Donna.

Marie thought, The next time Eric's in my office with me, I'm locking the door. I'll send Donna on errands for all day.

Inside her skin, she felt as soft as a peach. No one knew. Marie wished that everything in the world that stood between kissing Eric, and not being able to ever kiss him, would disappear. She wished that her chair would dissolve, right from under her, like a big piece of ice in yellow sunlight.

"Donna, you look nice," said Marie. She had reached the hall outside her section, where Donna, of course, was waiting for her. Donna wore a red and yellow striped dress--a cheerful, silky party dress, completely inappropriate for the office.

"I know you're lying, but thanks," said Donna. "You just missed Dave. He had a meeting with very big Suits on something else, and he thinks you were out at the wreck site, like that's something you would do, and if I were you, I would thank me, because Dave thinks you're getting



bad for our morale. But we're handling this. The adjustors are all excited, but Terri is upset, because it's such a bad omen. Remember my wedding? That morning, a Jeep smashed on rocks near the river, and it got more attention than I did."

"Donna, stop," said Marie. "You're not saying anything I need to know. Tell me about where I was."

"Talk to Ed, and I'm not just saying this to make you feel bad that every single day now, you show up a little later. I have to go upstairs to Theft, and I just got my period, and I feel so bloated, my zipper is going to pop, so I asked Mary Pat to watch my back. She's talking to Legal, though. She took Eric. They've been up there two hours."

Mary Pat! Well, if Donna wanted to ask Mary Pat to keep an eye on her, that was her business. Would Mary Pat move in the second Marie was gone, and take over the section? She couldn't; she was, Marie remembered, a high-school dropout. Donna's dress swung out a little when she moved; then Marie heard her running up the stairs.

Ed was at his desk with his coat on, not the orange down parka he usually wore, but a black trench coat, buttoned up. There appeared at his collar a hint of a dress shirt. "Ed," said Marie. "You look like you're going to a funeral."

"I feel it. You want it straight?"

Marie unbuttoned her own coat, and sat down in the extra chair at Ed's desk. One thing she felt she had mastered at the Balvin was the art of accepting bad news, without letting it get to her personally. Marie placed her hand on top of her coat near her heart. "Shoot, Ed," she said.

"You know that raffle at the mall, that Mustang from Frank Peters?" Marie nodded. Frank Peters had a large and thriving Ford dealership; everything that passed through his lot, he insured with the Balvin. "It's stolen?" said Marie.

"Partly." Ed looked down at the piece of paper on his desk. "Front door, driver's side. Driver's seat. Hubcaps, shift knob, the ash tray, the radio, and, it's a convertible, the roof. Plus they got under the hood, but we don't have that yet."

"It's not ours, Ed," said Marie. "It's Theft's."

"You're right, unless you count the worse thing. They had to get the Mustang out of the mall before it opened, so Frank called Bruce." Bruce Weatherby ran a Mobil garage, and had a tow truck. He was also Ed's brother in law; he was married to Ed's older sister. "Bruce got into an accident?" said Marie.

"We have a total zero personal injury on this, Marie. A cable snapped, a chain, we don't know the details. That corner by the factory, it's pretty sharp. The Mustang took off from the tow truck like, this was the way I heard it, it was possessed. You know that yarn shop?" Marie shook her head. Ed said, "It used to be a beauty parlor. It used to be called Glamorama." Marie nodded. Ed said, "No one is buying any yarn there today."

"It's wrecked?"

"A portion. Why anyone would put a building on that corner, with a plate glass window, I don't know."

"Was anyone in the shop?"

"The woman who owns it was in the back, plugging in her Mr. Coffee. She should have it bronzed. Another two minutes, she would've been opening her cash register. She would've found herself dealing with a car on top of her counter, well, most of one."

"Dave Nolan's secretary just called my line," said Linda. "Theft says we can do anything we want if we promise to never send Donna up there again. They would rather put their hands in a hornets' nest than ever see her."

Linda had come up beside Marie. Tendrils of hair had got loose from the bun at her neck, and looked wispy and airy and soft. She had slicked back her bangs, for a change, with some gel. Linda usually wore tight jeans and tailored blouses with lots of darts, but now she wore a loose blue silk shirt and wide dark pants that looked like satin--and they were.

What was going on here? Marie looked around at the section, at Eric's unoccupied desk, at Terri, who was typing into her computer and staring at the screen with a worried expression. Terri always dressed well, but today she'd gone out of her way to be especially pretty. She wore a cashmere sweater, probably her best one, as green as Easter basket grass.

