Two weeks after Dr. Congreve’s last lover, her absolutely final attempt at romance, a mainland Chinese Ph.D. ABD graduate student in economics with a carload of books and a heavy political agenda, stormed out of her life, shouting over his encumbered shoulder up her apartment stairs, “tie ash beech,” she began to dream of his would-be successor, an image of a man so bizarre it could have been dredged up only from the brackish backwater of her childhood. She had been raised in a less than modest concrete block house next door to a shop that retreaded old tires in a southern town where the exciting thing to do on Saturday night was to walk down to the Electric Freeze Drive-In and sip a milkshake and watch the bugs hit the electric bug zapper. She had escaped the despair of her youth by pursuing an academic career, and now being an educated southerner and rapidly descending into middle age, she supposed she was obliged, even in dreams, to conceive of life and love in terms of the grotesque.

In the dream her next lover, a redneck with hairy arms and a beer belly the color of a catfish’s underside, is coming to pick her up. She has not bidden him to come, or agreed to his coming; there hasn’t been as much as a phone call, only a certain and dreadful knowledge in her heart that he will come. She hears the backfire of his muffler, the screech of some disintegrating automotive part against concrete, the groan of the dying behemoth as he cuts off the engine. She parts the curtain to peek out. There it is, the huge old sea-green car, fenders painted in black primer, the door on the driver’s side battered and wired shut. Her horror increases. Her revulsion at all that is poor and ignorant—and proud to be so—rises in her throat, but she cannot scream or turn from the window. Empty beer cans clatter to the gutter as her dream lover scoots across the dirty sheepskin-covered seat and kicks open the
passenger door. Sometimes his hair is black, sometimes as pale as a baby chicken’s; it is always long and greasy. But the unnerving detail, the thing that has nailed her soul to the despised cross of being Southern, and therefore second-rate, whose axis of geography and blood has crucified her ambition to set herself above all this, are the words emblazoned on his T-shirt, “If You Ain’t In Dixie Then Buddy You’re In Hell.”

She woke with the taste of burning rubber in the back of her mouth and the clear conviction that it was only a matter of time until the dream lover would come for her in reality. Who was he, what did it mean? As real as the dream had been she had only an impression of a face, at once deformed, ugly, yet beautiful and generous. The nature of the deformation remained veiled. What was it? A broken nose, a harelip, a geosyncline of upthrust and overturned teeth? But his eyes were a deep, moist brown—and kind—that much was clear.

It went back to her childhood, as everything always did, the ex-husbands, the former lovers, the Chinese graduate student, now the dream. Her father had been a welder, and her mother the put-upon kind of woman who stands over a perpetual sink of dirty dishes. In her mother’s case the sink was under a window that looked out upon the retread shop and a sea of stacked tires. The odor of burning rubber permeated the house, the furniture, their clothing, even their hair.

“Do we have to live here?” the child who would become Dr. Congreve protested. “Why can’t we live in a place that smells good? Why can’t we be like other people and live in a nice house in a neighborhood that smells good?”

“Now, Sister, that ain’t no proper way to look at life,” her father would say jovially. “What a person smells is all in their head. You don’t smell nothing, do you Mother?”

Her mother placed a bowl of soup beans and a plate of cornbread on the table. She was a calm woman who never contradicted her husband—or felt the need to. “I don’t smell a thing except maybe the onions in these beans. We’re very fortunate
people because we have beans to eat and the gift of smell. Be thankful for what you got, Sister. Besides, when you grow up and get married and get a place of your own you won’t have time to smell anything, so enjoy smelling while you can. I think the smell of onions is lovely, don’t you, Daddy?”

She had no siblings. She was called “Sister” because she was Southern and a girl. If she had had a brother he would have been “Buddy” and she was glad he had not been born. Sometimes she closed her eyes and imagined Buddy only to kill him off in a tragic fire or a lingering childhood disease. In spite of herself she believed in her father’s principle of imagination. As she matured so did her imagination. Lovers became the lovers she needed. She imagined herself brilliant and convinced scholarship boards of her brilliance. She loved college and her professors. She saw in their eccentricities and affectations that they, too, had imagined themselves brilliant and exceptional. The world was illusion. She pursued an academic career.

