

Friend

On a morning in early December, Olive Kitteridge clambered onto the small van that took residents from the Maple Tree Apartments into town to go to the grocery store; it had snowed lightly the night before, a white glistening everywhere. She grabbed hold of the railing that went up the small steps to where the driver waited—a sullen young man with tattoos on his neck—and she sat down in the third seat next to the window. She was the first person to board the van, and this was her first time on it. Olive still had her car, but she had decided to take the van into town today because her friend Edith, who had lived at Maple Tree for a few years, had recently told Olive that she needed to be friendlier to the people who lived here. “Ay-yuh,” Olive had said. “Well, I think they need to be friendlier to me.”

She watched now as the other old people—Godfrey, some of them were positively ancient—climbed on, and then a woman who looked a little younger than most of them got on and sat down next to Olive. “Hello!” the woman said to Olive, settling herself in with a variety of recycling bags and also a big red handbag. She was a pretty woman, with very blue eyes and white hair that was a bit longer than Olive thought it needed to be. “Hello there,” Olive said, and the van pulled out, bumping over the speed bumps until

they were on the main road away from the place. The woman's name was Barbara Paznik, she told Olive, and she asked how long Olive had lived at Maple Tree. Olive told her, Three months. Well, Barbara said, shifting her weight a tiny bit to look Olive more in the face, *she* had moved in one month ago, and she thought it was the *most* wonderful place, didn't Olive think so? Olive asked, "Where did you come from?" And the woman said she came from New York City, but she had gone to camp in Maine when she was a girl and she and her husband had vacationed here for years, and now here they were, and they *just* loved it. Loved, loved, loved it. They were early risers and they took a walk on the path through the trees each morning. After a moment the woman said, "Where do you come from?" But Olive turned to look out the window; the woman's breath smelled.

They were driving past the Congregational church, where Olive's first husband, Henry, had had his funeral, and then the van drove down Appleton Avenue past the small houses there; a child and his mother had just come out the door of one. The child was a boy, he wore no hat, and his mother, Olive noted, looked tired. She was wearing sneakers in this snow.

"I come from here," Olive said, turning to the woman. But Barbara Paznik was talking to the woman across the aisle from her now, the back of her tweed coat was almost all Olive could see. After a moment, Olive took her finger and poked the tweed coat hard, and Barbara turned with surprise on her face. "I said I come from here," Olive said, and Barbara said, "Oh, I see," and then went back to speaking with the woman across the aisle.

In the parking lot of the big grocery store, the van pulled to a stop, and people got off—slowly. Olive bought toothpaste and laundry soap and some crackers and oatmeal, then she was ready to go. For a few minutes, she sat on a bench inside the store, by the front door, holding her recycling bag with the stuff in it; she had gone to this grocery store most of her life, and she had never sat on

this bench by the door; this fact now made her feel strangely—and particularly—sad. She got up and went back out to the van. The driver opened the folding door; he kept looking down at his cellphone. She tapped the snow from the tip of her cane and sat down in the seat by the window that she had been sitting in before; she was the first person back on the van. Silence surrounded her as she waited.

Watching while the others finally got into the van, Olive noticed that a few of the old women were apparently wearing those Depends things, those awful diapers for old people. She could see them bulk up the women's hind ends if their coat didn't go below their waist, and one woman, as she bent to get something she had dropped onto the floor of the bus, just about exposed this fact to everyone. It made Olive shudder.

Barbara Paznik did not even look at Olive when she got on; she simply went behind Olive and sat with someone else. No one sat in the seat next to Olive. And everyone seemed to be yakking to somebody. Then, as the van wound its way up the street and around the corner—Olive could not believe this—they all started to sing. "The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round. . . ." Women looked at her with laughter on their ancient faces as they sang, even the few old men were laughing. Olive had to look out of the window, her cheeks getting warm. "God, Jack," she thought, "you're missing a hell of a time." She felt enormously angry at him for dying. And then she thought: He wasn't so much, that Jack.



To Olive, it felt that a screen had been lowered over her, the type of thing that went over a cake on a summer picnic table to keep the flies out. In other words, she was trapped, and her vision of the world had become smaller. Every morning, she drove to the local doughnut shop and bought two doughnuts and a cup of coffee to

go, and then she drove out to Juniper Point and watched the water while she ate her doughnuts; the tides, the seaweed, the spruce trees on the little island, these things reminded her of her life with Henry. She would get out and throw her coffee cup in the garbage can there. And then reluctantly she drove back to the Maple Tree Apartments.