"Linda, everyone really looks nice," said Marie.

"Donna said I'm too swishy, like I'm wearing pajamas," said Linda. Pam was talking on the phone at her desk, but she covered the mouthpiece with her hand, and half-stood up. She wore a plaid wool jumper with some sort of fringe around the buttons, and a turtleneck sweater underneath, which was as all decked out as Pam got.

"Linda!" she cried. "Donna told me I look like a blanket!"

"Maybe you two should get together," Ed said. "Can I be the bed?"

"Shut up, Ed," said Linda.

"Ed! John's waiting in the parking lot! Let's go see that wreck!"

Mary Pat was in the doorway, in her coat. Her voice boomed through the section like a speaker with the treble turned off. Marie was the only one here who loved that voice--it was a choir-trained alto. Every time Damages and Estimates went out to a restaurant or a bar together, Mary Pat put down double the liquor of anyone else, and set off toward the edges of drunkenness like someone on a brief vacation. If her mood was right she'd start singing, and you'd swear that music was playing, and everyone would look up startled, then look away, embarrassed by her pure,

sad sound. She'd sing, "Danny Boy," or "The Days of the Kerry Dancers," but she would never get past the first verse. Ed and John and Pam and Donna would drown her out; they'd start singing "A Hundred Bottles of Beer," until a waiter or a bartender came over and threatened to have them bounced.

"The yarn shop wants to sue the crap out of Bruce, Ed, but Eric's up in Legal, and everyone he can talk to, he's talking to them," Mary Pat said. Mary Pat had her old pair of L.L. Bean's lined winter woods boots on, but under her coat, Marie saw a bit of the hem of Mary Pat's one good red silk dress. The last time Mary Pat had worn that dress was for Linda's wedding, which had taken place four years ago, to which the section had gone; they'd chipped in and bought her--what had they bought her? Marie couldn't remember.

"Linda, what did we buy you for your wedding?" said Marie.

"A microwave," said Linda, and Pam called out to Terri, "That's not what we got you, Terri."

Ed walked out with Mary Pat. And that was when it finally hit Marie--like something she'd been fishing around for, in the dark--that at five o'clock this afternoon, at a restaurant, her section was giving Terri a bridal shower, to which no one but the section had been invited.

How many times had Donna said to her, "You've been acting so weird, Marie, should I call you the night before and remind you about the shower?" Donna must have said this one thousand times. A *bed*, thought Marie. That's what they were giving Terri. Pam and Linda had gone to the mall last week and had bought, at a toy store, a tiny plastic four-poster bed of the type that goes in a dollhouse, which they had wrapped in a box with silver paper that said, "For the Bride." The actual thing would be delivered from the furniture store when Terri moved into her new apartment.

Marie stood up unsteadily and walked toward her office, clutching at her coat where she'd undone the buttons; under it she wore the oldest, undressiest blouse, skirt, and sweater that she owned. It surprised her that she felt so calm. But she couldn't go to the trouble right now of deciding which thing was worse: this tremendous mental problem of hers, a sort of fog—no, a sort of whiteout—which had caused her to forget Terri's party; or the foresight of what would happen to her if anyone, especially Donna, found out.

The yarn shop! She began to imagine what had happened to it, as if she'd been there. She pictured the scene as a nightmare come true. She imagined the snapping, or spontaneous severing, of a cable or hook, as the Mustang launched off from Bruce's tow truck, and sailed through the air on a course of something inevitable, when something in motion could never be stopped. She saw the plate glass window cracking, and heard the tinkling of glass; yarn and fabric were shooting everywhere. From the days of Glamorama, there might have been blow-dryers stored away, and combs and hair pins and bottles of dye, whirling about in the chaos. Scissors and razors had flown through the air; hair spray cans had exploded. Marie imagined that the grille of the Mustang had suddenly protruded through the wall of the shop like a huge set of teeth, as if the shark from *Jaws* had arrived.

At last, as she entered her office and grabbed for her phone, Marie began to feel a little better. It was a good thing she hadn't sat down. On the floor below her desk, where she usually put her feet, there was a large, rectangular white box. It said CAKE, like the letters on the top of a pizza box.

Andy answered on the second ring. He was an advertising salesman for a small AM station in the valley, mostly talk shows and sports. "Moscharelli," said his voice. The clouds moving slowly by the window in the clear winter sky were like bodies of creatures in the sea, Marie

thought, like dolphins, and they all had Andy's face and eyes and expressions. How long would it take him to go home, pick a dress from her closet, and get it to her--not to her, just discreetly leave it at the security desk, with Phil, and keep him quiet about it? It would take Andy half an hour if he hurried. What dress? Anything, just dressy, he could pick out whatever he wanted.