In spite of her understanding the dream lover did not go away. Night after night he drove up to her apartment house and kicked open the car door and a cascade of beer cans clattered to the gutter. He smiled up at her behind the parted curtain, and then he winked, knowing and confident. His features remained vague, at the same time grotesque and beautiful. She woke in a flush, feeling as if she had been sleeping on a stove. She grew weary and baggy-eyed and barely alive for her nine o’clock class. Was he not some subterranean Freudian forerunner of the next real lover to come? She decided that what she needed was a change of scene, a new challenge, a final dispensation from the need to imagine love. She applied for, and accepted, a position at a small college in New England. Dr. Prunty, the head of the English Department, seemed as spare and aloof as the school and the town. The schools where she had been a student, then a teacher, had all been Southern, state universities known for their athletics. He rose from his desk and offered her his hand. His eyes were the color of chocolate and quite lovely. She stifled her imagination
before it could fire its engines of romance and illusion. “Welcome to Laedmore College, Dr. Congreve. Quite possibly we may tend to be more classically oriented and committed more to developing a sense of individualism in the student than your vitae indicates you’re accustomed to.” He gave her a secretive, smug look. “We’re really quite radical here at Laedmore. You’ll probably have to do a bit of adjusting.” She felt relief that Prunty was pompous and perhaps a fool, at least enough of one that at the height of her powers of imagining dullards into princes it would have been a tedious job to have do so with Prunty. Here she would be safe from the perils of imagination and love. He gave her the address of a fellow member of the department who was going on sabbatical and had a house to rent. “His cottage is most charming and quite affordable. And you’ll find Froudard a delightful chap”—he cut his brown eyes to the edge of his desk—“if you can overlook his most apparent failing, which considering your background, might be difficult.”

As promised, the cottage was made to order, a weathered Cape Cod. A chubby little man in L.L. Bean clothes opened the door. “So you’re the new girl in Remedial.”

Dr. Congreve felt herself bridle; it may have been a rhetorical question, but she felt it needed an answer. “Actually, to be precise, Rhetoric and Composition.”

“A rose by any other name, my dear. Prunty just phoned. Said you were from the South and were looking for something charming, by which I suppose he means old and out of plumb. These Midwesterners think anything a hundred years old is old. Prunty is very Midwestern and intolerably decent. I am, thank god, neither. By the by, I’m Froudard, Renaissance. Do come in.” He led her to a comfortable living room lined with paintings and books. He poured sherry into glasses that she guessed were antique and probably valuable, not that she knew or cared about such things. “Has Prunty told you the details of my sabbatical? Of course he hasn’t. Compassion isn’t his forte. Well, you’re a Southern gal and should understand familial responsibilities. My son, you see, is dying.”
She started to mumble some words of commiseration when a large yellow tabby appeared and jumped into Froudard’s lap. “Actually, Jerome is my adopted son. I’ve promised him a trip to Italy. Prunty can be such a shit. You know what he said when I requested sabbatical leave? ‘I don’t think the Dean considers taking young men to Disneyland before they die trips significant academic jaunts.’ Can you imagine anyone that heartless?”

Dr. Congreve was beginning to wish she had made her own housing arrangements. It wasn’t fair to involve her in personal tragedy and interdepartmental squabbles before she had even begun the semester. Her glance went noncommittally about the room from one painting to another, trying to find something nice and neutral to say. They were abstracts, sharp angles of brilliant color. The best thing, she supposed, was that they would stir one out of whatever sort of torpor one might be in. The sole and welcome exception caught her attention; a reproduction of Renoir’s Boating Party hung over the mantel. “I see you like Renoir,” she said. Even a stupid comment was better than a conversational vacuum; on that score she would never escape being a Southerner.

“Ah, that pitiful thing,” Froudard said, “Jerome insisted on hanging it there. I’m afraid his appreciation of art is at best nascent, and now, of course, it will never become more.” Froudard sighed, deflating his L.L. Bean togs. She felt sorry for Dr. Froudard. He didn’t seem the type to have a wife and child, and as she showed her around she saw no signs of a woman’s presence. The house was dusty and books were piled on every available surface. A rag and a can of furniture polish would do wonders, and the rent was right. She took the house for the school year or “until that time,” which they both obliquely understood to mean Jerome’s passing.

She settled comfortably and safely into Laedmore and Froudard’s cottage. She met no man worthy of her imagining him into a lover other, perhaps, than Prunty, who, thank god, was married and a twit. Fortunately, Laedmore was conservative,
WASP, and primarily female. And as yet she had not spotted any good-looking exotic foreign types like Deng strolling across the campus.

She had created Deng, as she had all his predecessors, out of her ragbag notions of broadening her view of life and her need to shock herself perhaps as much as others. They had picked each other up in a bar. When he told her he preferred a woman of experience she took it as a compliment to her maturity and status. When he said he was devoted to the development of democracy in his country she pictured him a freedom fighter in Tiananmen Square. His real interest in her turned out to be sex in every conceivable position and place (wouldn’t an older woman be more adept at such things) and his radical politics were sadly consumer capitalism: his vision of a new China had more to do with putting Pizza Huts at every crossroad than with human rights. Love, or her imagination of it, died when she realized that Deng was more American than she. But that was past. Blessedly, the dream lover had vanished, except occasionally at the edge of waking to the groan of pipes or the creaking of a board in the middle of the night, a glimpse of a disfigured mouth or eyes that mocked with their lovely deep brown. Sometimes she imagined she smelled burning rubber when she woke, then realized she had forgotten to change the cat box.