Her apartment, which was one room with a kitchenette and a bedroom and a large bathroom, faced north, and therefore got no direct sunlight. This bothered Olive tremendously. She loved the sun. Was she to live without sun? She had told this to Christopher on the telephone when she had first arrived, and he said, "Mom, we were lucky to get you in there at all."

She had brought with her the single bed from the guest room of the house she had lived in with her second husband, Jack, and a wooden table that she had had with her first husband, Henry. And a small hutch that she had with Henry as well. It had been Jack who had suggested storing those pieces of furniture in the basement of their house, and now she was very glad she had done so. It meant there were pieces of Henry here. "Thank you, Jack," she had said, after the movers had left. And then she said, "And thank you, Henry." On the hutch she had placed a photograph of Henry and also a smaller photograph of Jack.

Every evening a group of residents gathered in the lounge area, where there were small wooden tables and a group of chairs, dark green with armrests. Here these people had their wine, and Olive kept trying to join them. The evening after that horrific van ride, she went and stood near the group of people in the lounge, holding a glass of white wine, but these people—she thought—made it clear that she was not one of them. They were wealthy, Olive had come to understand, and they were snobs. This evening a woman,

who was tall and wore dark blue slacks with a white blouse, was talking about Harvard. Harvard this, and Harvard that. Olive said to her, "My second husband taught at Harvard. He went to Yale, and then he was the youngest person to get tenure at Harvard."

The woman looked at her. Just looked at her. "I see," she said, and walked away.

"Well, hell's bells to all of you," Olive said, putting her wine-glass down on a small tabletop, and in her mind she meant Jack as well. In fact, when she got back to her apartment, she put away the one photograph of Jack, and just had Henry's photo there on the hutch by itself.

A few of the people were local; her friend Edith, for example, who had lived in this place for years, but Edith had a full life here. When Olive, on her very first night, went into the dining room for supper—it was a large room with foolish white latticework on the top half of the walls—Edith was sitting at a table for four, with three other people, and she gave Olive a little wave, and that was that, and Olive sat alone at a table for two. She hadn't known what to do with her face as she ate the stupid salad from the salad bar, and then the skimpy piece of salmon and yellow rice.

But Bernie Green was living here. Olive remembered him, because when Henry had to sell his pharmacy to that huge chain, Bernie had handled the legal aspects for him, and Henry had always spoken highly of him. And here he was, looking old as the hills, and where was his wife? His wife was over the bridge, it turned out; she had developed Alzheimer's very soon after they had moved here together, and so Bernie went every morning—over the little walking bridge that went to the Alzheimer's unit—and he sat by her bed even as she became more and more out of it. Whenever Olive saw him he had tears in his eyes, and sometimes they were

just coming straight down his face. What was that all about? She asked Christopher this on the phone, and he said, "Well, Mom, he's probably sad about his wife," and Olive had said, "But, Chris, he walks around weeping!" And Christopher had said it was cultural. "Cultural?" Olive demanded. "What in hell does that mean?" Christopher said it meant the guy was Jewish, and Jewish men weren't ashamed to cry.

Olive hung up disgusted with them both.

Ethel MacPherson had lived here for six months—she had moved in after her husband, Fergus, died—and she seemed to know everything about everyone; she was the one who told Olive about Bernie's wife going over the bridge. Ethel said, "Oh, I couldn't stand being in that big old house after Fergie died! Oh, how I miss him!"

"Wasn't he the fellow that used to walk around Crosby in his kilt?" Olive asked.

Ethel said, Yes—that was her husband.

"What was that all about?" Olive asked. "I never quite understood that myself."

Ethel seemed insulted by that. "Well, if you had Scottish ancestry you might think differently" is what Ethel said.

And Olive said, "I do have Scottish ancestry!"

"Well, maybe it doesn't mean to you what it did to Fergie," Ethel said, and she moved away, waving at someone across the dining room.

Phooey to you, Olive thought. But she felt awful; nobody was talking to her, and after a few minutes she went back to her little apartment.

As soon as it got dark she tucked herself into her little single bed and watched television. The news was amazing to her. And this helped her. The country was in terrible disarray, and Olive found this interesting. At times she thought fascism might be knocking

on the door of the country, but then she would think, Oh, I'll die soon, who cares. Sometimes she thought of Christopher and all his kids and she felt worried about their future, but then she would think: There's nothing I can do about it, everything is going to hell.

Eventually Olive found the Chipmans; they had lived an hour away in Saco, and he was a retired engineer and his wife was a retired nurse. Both were Democrats, thank God, so they could talk about the mess of the world, and they ate their supper together, the three of them at a table for four. This helped Olive; it gave her a place. The fact that she thought they were both a bit dull was not something she dwelled on, but often enough after eating with them she would roll her eyes on the way back to her room.