"I'm trying to see this, Marie. This is the first thing I heard about it, so you have to let me catch up. You forgot? It's a very big deal and you forgot? What's the matter with you?"

"Thank you for putting it so kindly," said Marie. "Thanks for helping me put this in a positive light. Everyone thinks I'm awful as it is."

"Maybe they won't think so when you're not their boss anymore."

"Then what should I be? Don't just say, 'Be my wife,' or I'm hanging up on you."

"How should I know what you should be? Be their ex-boss." There was a silence for a moment, then Andy said, "You're not getting nuts, Marie. You do not have early Alzheimer's or something. I would have noticed. I would have told you."

"I have to go," said Marie.

"See you," said Andy.

"See you," said Marie. She wished that her husband was here to see the careful way she hung up the phone, with light, grateful fingers, as if it contained all the parts of him she liked best.

The phone buzzed and it was Donna, telling her please do not step on the cake, please move her chair to the other side of her desk.

Phil Santangelo was smoking a cigarette in spite of the "No Smoking" signs everywhere, and flicking it into an overflowing ash tray. He looked up at Marie and whispered, although no one else was around, "I swear to God, Andy told me not to look in this bag, and I didn't, and I did

not read the note. I believe that anything that goes on in a marriage, it stays in a marriage. Me and Andy didn't even hardly talk, except to talk about what happened to my mother." Phil handed her a plain brown grocery bag.

"Do you know where I could order some flowers?"

"Did someone die?"

"Terri, in my section, is getting married."

Phil turned around and looked at the plants, still there from Christmas—twenty or thirty oversized poinsettias in huge pots, wrapped in gold paper, and arranged on a pedestal, in the center of the lobby, in the cone-sized shape of a tree. "Take a few of those, Marie. They're rented, but no one will know."

"I want something nice."

"Rayburn's, the only florist here, is closed today. For a couple extra dollars I could maybe arrange something with a guy I know, if I don't fall asleep."

"Thanks," said Marie. Andy had stapled his note to the outside of the bag, as if she'd miss it had he put it inside. It said, "Tell the people you work with I wish them a good time tonight. I wish I could be with them, to enjoy their pleasant company and quiet ways. Tell them from me, how long can they go without talking about disgusting things that happen to people in accidents? They could go five minutes. And if you want to know what kind of a day I am having, I'm looking forward to not having it anymore. I'm picking up a meatball sub after work, but if you have anything good left over, get it wrapped for me. If you come home in a good mood, wake me up, and if you're not, tell me about it in the morning."

This was the way the daylight went out: quite suddenly, without fading, without dusk. There were no gentle shadows; there was no slow seepage of the light by degrees. The color of the sky changed to ashen, and a splash of darkness rose up in the east, like a huge black sail filled with wind. Marie changed her clothes in her office while Donna, secretly, moved the cake to her car, where it was strapped in the back in the seatbelts. Marie was not allowed to drive herself to the restaurant; she could come back later for her car. Donna was acting as if, left to her own devices, Marie would disappear off the edge of the world, like in the days when the world was flat, and no one would see her again.

The restaurant, the Main Street R and R, was on the bottom floor of a converted factory building. Two of the upper floors had been made into a gym, and were filled with equipment, including stereos for aerobic classes, stationary bicycles, weights and benches, and automatic stairs. There were saunas, showers, and lockers. "We have Nautilus." Stencilled in fancy gold scroll on the door were two R's for the name of the restaurant.

"I thought this place would be casual, like the R and R meant a train stop or something," said Marie, and Mary Pat said, "For casual I would not be wearing this dress."

Marie had ridden with the adjustors. Linda, Eric, Pam, and Donna, had arrived ahead of them, and stood closely together by the door, and Marie could tell at once that something was wrong. "I hear the food here is pretty good," said John.

Marie said, "How many offices do you think there are in this country?"

"You mean, businesses?"

"I mean businesses, insurance companies, everything."

"A hundred thousand," said John.



"How many of them have people who can get together for someone's party, and it's a normal thing, and no one's having a crisis every minute?"

"All of them, except us. Are we having a crisis?"

"I think it's Pam," said Marie.

Ed said, "My sister was here last week. She ate the medallions of veal."