The second week into the semester Prunty left a note in her mailbox to please drop by his office. The departmental inner sanctum was guarded by the obligatory bitchy and graying department secretary and a small herd of graduate students. They lifted their heads in unison as she passed through their territory. Prunty rose when she entered. A tall, slender man, he was unexpectedly clumsy, as if he strove against unseen currents. Getting up from his desk he spilled his coffee. She had known men who were capable of exploiting such awkwardness, demonstrating their boyishness. Prunty, she sensed, was beyond the charm of artifice. She sat down stiffly and pulled her skirt down over her knees. She hoped she looked as proper and fortyish as she felt.
“Just received a note from Froudard in Italy. Can’t seem to lay his hands on a copy of Bartolomeo’s *Renaissance,*” Prunty said, accenting the second syllable so that the word sounded negative and horsy. “I’ve looked ‘round his office, but no luck. So, would appreciate if you’d have a look-see at your place.”

“Certainly. By the way, did he say how his son is doing?”

Prunty looked startled. She went on quickly, “The boy who’s dying. Jerome, I think his name is.” She knew she had blundered, but was at a loss as to how.

Prunty got up and closed the door to the outer office, upsetting the wastebasket. “What I say to you, Dr. Congreve, must remain confidential. But I would appreciate your opinion on these matters because you are a Southerner and you people down there seem to understand doom and damnation and still manage to maintain a belief in something.” He turned eyes so intense and brown in her direction that she had difficulty in returning his gaze. “Do you believe in plagues, Dr. Congreve?”

“You mean like the bubonic plague? It might be a shock to you, Dr. Prunty, but the germ theory has gained general acceptance south of the Mason-Dixon.” That was too flip, of course. But a conversation without a clear destination might carry her into dangerous waters.

“I speak of the plagues of moral retribution, Biblical plagues, plagues of locusts, Sodom and Gomorrah. And don’t feel you have to be politically correct with me, Dr. Congreve. My wife Betty teaches in the biology department. Whenever I suggest to her that there might be a statistical correlation between moral degeneracy and biological plagues she laughs at me. The question itself isn’t PC, I am not PC.” He swiveled his chair to face the window, exposing thin, elegant shoulder blades, a silky nape above a starched collar. “Froudard always refers to his current young man as his ‘adopted son.’ This one, the one he’s taken to Italy, is dying of AIDS.” A shudder moved through his thin body; was it possible that Prunty, an educated man, truly believed in evil as a force in the world? During her youth she had sat in
church every Sunday morning and tried to analyze the preacher as he threatened the congregation with hell and damnation. Evil had never had a reality for her. If she had been Prunty’s wife she, too, would have laughed. “I know what you’re thinking, Dr. Congreve, that I am an antediluvian fool. But consider my position. Sometimes I feel as though I am the last living white male of European descent. And do you know who the enemy is? It isn’t them. It’s the concept of PC. Every sentiment, every action must appear, and I emphasize that word appear, to meet some standard of falsely benign, all-encompassing compassion for categories of human behavior which by their apparent uniformity must, due to the laws of human nature, be false. You know the Beast that has been slouching toward Bethlehem, Dr. Congreve?”

He was almost shouting. She wondered if he could be heard through the thin walls. “I know the metaphor, yes. However, we don’t attempt to teach Eliot in Remedial.”

“Well, he is alive and well and has arrived at Laedmore, Dr. Congreve. Look out at the sea of faces in your classes and you’ll spot the little beady eye, the sudden wakening from his slothful sleep. And what is it that has roused the heart of the Beast? The poetry of Shakespeare? Milton? Yeats? Oh, no, Dr. Congreve, he is sifting my words for their political correctness. In order to keep my job, to be respected as a professor of English Literature I must hold up the mirror to that tiny brainwashed skull and assure him that all the knee-jerk yes-words fed into him by a corrupted, hypocritical, and venal society for its own profit are not only true, but universally just.”