This is how she lived.



A few days after Christmas, her son, Christopher, and his wife and all four of their children came to visit. And here was a surprise! Christopher's oldest son, Theodore, who had been fathered by a different man and who had never, in Olive's memory, spoken to her, stepped into her apartment, a young adolescent now, and said, "I'm sorry you got sick. With your heart and stuff."

"Well," Olive said, "it happens."

And then the boy said tentatively, "Maybe things will get better here."

"Maybe," said Olive.

Olive's granddaughter Natalie was eight by now, and she would talk to Olive, but then would turn and cling to her mother, who rolled her eyes at Olive and said, "She's going through a stage."

"Aren't we all," Olive said.

But Little Henry, Olive's grandson who was ten, had memorized all the presidents of the United States. "Good for you!" Olive told

him, but she was extremely bored as he recited them, and when he got to the current president, Olive made a noise of disgust, and the boy said, seriously, "I know."

After Christopher's family left, she was bereft, and she ate in her apartment for two days before she went back out and joined the Chipmans.



It was April when Olive first spotted the woman—she lived two doors down and across the hall from her—and Olive thought she looked mousy, and Olive had never cared for that mousy look. Olive kept on walking to the dining room, and after Olive seated herself at the table, waiting for the Chipmans to come in, she noticed that the mousy woman, who wore a big pair of glasses on her small face and had a cane with four prongs on the end of it, had also come into the dining room, and that she was looking around with uncertainty. Olive reached for her own cane and waved it in the air, and the woman looked at her then, and Olive indicated that she should sit with her. "Godfrey," Olive murmured, because it was taking Mousy Pants some time to make her way around the tables, and she still looked tentative, as though Olive had not meant to have her sit with her.

"Sit!" Olive said when the woman finally got to the table, and Mousy Pants sat and said, "My name is Isabelle Daignault, and thank you for inviting me to sit with you."

"Olive," said Olive. (She thought to herself "Frenchie" because this woman had that last name.)

But then the Chipmans came in, and Olive introduced the couple to her. "Isabelle." And they all began to eat and talk, and Mousy Pants said very little, and Olive thought, Oh, honest to God. When they had finished eating, Mousy Pants stood up and waited with some uncertainty, and Olive said to her, "You going

back?" And Mousy Pants said that she was, so they walked out of the dining room together and back down the hallway.

Mousy Pants said, "I've only just moved in here, just two days ago."

"Is that right?" Olive said. Then Olive added, "It takes some getting used to, I'll tell you that. The Chipmans are okay. The rest of the people are snot-wots mostly." Mousy Pants looked at her with confusion on her face. "Bye now," Olive said. And she left the woman at her door.



Spring had really arrived now, and Olive decided she wanted a typewriter. She had started to type things up—memories—on her computer, but the printer stopped working and she became so frustrated she shook; her hands were shaking. She called up Christopher and said, "I need a typewriter." Then she added, "And a rosebush." And by God if that boy didn't drive up from New York City the next week with a typewriter and two rosebushes; he brought Little Henry with him.

As Christopher carried in the electric typewriter, he said, "These are hard to come by now, you know," but she thought he did not say it meanly.

"Well, I appreciate it," Olive told him. He had brought five cartridges of ink and he showed her how to insert them. And then he planted the rosebushes as she directed, right outside her little back doorway in the patch of ground before the sidewalk; the man who ran the place had said she could garden out there. Christopher dug the holes deep, like she asked him to, and he watered the rosebushes right away as she told him to do as well. "Hi, Grandma," Little Henry kept saying; she was busy with the rosebushes. But afterward, when Christopher came inside and had washed his hands, Little Henry looked at his father, who nodded at him. "Want to see

a picture I made for you?" the child asked, and Olive said, "Yes, I would." And the boy carefully unfolded a piece of paper with a watercolor done of a skeletal-looking person and a big house. Olive thought it was very unimpressive. "Who is that?" she asked, and he said, "Me, and that's my house," and Olive said, "Well, well."

"Want to put it on your refrigerator?" Little Henry asked with great seriousness, and then he said, "That's what Mommy does with our drawings," and Olive said, "I'll stick it up there later."



About the typewriter, Olive felt almost happy. She liked the sound it made, she liked the fact that she could slip in a piece of paper and have it come out—without that damned blinking printer!—and she liked stacking the papers up. Some days she read over the things she had written, and some days she didn't. But the pile grew slowly. It was the only time she felt that sense of the screen she lived inside of lifting, when she was typing up her memories.

