Sample Anjet Daanje

Sugar Animal

Page

My right hand, unthinking, beats time on the wheel for Frankie. My eyes compel the traffic light to change. Just as my efforts have paid off, as my foot is hovering over the gas pedal and my lips are cursing the blind moron napping in front of me, she pops into in the corner of my eye. Like a buzzard too hungry to notice hares or treetops, its full attention on one little mouse running for its life, I find myself drawn to that one detail. Not the front lawns, carefully watered and maintained, not the cyclists on their way to the mall, not the two men with dogs performing their daily bonding. But a woman's back spilling down to a denim-clad rear outthrust like a challenge. She's standing in her own garage, bent over her car's engine, oblivious to her classic Hollywood pose, which belongs in the emergency lane of some American freeway, not here in the dreary Dutch suburb of Vleuten. In the few seconds it takes for the car ahead to lurch into motion, my decision is made.

Although now, looking back, I feel certain I had no inkling of what lay ahead, any more than she did, so my decision had no clear purpose at the time, even so, when I relive the incident at night, my hand reaching for the turn signal is always the first act, the inescapable start of a predetermined series of events. Last week's suppressed anger, yesterday's, this morning's. Her purring feline smile over breakfast, never apropos of the conversation in progress, but expressive of some secret joy nestled in her mind, which she won't share because she believes my touch will turn it to stone. The blazing one hundred miles per hour at which I then drove to Zoetermeer, another suburb, just as dreary, where Piet Holder at Nutricia managed to put off signing the contract for yet another week. The traffic jam on A12 on the way back, which got me off the freeway and onto provincial routes, bound for an entrance to A28. Any of those could serve as the starting point, but then the story that brings me such unfailing pleasure would be a matter of cause and effect, and it's not. It's about revenge and power and how they sometimes threaten to overshadow my love for her, although they also preserve it and give it flavor, the way sugar and lemon juice combine with water to make lemonade.

My grab for the turn signal is followed by a polyphony of horns, honked by drivers who'd already decided they were turning right. I can just barely maneuver the company Opel between a Mitsubishi and a friendly Peugeot. Too much traffic on the side street. I turn right again and park. Like a good citizen, I take a ticket from the parking meter and tuck it inside the windshield. I shut the door, straighten my tie in the rear-view mirror, and walk back to the traffic lights.

There's a soft drizzle, like constant, quiet sorrow. The asphalt's turned pitch black but isn't really wet. And the colors of the gardens in front of the duplex houses have deepened too. Even the plants that normally limit themselves to shades of green at this time of year seem to have burst into modest bloom. I haven't put on my long raincoat, it's still lying on the back seat. For some reason it feels inappropriate to wear it, as if I'm going to a party and the wrong ensemble could ruin everything.

She's still in the same pose, her head now raised slightly under the yawning hood, so I can see I wasn't mistaken. She has blonde hair, a little too long, but I don't mind an extra inch or two. I watch her while the pedestrian light turns green. A young woman with a backpack strides impatiently past me. I go on waiting until it turns red again. I want to put this off a little, the laws of traffic and even time have no influence over my decision. This is power. Fifty yards away from her, disaster lurks, and she has no idea. She's squinting naively into a Volkswagen's engine.

Her stance, along with the unfocused energy with which she's examining parts without daring to touch them, makes it clear she has no idea how to fix the problem. Even so, she's trying it herself instead of calling a mechanic. I grin. Mireille can be stubborn like that too. Last month she thought she could fix the TV with a screwdriver and the manual. On a superficial level, women are all the same. Their minds have been emancipated by books, movies, and politics, but their bodies are still the same as ever.

I obey the little green man and cross the street. She stands up straight, her shoulders sighing. She's looking straight ahead, in my direction. I smile at her, as if she doesn't just happen to be glancing around but has made some essential distinction between the neatly trimmed hedge and me. For one deliberate yet persuasive moment I hesitate, before turning onto the gravel tiles of her front walkway. As if she's summoned me with her eyes and all I can do is give in, as if she has herself to blame for what's about to happen, I ask her point blank.

"Maybe I can help?"

I'm polite and friendly, so she won't feel menaced. She'll believe she has the option of saying no. She sees my gray suit, the immaculate creases in my pants, the expensive shoes, my disarming smile, which sells sugar by the ton. I'm no macho auto mechanic but a gentleman, who, judging by his outfit, knows as little about internal combustion engines as she does, but ignorance is eloquent and loves company. She pegs me at about her age and strikes a casual tone. "You know anything about cars?"