She excused herself by saying she had to prepare for her four o’clock class. As she passed the secretary and the graduate students in the outer office she felt their quiet stares, sheep lifting their heads to observe the strange dog passing through their pasture. Surely they had heard Prunty’s ranting, they must know he was nutty. Timid sheep, she thought, and sensed that someone was following her.
“Excuse me, Dr. Congreve.” She turned to see the beaming face of LaPage Mucilage—that wasn’t her name, but close to it, so close that she had privately associated “Glue” with the large, overbearing woman. “How about I buy you a cup of coffee? Anybody who looks as pissed as you do could use a cup of coffee.”

Her defenses down, Dr. Congreve let herself be led to a conspicuous table in the faculty grill. Glue—whose name she finally dredged up from a mental image of the departmental roster, one Bethpage Muccilich, Women’s Studies—spoke through horsy bites of a jelly doughnut. “What on earth did you do to Prunty to get him so stirred up? There’s a lot of us gals who would like to have Prunty get so hot and bothered. He makes me cream in my jeans, I can tell you.”

“It wasn’t anything like that. It wasn’t personal, I can assure you. He’s concerned about student apathy.” She wondered just how much of the conversation had been overheard.

“Did he tell you about his wife? They say she might have won a Nobel Prize. Did something with African hissing cockroaches. Sex lives or some such thing. We’re all just biological soup, subject to what our genes tell us. Can you imagine watching cockroaches screw when you’ve got a hunk like Prunty in your bed?”

“You speak in the past tense. You mean they’re divorced?”

“They don’t award the Nobel posthumously. She’s dying. Cancer. Ain’t that a bitch?”

Dr. Congreve felt heat rise in her chest and move upward to her neck and face. Glue would think she was blushing over Prunty. That wasn’t it at all. Why had she mentioned the dying Jerome? Had what she identified as homophobia in Prunty really been grief? Her head throbbed; she felt sorry for Prunty, she felt sorry for herself.

She posted a note on her classroom door that her last section of Remedial English would not meet. She went home and threw herself on Froudard’s sofa. The cat climbed on her stomach and began purring furiously. Was there something in her that unleashed whatever madness lay hidden in men’s darkest hearts?
Other women worried about how to attract men physically, she worried about how not to draw them to her imagination, a fraudulent and honeyed elixir that could transform the pungent smell of burning rubber into the delicate fragrance of a Victorian garden. It wasn’t sex. Sex was real, a biological fact, and reality was something to be gotten through, to be imagined away. For her no sensation could ever be quite palpable and immediate, a thing in itself to be enjoyed in the moment, but to be evaluated and compared, as she had been taught by her parents to see the obvious nutritional and economic advantages of a bowl of soup beans over a T-bone steak. Oh, if only her parents had been just plain poor and squalid without all their defensive justifications. She was glad that Prunty was plumb crazy. A man could be a little crazy and still be tempting; plumb crazy was an antidote to involvement. The cat’s motor hummed at full speed. Her eyelids grew heavy. She felt wrapped in cotton. Through the cotton she heard a knock at the door. She knew without getting up who it was. He had come for her in his ancient green car with its scabrous vinyl top. He had driven far, day and night, over the low hills and the mountains, mounting them via backroads and interstates, the Alleghenies, the Appalachians, the Adirondacks, pushing north and east like his ancestors had pushed south and west two hundred years before, without doubt of right or purpose, but with the full thrust of acquisition. He had approached the outskirts of town, its landscape of deserted mills, shabby factories, beer halls, and discount stores, with the same mixture of disdain and inferiority that she also had felt. She saw his smirk, his wide-eyed stare, his limp greasy hair catching the breeze of the open car window. On the seat was the opened six-pack and hanging from the rear view mirror a pair of fuzzy dice and a garter belt, trophy from a backseat assignation. In his left hand he held “a cool one” just below the view of passing cops. Every inch of bumper space was covered with the righteous slogans of the disinherited and disillusioned: “If You Know Jesus, Honk,” “America—Love It or Leave It,” “Stud on Board,” “DAMM: Drunks
Against Mad Mothers.” By the time he reached the respectable section of town, the decorous Eighteenth Century houses and the college, he was clearly a fish out of water, defensive and absurd—shooting the finger to a staring tweedy professor, growling “Hey, sweet thangs” to a group of tittering, mocking coeds, a roar of muffler and a cloud of oily black smoke at the stop light. But his hunter’s instinct was as sound and true as his great-great-granddaddy’s. The same genes that could nail a squirrel through the eye with a rifle ball at a hundred yards aimed the ancient green car with its wired-shut door down her street and rattled to a stop in front of Froudard’s quaint Yankee cottage. He scooted across the fuzzy seatcover and crawled out the passenger side. Empty beer cans clattered to the gutter. At last her dream lover had arrived at Laedmore.