One day a memory came to her. But it could not be true. She was a little girl, asking her mother why she had no brothers or sisters like other people did, and her mother looked down at her and said, "After you? We didn't dare have another child after you." But this memory could not be true, and Olive did not type it up.

She did type her memory of how in the months before they discovered her mother's brain tumor her mother had behaved oddly—and one of the odd things had been that her mother would go and stroke her car as though it had been a horse from her childhood farm. When Olive thought of this now, she understood. She had never understood it before, but because her car gave her the only freedom she had, Olive saw that her mother had loved her car as well, as though it had been the pony from her youth and would get her out, from one place to another.

"Henry believed in God," Olive typed one day. Then she added, "So did I because of the frogs we dissected in biology class." She remembered how in college she had thought one day, looking at the inside of a frog: There must be a God who made all these things. Now she considered this, and then typed, "I was young then."



Mousy Pants continued to eat with Olive and the Chipmans, and then one day, as they walked back from the dining room, Mousy Pants asked Olive if she would like to come in and visit. Only recently had Olive found out that Mousy Pants came from Shirley Falls—that's how mousy she was, not to have mentioned it earlier—and so Olive said, "All right," and she went into Mousy Pants's apartment and was surprised by all the little knickknacks the woman had, a figurine in lederhosen and another in a Swiss dress, and many different photographs spread out on the surfaces of tables. Olive sat down. "Well, at least you have some sun," she said.

She saw how Mousy Pants's ankles were very swollen, and her wrists—which Olive had noticed before—were also swollen, and Mousy Pants said to her now, "I have rheumatoid arthritis."

"Horrible," said Olive, and the woman agreed that it was difficult.

Mousy Pants spoke quietly, and Olive asked her if she could speak up. "I can't hear you," Olive said, leaning forward in her chair.

Mousy Pants said, "Yes, I'm sorry."

And Olive said, "Oh, for God's sakes, there's no reason to be sorry, I'm just asking if you can *speak up*."

Mousy Pants sat forward herself then, and she began to talk. She talked without stopping, and Olive found herself becoming extremely interested in everything she said. The woman said this: She said her name had originally been Isabelle Goodrow, and as a

girl she had become pregnant by her father's best friend. This was not long after her father had died. She was an only child, and she had been very protected, and she had known—she said this looking at Olive directly—nothing about sex at all. And so this happened. The man was married and lived in California with his family, and he had come back to the small town in New Hampshire where Isabelle and her mother were living to visit. And when he left she was pregnant. Her mother had taken her to the Congregational minister, who had said that God's love worked in mysterious ways, and so Isabelle, who graduated from high school just about this time, had the baby and stayed home with her mother, and she took some courses at the university but her mother died, and then she was alone with the baby. And she felt very ashamed. "Back then, people did," Isabelle said. "I mean, people such as myself. Very ashamed." She sat back.

Olive said, "Go on."

After a moment Isabelle sat forward again and said that she had packed everything up one day and driven up the coast to Shirley Falls, Maine.

"I told you I went to high school in Shirley Falls," Olive interrupted. "I came from the little town of West Annett and I went to high school there, and so did my husband." Isabelle waited, her swollen fingers draped over the top of her cane. Olive said, "Okay, keep going. I won't stop you again."

Well, said Isabelle, she knew no one in that town when she first arrived, and she guessed that was the point. But she was very lonely. She found a babysitter for her little girl, and she got a job working in the office room of a shoe factory, she was the secretary to the man who ran that department, and the room was filled with women. "I thought I was better than they were," Isabelle said. "I really did. For years, I worked with these women, and I thought, Well, my grades in high school were very good, I would have been

a teacher if I'd not had Amy, and these women could never be teachers. I would think things like that," she said, and she looked directly at Olive again.

Olive thought: By God, she's honest.

The women in the office room, though, turned out to be real friends. When Amy was sixteen years old, there was a crisis. Isabelle found out that Amy had been having a relationship with her math teacher. "A sexual one," Isabelle said. Isabelle had become furious. "Do you know what I did?" She looked at Olive, and Olive saw that the woman's eyes were smaller and becoming red.

"Tell me," Olive said.

"Amy had always had beautiful hair. Long, wavy yellow hair, her father's hair, not mine, and when I found out about that math teacher—Olive, I walked into that girl's bedroom with a pair of shears—and—and I cut her hair off." Isabelle looked away and took her glasses off and drew a hand across her eyes.