"You know how they feel about veal calves," said Mary Pat. "If you order veal, they'll be all over you."

"Who'll be all over me?"

"Linda, Pam, all of them," said Mary Pat.

John said, "Order something else, Ed. Then get up like you're going to the bathroom, and go into the kitchen and change it. When it comes, say it's chicken."

"I never walked into a kitchen of a restaurant before," said Ed. "Do they let people do that?"

"I'll go with you," said John.

"Can we order a beer at the table, or do we have to go and drink it in the bar?" said Ed.

"We can do both," said John.

"Why are you standing here in the freezing cold?" said Mary Pat, when they reached the others. She kicked at the ground and some gavel sprayed up, and Terri said, "Pam doesn't want to eat where people are jumping up and down above our heads."

"Is this one of those phobic things?" said Ed, and Linda said, "Shut up, Ed."

"This place used to be a factory," said Mary Pat. "They had machinery up there, Pam. That ceiling's not going to fall."

Pam looked up at the building, then down at the ground, then up at the building again. "Something better happen here real quick," said Ed.

"Maybe we should go somewhere else, but I don't know where, since this is where we're supposed to be," said Terri.

"I'm scared that when I come out at dessert time to get the cake, I'll drop it," Donna whispered.

"Give me your keys and I'll get it. I have really steady hands," Eric told her. Marie looked at him, then quickly looked away, then looked back at him from the sides of her eyes. Eric wore a short leather jacket, a white and silver striped shirt, as silky-looking as a jockey's, no tie, no belt, black jeans, dark socks with a pattern of little white diamonds, and a loose, maroon, unbuttoned vest that would go, on someone else, beneath a tuxedo. If Donna were to give her opinion, Marie knew what she would say. Donna would have compared his appearance to someone who was about to go disco dancing, for the first time, in the sort of club that had not existed for ages. She would have said, "It's nice that there are men in the world who buy their own clothes instead of leaving it to their wives, Eric." But Marie had never seen him look so good.

John said, "I'll go inside and read the building code, Pam, and if you can't believe what a certified structural engineer says about stress, even with grunts and groans, and people thumping up there, forget the whole thing. We'll go to Burger King. We'll order takeout and go to Marie's."

"Marie has four chairs," said Donna. "We would have to sit on her stairs."

Pam sucked in a deep breath, and looked at the building again and said, "I'm OK, I'm OK."

"I have Valium, Pam, if you want some," said Linda, and Pam said, "I would only pass out."

"I might want some for my wedding, Linda," said Terri.

"Everyone I ever heard of but me got married tranquilized," said Donna.

"But you're the only one who needs it, Donna," said John.

"You are *lard*, John," said Donna.

"Linda," whispered Ed. "Don't let me sit next to Donna."

The restaurant was made up of a wide main dining room and couple of banquet rooms, one of which was theirs. Even though just a few of the tables in the main room were occupied, they had all been set. There was a look of hopelessness about the empty chairs and missing bodies, but there was also a sense of something coming, as if the plates and bowls and silverware and glasses were waiting, simply, for people who had not yet arrived. The tablecloths were a pale shade of orange, and the napkins a dark shade of pink. Marie tried not to look around too critically, but if this were her restaurant, she would never put those colors together.

The women's bathroom was over to the right, off the bar. Marie headed straight in there. When she came out of the stall, Linda was standing by the sink, brushing her hair. Marie said, "I'm having very bad feelings about being inside this building."

"You caught it from Pam," said Linda. "When you walked in, did you look all around, at the ceilings and the walls and the beams?"

"And the doorways," said Marie.

"So did I. It's because we work for an insurance company. As soon as we sit down, drink some wine. Right now, breathe normal. You might be having a tiny, tiny panic attack, not a big one."

Then Pam walked in and said, "The adjustors went into the bar, so forget it if you think we're not getting thrown out of here. Is something wrong, Marie? You look a little sick."

The door opened again, and Terri came in. Pam said, "This feels like high school."

"Why don't you take your coat off, Marie," said Linda, then helped her out of it, and held it for her. Marie stood there in her old workday cardigan sweater and the sleeveless summer dress

that Andy had brought her, the one that made her look like Eleanor Roosevelt in July, and her old brown work shoes. She'd forgotten to tell Andy to bring her some dressy shoes. Linda said to Terri, "Go check Marie's coat in the coat room, and don't come back, because we're talking about your present."

"Is Marie having hot flashes?" said Terri, and Linda said, "She wants to be depressed for a minute."