She woke with a start. She was eye to eye with Froudard’s purring yellow cat. She was sweating profusely and her head throbbed. For years she had drilled her students that literature should evoke terror and pity. Now she realized that she had never had the faintest idea what Aristotle was talking about. But how ridiculous! To be afraid of a dream. She commanded her body to breathe slowly and deeply. She would be more careful, watch what she ate, abstain from liquor before bedtime, keep away from Glue and, most especially, Prunty. She would think positive thoughts, forget all claims of the past, her dour parents, her ex-husbands, her former lovers, other people’s dying lovers, departmental gossip. Her eyes fell on The Boating Party above the mantel. It was a cheap reproduction, she could see the impress of fake brushstrokes on the cardboard, but the unpretentiousness of it, the warmth, the palpable joy of the young Parisians in their blooming vivid world was comforting. If only she could go back in time, close her eyes and escape into the painting, live a life of lazy afternoons on placid rivers, engage in easy harmless flirtations.

In November her mother had a stroke and she flew home. There was no one else, her father having long since gone to a reward which, if he had a choice, was both thrifty and imagina-
tive, a paradise painted on carnival backdrops, stuffed parrots and hoochie coochie girls in fake tiger skins, just a peek at $2 a ticket, not the real thing. In the hospital her mother lay propped, face distorted and unfocused. When she spoke her voice was faint and foreign. Dr. Congreve bent to hear words that sounded like those her Chinese lover had once whispered in her ear when they were alone on a high-rise elevator going up. She was shocked, then realized that the stroke had scrambled her mother’s tongue. She found a nursing home with a view of the back of a supermarket, a compressor, a dumpster, and catty-cornered across the street the long deserted Electric Freeze. Was it better, worse, or indifferent compared to her mother’s old view of the retread shop? On the flight north she felt guilty. She loved her mother and could have brought her back to Laedmore. But she hadn’t and she wouldn’t.

Froudard’s yellow tabby was waiting at the door of the cottage. The heat had been turned down and the house was musty from being shut up. She fed the cat, and watched him wolf it down. Then she made herself a drink and sat down on Froudard’s sofa. The young men and women in The Boating Party were laughing and drinking. The cat rubbed his head against her chin; his breath was fishy. At least he was delighted to see her. Old maid with cat and teacup of bourbon, she thought. She got up and picked up the phone and called Glue because there was no one else.

“A drink?” she said suspiciously. Dr. Congreve was about to say perhaps another time when Glue suddenly made up her mind, “Hey, that’s a great idea.”

They went to a bar Glue suggested, a working class tavern on the south end of town where, according to her, the hunks from the packing plant across the street hung out. “This is my kind of place,” she said, pulling her large hips free from the strictures of Dr. Congreve’s front seat. “Great bunch of guys. I’ve made some real buds here. Joe’s the bartender. You gotta hear his stories.”
Two men in green work clothes sat at the bar. The bartender lifted a dirty towel in greeting. “Come in, ladies. In case you’re not familiar there’s booths in the back if you prefer.”

“How you doing,” the bartender said noncommittally.

“Hey, Joe, it’s me,” Glue said.

“It’s me, Bethpage, Bethpage Muccilich.”

“Yeah, it is getting cold out there, ain’t it. What’ll it be, ladies?”

They sat at the bar. The men in the tavern seemed to Dr. Congreve to be old and tired and shriveled; their work clothes reminded her of her father. The night seemed more like a Monday than a Friday. Then customers began to trickle in. Glue said hello to each as they entered. One man acted as if he might have met her before, but had no interest in pursuing the acquaintance. She told the bartender to give him a drink on her. She winked at Dr. Congreve. “You ought to experience that guy in the hay. Maybe I can work something out for you. Threw me when you called. Didn’t strike me as the type.” She winked at another man across the bar. He pretended not to see her. After three drinks she became confessional. “I have a secret, you know.”

“Oh, really?”

“I’m from Canada. Being from the South you know what that means. But it doesn’t matter in your case that you’re from an ignorant place, because you’re thin. If you’re thin enough you can overcome anything in life.” Bitterness edged her voice. “If you’re fat like me, in the eyes of the world you’re nothing but a fat person and that’s it. Thin people like you think it’s just a matter of food. It’s not. I am fat because I was sexually abused when I was a kid, my mother was an alcoholic, and my father kept my mother and me locked in the basement. I escaped when I was fourteen and joined a Satanic cult in southern Indiana. I was rescued by two Mormon missionaries on bicycles who stopped at the farmhouse where the cult was sacrificing cats and goats and human babies. I beat my first husband. I do everything compulsively, and I have been known to wash my hands a hundred and fifty
times a day.” She started crying. The men raised their heads from their beers and turned their tired, disinterested faces toward her. “You think I’m a liar. Well, I’m that too. I’ve had offers from the television people. Hell, I could be a whole season for Jerry Springer. Barkeep, another round.”