"Huh." Olive considered this. "Well, I guess I can understand," she said.

"Can you?" Isabelle looked at her, putting her glasses back on. "I can't. Oh, I mean I *did* it, so I should understand it, but, oh, the memory haunts me, what a thing to do to that child!"

"Does she like you now?" Olive asked.

And Isabelle's face broke into gladness. "Oh, she loves me. I don't understand how she can, I really was not a good mother, I was so quiet and she had no friends, but yes, she lives in Des Moines now, and she has one son who is thirty-five and living in California doing computer stuff. But yes, Amy does love me, and she's the reason I can afford this place."

Olive asked to see a photograph of the girl, and Isabelle pointed behind Olive, and Olive turned around and saw a whole array of photos. The girl was much older than Olive would have pictured, but then she remembered how young Isabelle was when she had

her. Amy wore her grayish hair short now, but her face was full and had a sweetness to it. "Huh," Olive said. She looked at the photos carefully.

"Well, I wasn't a good mother either," Olive said, turning back to face Isabelle. "But my son loves me. Now. After I had my heart attack he seemed to grow up." She said, "What does Amy do?"

Isabelle said, "She's a doctor. She's an oncologist."

"My word," Olive said. "Well, that's something. Working with cancer patients all day, my goodness."

"Oh, I think it has to be very hard, but she seems to find it fascinating. You know, her first little boy, he died when he was eighteen months old. Not of cancer. SIDS. And she was in nursing school, and then she just kept right on going. She's married to a doctor as well. He's a pediatrician."

Somehow Olive found this astonishing. She said, "Well, my son is also a doctor, in New York City."

"New York!" Isabelle said, and asked what kind of doctor he was.

"A podiatrist," said Olive. Adding, "People walk a lot in New York. He has a blazing practice." She looked over at the many little figurines that were on a shelf by the window.

"Those were my mother's," Isabelle said.

"So when did you marry?" Olive asked, looking back at her.

"Oh, I married a wonderful man, he was a pharmacist—"

"I married a pharmacist!" Olive almost yelled this. "My husband's pharmacy was right here in Crosby, and he was a *lovely*, lovely man. Henry was made of love."

"So was my husband," Isabelle said. "I married him right about the time Amy went to college. He died last year, and our house was just too much for me, and so Amy got me into this place."

"Well," said Olive. "Well, well, well. We *both* married pharmacists."

Isabelle said, "My husband's name was Frank."

"And he was a Franco," said Olive. "What we used to call a Frenchie." And Isabelle said yes, and wasn't that funny, because back when she worked in that shoe factory, thinking she was superior to the women who worked there, she would never have thought she'd marry a Franco. But she did. And he was wonderful. He'd had a wife who'd died very young, before they'd had any children, and what this man did after his wife died, every day in the spring and summer and fall, was to go home after work—he and this young wife had had a house outside of Shirley Falls with fields all around—and he would get on his mower and he just mowed those fields. Mowed and mowed and mowed. And then he met Isabelle.

"Did he stop mowing?" Olive asked.

Isabelle said, "He didn't mow as much."

Olive felt a warmth move through her; she stuck her cane onto the ground and pushed herself out of the chair. "Well, I like the sunlight you get here," she said.



Then something happened that made Olive far more concerned than the lack of sun in her apartment. Olive's bowels began to leak. She had first had this occur at night, it had woken her each time with a terrific sense of dread, and then one day on her way out of the dining room, she thought: I'd better hurry back to the bathroom, but she didn't get there quite in time. For Olive, this was absolutely appalling.

She rose at six in the morning the next day and got into her car—she passed Barbara Paznik and her husband, who were out walking, and Barbara waved with enthusiasm—and Olive drove to the Walmart far out of town. Walking as quickly as she could with her cane, she bought a box of those atrocious diapers for old peo-

ple, and she brought them back and put them in the top of her bathroom closet. She wondered when she should put one on. She never knew when these episodes would occur.

A few nights later after supper, as she and Isabelle walked down the hallway, she felt the urge, and when Isabelle said, "Do you want to come in?," Olive said, "Yes, and hurry," and she walked directly into Isabelle's bathroom. "Whew," she said, and as she was straightening herself out a few minutes later, she glanced up and saw—a box of Depends!

Olive came out and sat down and said, "Isabelle Goodrow Daignault. You wear those foolish diapers for old people," and Isabelle's face became pink. Olive said, "Well, so do I! Or at least I'd better start occasionally wearing them."

Isabelle pushed her glasses up her nose with the back of her swollen wrist and said, "My bladder can't seem to control itself, so I had to start wearing them. Not always, but at night I do."