"Again?" said Terri.

"The flowers came, but I don't know from where," said Pam. They're big, in a big glass vase, and there are lots of them. I didn't know what you call them but Donna said they're paradise birds. Ed said they look like a whole bunch of Woody Woodpeckers. He told Terri they'll peck at her hair."

"Don't mind Ed. He's just hungry," said Linda.

Pam said, "They really look like birds' heads."

"I know the ones you mean," said Linda. "When I took chemistry, my teacher was a part-time florist. I used to be good at arrangements."

"When I took chemistry, we made Kool-Aid, and we burned split ends with those Bunsens," said Pam.

Mary Pat came in and said, "Now what?" She already smelled like beer.

"Marie is thinking about retiring, I think," said Linda, and Mary Pat said, "She mentioned it?"

"Not exactly," said Pam.

"If you mentioned it, Marie, then it's a miracle," said Mary Pat. She went into the stall and the only thing they could hear was peeing.

Pam said, "I think it's nice that all the other sections at work invite the people they live with to showers and weddings and things, and we don't. I like it that we never invite anyone to anything."

"We used to," called out Mary Pat. "I remember when Donna got married. It was the first time she met my husband, and I wasn't there yet. I had to see what happened to an AMC wagon that went over the embankment, on that hill by the river. It was the worst one I ever saw. It looked like little tiny bits of tin cans. So he walked into Donna's reception alone and Donna went up to him and said, 'Hi, Bozo.' He said, 'Is that what she calls me at work?' And you know what Donna said? She hadn't met Andy yet, either. She said, 'No, that's what my boss, Mrs. Moscharelli, calls hers. I thought you were Andy Moscharelli.' And the old fart, you should have heard him, he fell for it." Mary Pat's husband's name, Marie remembered, was Harold.

"Mary Pat takes so long to explain things," whispered Pam, as the toilet flushed.

Linda said, "Wait till she starts singing."

"I *heard* that," said Mary Pat.

Marie wished that she could close her eyes and open them again and look out the window and see trees with green leaves, see the pale gray twilight of spring or early summer, as if the rest of her life had started already, as if she already knew what to do with it. Who was she kidding? Every time she tried to look at the future, to see what was coming, if it was better or worse, if it was something she wanted or something she'd have to settle for, it was all as blank as a hole.

She had not set a date for her retirement. "Late spring or early summer," she'd said. The outside world would soon be at the brink of warming up. She wished she could command the winter, like a dog at her heels, to just stay. Linda said, "Marie? You know what? I could swear I saw your husband in the parking lot at work this afternoon."

"So did I," said Pam. "In a pickup truck. Phil, the security guy, was with him. I think they were putting something in the back."

"Andy doesn't have a truck," said Marie.

"Well, maybe it was someone who looks like him. Are you OK now?" said Linda.

"Do I look very awful?"

"Marie, who's to look?" said Mary Pat.

"Wait till Terri finds out what we're giving her. Her face will turn bright, bright red," Pam said.

"I can't believe we're letting John be the master of ceremonies. It will take him twenty minutes to say one single word," said Linda.

"He's not that bad when's he's up on his feet. He used to be in Toastmasters," said Mary Pat.

Now they were walking out through the bar. Linda said, "We don't have a seating plan, Marie. Who do you want to sit next to?"

"Eric, please," said Marie. She didn't care if she blushed and they saw it. She would not, she reminded herself, break off a bit of bread like an old-time peasant and hold it in her hand like a utensil to scoop up oil, gravy, sauce. She hoped that, if she stood up to say a few words, there'd be no bits of food between her teeth. She hoped that the wine would be good, and she wouldn't spill it. She hoped that, if Andy had taken the curbstone at her parking spot today, she wouldn't find it sitting in their driveway like a marker on a grave.

"Marie! We're starving! Hurry up!" cried Donna. Everyone was standing by the door of the room.

They were waiting for her. They were making her the first to go in, like this was practice for the banquet they would give when she left, if they gave her one. She would choose a different restaurant, she decided, and she would pick out the flowers—and her outfit—herself.

Marie hoped that Terri would be happy. She hoped that the waistline of her dress, which felt a little tight, wouldn't burst. She hoped that, if Eric's arm brushed her lightly, or their hands touched, he wouldn't pull away as if she'd jabbed him. If she imagined kissing him, she hoped it would last through the party. She hoped it wouldn't show that she felt this way about him, and she hoped, at the same time, that if she lifted her wine glass and raised it to him, he would know.