By the time Dr. Congreve could talk Glue into leaving, she had to be helped to the car. “Don’t bother to pretend that you understand me or have any sympathy. The stupidest thing about you people from the States is that you think everything that’s broken can be fixed. You are a country of wimps and fools. And don’t assume, Miss Skinny Ass, that just because you’re thin you are worthy of inheriting the Earth.”

Dr. Congreve started to object, but she didn’t want to get into an argument. They were driving through what seemed to be a rough part of town. She thought of the dream lover driving these deserted looking streets and imagined what he would say to the drunk woman beside her. He would tell Glue that she was heavy-set, not fat, and that being heavy-set wasn’t so bad if a girl had a pretty face, but that she ought to keep her mouth shut about her past if she wanted to catch a man because men had illusions and didn’t want damaged goods.

They had reached Glue’s apartment. It was a cold night. She got out of the car awkwardly, then turned and stuck her head back in the door. “And for your information, you don’t have anybody fooled. Everybody in the department knows you’ve got the hots for Prunty.” She closed the car door too carefully. Dr. Congreve watched the large woman stumble and lurch toward the apartment house. If she passed out on the doorstep she would freeze. There was some advantage in being a Southerner, Dr. Congreve thought, false dignity was better than none. She decided that if the woman fell she would let her lie there and drive off, but the light in the entry hall came on and then went off.

Christmas break came, the students went home and campus was deserted. She went Christmas shopping. Actually, there wasn’t anybody to buy for except her mother and the cat. She passed a
card store. She went in and bought a card to send Froudard in Italy and, on impulse, one for Glue. It would probably be the only card she would get, but at least she wouldn’t be able to whine around the faculty lounge about not receiving anything. Coming out of the card shop she ran into Prunty and his wife.

Betty Prunty offered a surprisingly firm hand. Obviously she had once been a person of great beauty and was now upholding herself through charm and determination. Her deterioration was a winnowing down of soft blonde luxuriance to a bony fineness, and soon she would vanish altogether. “Devon said you were from the South and I can hear it in your voice, Dr. Congreve. Those lovely vowels. We’re leaving for Mexico for a few weeks, but when we get back you must come for dinner.”

“Yes, come for dinner when we get back,” Prunty repeated. His brown eyes crinkled with holiday good cheer; he was almost ebullient. “Betty and I have just been to the travel agency to pick up our tickets. They’ve got one of those embryo extract therapies down there I want Betty to have a go at.”

“Actually, it’s a vacation for both of us. I’m much better really, but it’s been rough on Devon.” Betty Prunty leaned into her husband’s elbow in a motion so frail and Victorian that the December wind might have swept her into the gutter.

They wished her a Merry Christmas. Dr. Congreve watched them walk to their car. Prunty held his wife’s elbow, a gesture that was not so much supporting a dying wife as accompanying a frail beauty. She turned a radiant smile on him. He was charming; she was genteel. How much was theatre? They moved slowly and elegantly down the street festooned with plastic greenery and electrified Santas. Obviously Betty Prunty was sparing her husband from the pain of her death as she had probably spared him from every other unpleasantness in their life together. Dr. Congreve imagined them on the plane; their conversation animated and filled with vacation plans, never touching on illness or death.
All through January postcards arrived at the department: “Weather wonderful. Betty responding beautifully,” “Progress slowed, still much encouraged,” “Temporary setbacks, but keeping the faith,” “Betty in hospital, slight complications,” “More tests scheduled. Betty learning chess.” Glue read the latest postcard on the bulletin board out loud to the other teachers drinking coffee in the lounge. “You mean to tell me Betty Prunty is just now learning to play chess? It’s his idea, isn’t it? Take your mind off death with a rousing game of chess. Do you play chess, Dr. Congreve?”

On a drizzly February evening there was a knock at the door of Froudard’s cottage. She had fallen asleep grading papers. At first she was alarmed, then disoriented. A drenched and weathered Froudard greeted her. He seemed to have aged. “Sorry to barge in on you, but it seems I have to reclaim the old manse.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I hadn’t heard the bad news. No one told me of Jerome’s . . . passing.” She heard herself being Southern, politely evasive, feminine. She hated that it came so naturally to her.

“Oh, no, I’d like to kill him, but Jerome’s not dead yet. He’s in a hospital in Rome. He had pneumonia and the priests did all their last rites folderol. But he fooled them this time. Jerome is the kind of boy who fools everybody,” Froudard said meanly. He looked around the room. “You haven’t changed a thing. I thought you’d at least take down that dreadful picture.” He indicated the Renoir reproduction above the mantel. “Do you think you can find another place by the first of the month? I’m not well. I’ve tested positive. I need my house.”