Olive said, "Well, my back end leaks, I'd say that was far worse."

Isabelle's mouth opened in dismay. "Oh, good heavens, Olive. That *is* worse."

"I guess to God it is. And I think after I eat is when this happens. Honest to good God, Isabelle. I'm going to have to make sure I have my foolish *poopie panties* on. Even my granddaughter's outgrown them—years ago!"

Isabelle seemed to enjoy that; she laughed until tears came from her eyes. Then she told Olive how she was always embarrassed to buy them when she took the van to the store with the other old people (she did not have a car); she always tried to sneak off and get them, and Olive said, "Hell, I'll buy all you want, I go to Walmart when it opens at six in the morning is what I do."

"Olive." Isabelle let out a sigh. "I'm awful glad I met you."

When Olive returned to her apartment she didn't write up any memories; she just sat in the chair and watched her birds at the feeder outside her window and thought that she was not unhappy.



And so the year went by. At Christmas, Olive met Amy Goodrow and her husband, who was Asian—Olive already knew this from the photographs—and she was surprised by Amy in person; there was something at once kind about her, but also cool. Olive didn't know what to make of her, but she told Isabelle after they had left—they had flown into town for three days—that she was a nice girl. “Oh, she is *wonderful*,” Isabelle said, and Olive thought about that, how much Isabelle adored this girl.

Olive's own family stayed in New York for Christmas. “They have all those little kids and the tree and all that foolishness,” Olive told Isabelle. And Isabelle said, “Of course they do.”



Another spring slowly arrived.

One evening Olive noticed that Bernie Green had some guests with him at supper. She watched from the doorway as she entered. They were a couple, maybe in their fifties, but as she watched she suddenly realized: Why, that's the Larkin girl! So Olive walked over to their table, and she said, “Hello, are you the Larkin girl?”

And the woman looked up at her, closing her dark red cardigan with one hand, and said, tentatively, “Yes?”

Olive said, “I thought so. You look like your mother. I'm Olive Kitteridge. She used to be a guidance counselor at the school where I worked.”

The woman said, “Well, I'm Suzanne, and this is my husband.”

The man nodded at Olive pleasantly. Olive thought Suzanne was a pretty thing, though she seemed to Olive to have a pulse of sadness going through her.

"Do you know—oh, this was years ago now—" Olive sat down at the empty chair at the table. "Your mother called me a cunt."

Suzanne Larkin's hand went to her throat, and she looked at her husband, and then at Bernie. Bernie started to chuckle.

"Oh, I deserved it," Olive said. "I went to see her after my first husband died, and I went there because I thought her problems were worse than my own, and she knew that was why I was there, it was extraordinary, really, I never forgot it. But my word, what a word to use."

Suzanne Larkin looked at Olive, and then a sudden kindness came to her face. "I'm so sorry about that," she said.

And Olive said there was no reason to be sorry at all.

"She just passed away this week," the girl said.

"Oh Godfrey," Olive said. Then she said, "Well, I'm sorry. For you."

And the girl reached to touch Olive's hand lightly. "No reason to be sorry." She leaned in toward Olive. "At all."



Mostly, Olive and Isabelle spoke of their husbands, and also a little bit of their childhoods; Olive had told Isabelle right away that her father had killed himself in the kitchen of his house when Olive was thirty years old, and Isabelle's face had shown genuine sorrow. This was important to Olive; had the woman appeared judgmental, Olive thought they might have stopped being friends. Only seldom did they mention their grandchildren, and one day Olive asked Isabelle why she didn't talk more about her grandson, the fellow in California doing computer stuff. Isabelle put her hand to her chin as though thinking about this. "Well, talking about grandchildren

can be boring for others, and also—" Here Isabelle sighed and looked around Olive's living room—they traded off their places to visit—and said, "And also, I don't really know him very well. The truth is, Olive, Amy is good to me, but she does live in Iowa, and I sometimes think when a child moves that far away they're really trying to get *away* from something, and in this case I suspect it's me."

Only then—in a certain way—did Olive fully understand why Christopher lived in New York City. "I guess you're right," she said slowly, the pain of this a reticulation spreading through her. And then she thought about Amy. That's what her slight coolness had been: Amy loved her mother, but she was not close to her. The things that happen in childhood do not go away.

"I love my grandson," Isabelle was saying. "Oh, I do, but he's not really a part of my life."

Olive swung her foot up and down. After a minute she told Isabelle how she had written a letter to Little Henry and one to his older brother, who had suddenly been nice to Olive, and they had both written back, and then she got a call from Christopher saying, "Mom, you need to write the girls as well." And Olive had been stung by that, so she wrote the girls, and never heard a thing back from them.

Isabelle listened, and shook her head slowly. "I don't know, Olive," she said.

And Olive said, "I don't either."



And then one day Isabelle did not show up for supper. Olive went and banged on her door, and Isabelle came to the door—though it took her a long time—and she had bruises up and down her arm, which she showed to Olive as soon as Olive got inside. "Oh, Olive," she said. "I fell." And she told Olive how she had been getting into

the shower when she fell and for a few moments it seemed she wouldn't be able to get up, but she did, and now she was very scared. Tears glistened behind her glasses. "I'm scared they'll move me over the bridge," she said. And Olive understood.

That day they each gave the other an extra key to their apartments, and it was decided that every morning and every evening one of them would slip the key into the other's door and make sure the other was okay, and then just walk out. Olive was surprised at the amount of safety she felt the first time—that night—when she heard her door open at eight o'clock and saw Isabelle walking into her bedroom. Olive waved, and Isabelle waved, and then Isabelle walked out. So it got like that. Olive checked on Isabelle at eight in the morning, and Isabelle checked on her at eight every night. During these times they seldom spoke, just gave a wave, and they both agreed it worked out well.



One day Olive opened the door to Isabelle's apartment—it was a little earlier than usual, Olive had been up for hours—and just as she was about to holler "It's only me," she heard Isabelle talking, and so she almost walked out, thinking Isabelle had a friend over.

But then Olive heard this: Isabelle, speaking in a baby voice, said, "Mommy, do you think I'm a good girl?"

And then Isabelle's voice changed to a calm, adult voice, and she said, "Yes, honey. I think you're an awfully good girl. I really do."

Isabelle's baby voice again: "Okay, Mommy, that makes me happy. I try to be a good girl."

Isabelle's adult calm voice: "And you succeed. You're a very good girl."

Baby voice: "Mommy, I need to take a shower."

Adult voice: "Okay, honey. You can do that."

Baby voice: "I can? Because sometimes I get scared. That I'll fall or something, Mommy."

Adult voice: "Oh, I understand that, honey. But you'll be okay. You can do it."

Baby voice: "Okay, Mommy. Thank you, Mommy. You're awfully good to me."

And then Olive saw Isabelle start moving toward the bathroom, and very quietly, so quietly that Olive felt the tension ripple right down her back, Olive closed the door, hearing it click, and she waited outside the door of Isabelle's apartment, and after a few moments she heard the shower running, and so Olive went back down the hall to her room.

Sitting in her wingback chair by the window, Olive kept hearing Isabelle talking to herself in those two different voices; a chill kept going down her arms. Was the woman schizoid? Olive could not stop herself from feeling a deep fear. Maybe Isabelle was going dopey-dope. Another chill ran down Olive's leg.

That afternoon, Olive said to Isabelle, as they sat in Olive's apartment, "I've been thinking about my mother a lot."

Isabelle looked pleasantly at Olive. "Have you?" she said. When Olive didn't answer, Isabelle said, "What is it you've been thinking, Olive?"

And Olive said, with a small shrug, "I don't think my mother ever really liked me. I guess she loved me, but I don't know if she liked me."

Isabelle said, "Oh, Olive, that's sad."

So Olive just took the bull by the horns and said, "What about your mother, Isabelle? Tell me more what she was like."

And Isabelle did not change her expression; she just said, "Oh, she loved me. But you know, Olive, I disappointed her. With my

pregnancy so early on, that was very hard on my mother. And then she died. And it was very sad, Olive, it's made me sad all these years, because I would have liked her to live long enough to see that Amy—oh, that Amy is a doctor, and so smart, and I would have liked her to know about my marriage to Frank. She would have felt so much better.”

“Yes,” Olive said. “Well, that’s life. Nothing you can do about it.”

“No.” Isabelle shook her head appreciatively. “That’s true. But I miss her these days. Somehow especially these days. Sometimes I talk to her—I even have her talk to me. The way she always would when I was little.” Isabelle shook her head slowly; light reflected off her glasses as she looked at Olive. “It comforts me. And it gets mixed up with my being a mother to Amy, because I don’t think I was such a good mother to her. You know, I’ve told you that before.”