“I don’t know, I’ll see what I can do.” She knew she wasn’t being assertive enough. They had agreed upon terms, and he was the one who was abrogating them and at the same time acting the injured party. The trouble with being Southern was that good manners required you to immediately absorb all the fault, even when you knew better.
Froudard walked over to the bookshelves in search of something. “There was a photograph album here. Have you seen it?”

“No,” she lied. Her manners also required her to lie about nosiness. She had studied the faces in the album with great fascination, Victorian ladies in high collars and skinned-back hair, Edwardian bankers, children in flouncy linens with ponies, on wicker chairs, in nurses’ arms, all presumably Froudards and Froudard in-laws, all ugly, and invincibly prosperous, smiling their well-to-do smiles right through the Depression. Then there were the pictures of Froudard as he progressed from babyhood to graduation after graduation, a whole series of mortarboards and gowns. The album had filled her with envy; her family pictures were of farmers holding teams of mules, women in housedresses holding babies or dogs, her parents and herself on vacation in the Great Smokies, pale, heads tilted in apology, unremarkable and poor.

Froudard located the album and settled himself on the sofa. “Family makes all the difference, but I don’t need to tell you that, do I? You’re a Southerner.” The cat wandered in. He sniffed Froudard’s pant leg, then walked across the room and jumped up in her lap. “As I’ve always said to all my boys a family is built on trust. If you can’t trust family who can you trust. Ah, here she is, Great Aunt Polly.” He pronounced “aunt” beautifully, without making it sound like something to be stepped on. He pulled out a photo circa 1910 of a smug and ugly young woman with a great wad of hair and too many ruffles. “She never married, always had too much fun at home to leave, she said. Great practical joker. She lived with my grandparents. I adored her. Once we made chocolate pudding with Ex-Lax and served it as dessert to the others.”

Dr. Congreve wondered what this had to do with trust and was about to suggest that it would be more suitable for her to move in April during spring break when Froudard began to blubber. “You know what I think, I think he was lying from the very first. When I adopted Jerome he seemed so sweet and pure, but now I know he lied to me. When he ran away and came back sick
he assured me that he had caught AIDS after he had left me. And fool that I was I trusted him.”

Why hadn’t he just called or e-mailed to tell her he needed his house? This was an imposition, dragging her in, making her feel sorry for him. She thought of Prunty: would his response be what she was feeling? If so, she wouldn’t feel this way, she would never allow herself to be a bigot like Prunty.

“Aunt Polly was wonderful, very eccentric of course, but so much fun. When I was a very small boy she took me up to her room and set me in this barber’s chair where we always played dentist or barber or beautician or anything that called for such a grand chair, and she said, ‘Harold, dear, you have been given the greatest gift in the world, you have been born a male Froudard. And male Froudards are very special people. They bestow friendship on only the most deserving, they associate only with the highest and best.’” Froudard was openly weeping. “Before this I have believed all my boys to have been male Froudards—adopted male Froudards.”

He stood to leave. “Forgive the emotional outburst. Of course the blessing is that Prunty is out of town. I suppose poor Betty is dying. Poor woman. Can you imagine having to flatter that man’s ego all these years, his right-wing piety, his alternate views of reality. You look surprised. You mean you haven’t heard that one? I thought he hit all you new girls in Remedial with that one first thing.” At the door he paused. He held the photograph of his long-dead great aunt. “Do you believe that when you die someone you loved very much comes for you? Nonsense, don’t you think? When you’re looking for an apartment be sure and ask them if they allow pets. I’ve decided to leave you my cat. Ungrateful thing, he seems to like you much better than me.”

When Froudard had gone Dr. Congreve clutched the purring yellow cat to her chest. She thought she might be going to cry herself. How dare these ridiculous people involve her in their tragedies, their petty quarrels. She had come to Laedmore to escape all that was trite, maudlin, and inevitable in her life. At this
moment her poor stroked-out mother was probably looking out at the dumpster of rotting produce, the mashed cardboard boxes behind the supermarket, trying to recall if she had a daughter and, if she could remember, puzzled as to what she had done to deserve such desertion. A person who could turn her back on her dying mother could only feel so much pity for the likes of Froudard and the Pruntys. She dropped the cat to the floor. He let out a sharp surprised objection. She would find him a home, and if she couldn’t she would take him to the animal shelter.

She found an apartment across town. It was without charm, that had subconsciously been her main requirement—she had had her fill of charm. They also took pets. Her options were open in case she changed her mind. She wondered if Froudard meant for her to take the cat now or later.