Olive had to think about this once Isabelle went home. Apparently, Isabelle was not schizoid, nor was she going dopey-dope. She missed her mother and was calling upon her in her own voice. Or in her mother’s voice. For a long time, Olive sat in her chair by the window. A hummingbird came to the trellis, and then a titmouse. Olive, after many minutes of thinking about what Isabelle had told her, said tentatively, “Mother?” And it sounded foolish. Her own voice, an eighty-six-year-old woman’s, saying the word. And she could not answer in her mother’s voice. Nope, it was not going to happen.

And so, in a way, Olive felt a different layer of bereavement now; Isabelle still had her mother, in some form, and Olive did not. Olive sat, pondering this. After a moment, she stood up and said, “Well, phooey to you,” but she didn’t know who she meant.



It was June now.

One week earlier, as Olive had driven out of the parking lot on her way to Walmart, she had seen Barbara Paznik and her husband out taking their morning walk, and Barbara had smiled and waved vigorously. And then apparently (Olive learned this later), Barbara had keeled over soon after; she had had a stroke, and two days later she was dead. Olive was amazed by this, and she was amazed at how distressed she felt.

She sat now in the early afternoon on one of the chairs set up in the meeting room for Barbara's memorial service; she had put on a pair of poopie panties just in case. Isabelle had not come because she had not known the woman, and she said she didn't feel right attending. About twenty people sat in a room that could hold three times that many. No one was weeping; they sat quietly while Barbara's daughter spoke about her mother always being so upbeat, and then a nephew spoke about Aunt Barbara always being so fun, and then—essentially—that was that. Olive started back to her apartment, then turned and went back toward the meeting room, and she found Barbara's husband, talking to two women. She waited until he had stopped, then she said, "Barbara tried to be nice to me one day and I wasn't very pleasant to her. I'm sorry she's gone. Sorry for you," she added.

And the man was so nice! He took her hand and he thanked her, he even called her Olive, and said that she mustn't worry about how she had treated Barbara; his wife had never said anything to him about it. And then he leaned in and kissed Olive on the cheek. She could not believe it.

And she could not believe how sad she felt.

For the entire afternoon she sat by her window in her wingback chair and pondered many things. She had not been nice to Barbara Paznik because the woman came from New York. Then she thought how Barbara Paznik had been younger than Olive, and full of energy, and she was gone now. Dead. Olive kept picturing the woman's vibrant, pretty face. And somehow Olive, in spite of her two husbands having died, now understood that this had to do with her, with Olive. *She* was going to die. It seemed extraordinary to her, amazing. She had never really believed it before.

But it was almost over, after all, her life. It swelled behind her like a sardine fishing net, all sorts of useless seaweed and broken bits of shells and the tiny, shining fish—all those hundreds of students she had taught, the girls and boys in high school she had passed in the corridor when she was a high school girl herself (many—most—would be dead by now), the billion streaks of emotion she'd had as she'd looked at sunrises, sunsets, the different hands of waitresses who had placed before her cups of coffee— All of it gone, or about to go.

Olive shifted slightly in her seat, wearing her poopie panties beneath her black trousers and flowery top. She kept thinking: Barbara Paznik was alive, and now she is dead. And then, her mind twirling around, Olive suddenly remembered catching grasshoppers as a child, putting them in a jar with the top on, and her father had said, "Let them out, Ollie, they'll die."

She thought then about Henry, the kindness in his eyes as a young man, and the kindness still there when he was blind from his stroke, the pleasant expression on his face as he sat in that wheelchair, staring. She thought about Jack, his sly smile, and she thought about Christopher. She had been lucky, she supposed. She had been loved by two men, and that had been a lucky thing; without luck, why would they have loved her? But they had. And her son seemed to have come around.

It was herself, she realized, that did not please her. She moved slightly in her chair.

But it was too late to be thinking that—

And so she sat, watching the sky, the clouds high up there, and she looked down then at the roses, which were pretty amazing after just one year. She leaned forward and peered at the rosebush—why, there was another bud coming right behind that bloom! Boy, did that make her happy, the sight of that new fresh rosebud. And then she sat back and thought about her death, and the sense of wonder and trepidation returned to her.

It would come.

“Yup, yup,” she said. And for many more minutes she sat there, not even really knowing what she thought.

Finally Olive stood up slowly, leaning on her cane, and moved to her table. She sat down in her chair, put her glasses on, and put a new sheet of paper into the typewriter. Leaning forward, poking at the keys, she typed one sentence. Then she typed one more. She pulled the sheet of paper out and placed it carefully on top of her pile of memories; the words she had just written reverberated in her head.

I do not have a clue who I have been. Truthfully, I do not understand a thing.

Olive stuck her cane to the ground and hoisted herself up. It was time to go get Isabelle for supper.