She was packing her last box of books when a car pulled up in front of Froudard’s cottage. At first she thought it was a student who had come to help her move, and then she recognized Prunty. He was carrying a small enameled box that made her think of candy.

“Dr. Congreve, I’m glad I caught you. I was just driving by.” He looked disheveled, as if he had been up for days. “No, I wasn’t. To tell the truth, I just couldn’t take Betty home to that lonely house. You know what I mean. There and not there at the same time. Might I have a drink?”

She found a bottle of Froudard’s Scotch in the cupboard. Prunty balanced the box on his lap while he drank. His eyes were puffy. “You’re moving?”

“Froudard wants his house back.” She grabbed the cat, who was sniffing at the enameled box on Prunty’s knees.

“Disgusting, isn’t it, his showing up like this. You’d have thought Froudard would have had the decency to stay in Italy. Now we’ll have to have a regular celebration of his disgusting sexual practices. Departmental fundraisers, consciousness raising programs for safe sex, the whole silly rot. Just wait and see, you’ll see PC at Laedmore like you’ve never seen it before. If his kind
would just keep their trousers on we wouldn’t have this mess, if you’ll forgive my plain speaking. Is that Froudard’s cat you’re hugging so tightly? Cats carry germs.”

“Not really,” she said, demonstrating her affection for the cat. “Actually, he’s mine.” She wasn’t going to be drawn any further into partisan sentiments.

“Betty always loved this cottage. The outside, that is. She’s never been inside before.” His brown eyes glistened. “You know the line from Yeats, Dr. Congreve, ‘How do we know the dancer from the dance?’ How perfectly that captures our perception of reality. Don’t worry, Dr. Congreve. I haven’t lost my mind. I know that if I go in that house Betty won’t really be there, but she’s in my perception of the house. She’s there for me. Reality is what we make of it, isn’t it? Might I have another drink?”

She poured him another drink from Froudard’s bottle. He began to speak of Plato’s cave. She felt as if she were a student in a freshman lit class. He was putting her to sleep with his crap about reality. She was glad he was a fool, but did he have to be all that much of a fool? She closed her eyes and saw her Chinese lover drinking tea, his arm lifted, rounded, smooth as marble, golden. “How about another?” As Prunty held out his glass he knocked the enameled box to the floor. “Oh, dearest,” he cried as if his wife really were in the box. But he made no move to recover it.

“Let me,” Dr. Congreve said. The box was surprisingly heavy. It must be lined in metal, she thought. She placed it on the mantel beneath the reproduction of The Boating Party. Prunty poured himself a large glass of Scotch. He seemed suddenly to be feeling much better. What had her father always said? “More folks are educated than are doing well.” Her father would have spotted Prunty for an educated fool.

Prunty moved swiftly and drunkenly to Descartes. He rambled on, then suddenly stopped. He lifted his glass to the mantel. “I will arise now and go to Innisfree.” He sank back into the sofa and his eyes closed. After a few minutes Dr. Congreve removed
the glass from his grasp and covered him with a spread. Then she picked up the cat, turned out the lights, and went upstairs. Froudard was coming to reclaim his cottage in the morning; so what if he found Prunty asleep on his sofa. They would, of course, be sweet as pie face to face, full of compassion, consolation, all very academic and PC. She pulled off her clothes and climbed into bed. She heard the cat purr, felt him palpate her thigh, and fell asleep.

They were on the outskirts of Laedmore, headed south, and the dream lover reached out his hand to pat her knee. She could see the dirty nails against her pale skin and feel the rumble of the big engine pulse through her body. Inside the car was like being in a tanker on a sea of great long waves. She looked out the port-hole windows at the ugly deserted factories, the discount houses and their acres of blacktop, the bars, the adult bookstores with their gigantic busts and butts reaching out to the street.

“This ain’t for you, Sister,” the dream lover said. “Ain’t no kind of a place for a woman where a man don’t know enough to call a gal ‘Sister.'” She knew without being told that his name was Roscoe and that he had a long string of ex-wives and children to whom he owed money and obligations he would never pay, yet she felt safe. He would never ask her to perform sex in any position that a good Baptist wouldn’t approve of; she would bear him at least one child which she would name Jason or Jennifer, and her reality would be whatever soap opera she was currently watching on TV. He turned his beautiful brown eyes on her. She saw the harelip, the pink diseased gums, the grotesque tobacco stained teeth, but nothing mattered except his eyes. The engine started to knock. The car bucked and then died. She woke and sat upright in bed. She heard Prunty on the stairs. Sorrowfully and pitifully caught in reality, he called “Betty . . . Betty . . . Betty.”