I stand beside her in the garage and lean under the hood, asking businesslike questions about the nature of the problem. Since there's no one else around to talk to about her bad luck, and little incidents like these are the stuff of her life, and are therefore important, she's more than happy to spill the whole story. The upshot is that she had plans to go shopping in Utrecht, but the car wouldn't start. I silently count myself lucky that my brother Paul used to care more about cars than about food or sleep. "Try again, then I can hear what's wrong," I say with a knowledgeable look on my face.

She gets in and turns the key. The Volkswagen's engine coughs, but then lapses into demure silence. After a few more tries, I wave to her to stop and she rejoins me. "You see, nothing happens," she says gratuitously.

"Did you pull the choke?" I asked.

"Oh, sure, I left it on the whole time."

So that's it, she's flooded the engine. All I have to do is wait and the machinery will heal itself. A little manly magic will make the recovery more impressive, and I won't have to tell her the problem isn't the starter but her own driving skills. She wants to see me work miracles.

I ask her for screwdrivers and wrenches of various types and sizes, which I use to disassemble a few parts with great solemnity and then put them back together. Although I hate to stain a good suit, I choose to leave my jacket on, and I don't even tuck my tie into my shirt for protection. I throw myself into the role of the friendly, mechanically minded, yet slightly bashful man. I admire my own creation. Is this me? This guy, foolish enough to shove his oil-covered hands into his pants pockets and then, a few minutes later, to wipe them off absent-mindedly on his expensive light green shirt? I realize I'm playing Dennis. Harmless Dennis, always trying to cover up his shyness with bravado in my presence. It's

endearing if you like that kind of thing—the type of man who makes even his victories look a little like blunders.

She couldn't care less if I succeed or fail. She's leaning over the rusty, greasy engine, right beside me. It's more than a little inconvenient, but I'm not complaining. My arm brushes hers, and as the smell of oil and gasoline fills my nostrils, my eyes linger on her face from much too close for far too long. My mind is entirely on her, in the dim garage that shelters us from the rain, it's not slipping backwards or racing ahead. Although I don't yet have a clear picture of what I'm going to do, I do know it will be extraordinary, and afterwards I'll want to savor every detail. So I summon all my concentration. It gives me a buoyant, happy feeling, like flooring the gas and setting my car free. Even as blurred snatches of landscape fly by, the moment seems to stretch its limbs, swallowing up all reservations and possibilities and refusing to end. "Well," I say assertively, wiping my right hand on my pants, "that takes care of that." I get behind the wheel, wait a few seconds before starting the car, and sedately turn the key. This approach gets an immediate response from the engine, which starts to hum enthusiastically.

"Gosh," she says in measured admiration, "so what was it?"

"The starter." I slam the hood shut and hesitate, as if searching for a better word than "bye" with which to end our encounter.

She's way ahead of me. "Come inside for a minute," she says. "You can wash your hands, and maybe we can do something about those stains on your clothes."

I follow her through the door that connects the garage to the front hall. My eyes sketch her hips and thighs. She's narrower and more domestic than the impression I had of her when I turned right at the traffic lights. Sweeter. But if I choose, I can put that out of my mind. Meanwhile, she's giving me the same treatment. She offers me one of her husband's suits and shirts, claiming he never wears it. She even has designer shoes for me. She bought them six months ago for her husband, but they were too small. If they fit me, I can keep them, she tells me. But when I return downstairs dressed, the way she looks me over leaves no doubt in my mind: these aren't clothes her husband's never worn. She looks at me the way she'd look at him, without hesitation, like I'm a familiar sight. The married expression is for the suit, and for me it's blended with the curiosity that a strange man arouses in her. It's an exhilarating mix. I have to work to keep my thoughts on track.

In the living room, which is neat as a pin, she brings me coffee and cake. From the open kitchen comes the smell of beef stew, now warming up again. We talk about cars, my job as a sales manager for a sugar company, and Ol' Blue Eyes. She has all of Sinatra's albums on CD, and her favorite tracks are the same as mine. Under the easy flow of conversation runs a silent current, our eyes exchange caresses. We are husband and wife, we've been married for years. She takes loving care of me, I protect her from all harm, the passion of those first few months has never faded. When she gives me a smoldering Ingrid Bergman look, we both understand what it means. And because we've known each other so long and we're sure we'll always be there for each other, we can let our desire grow and grow until it becomes unbearable

and must be sated. The undercurrent is starting to froth and churn now. I reach out my hand and touch her wrist. She lays her hand cautiously on my thigh. Our eyes meet. Frank drifts away, along with the sugar. Even though it hasn't happened yet, the decision has been made. When my lips touch hers, she'll shut her eyes in eager pleasure. She'll run one hand along my neck while the other slides down to my inner thigh.

Like a bawling child, the telephone butts in. Her lips, which had already parted in anticipation of mine, press together primly. It never happened, thank goodness, after all, it would be wrong, those pursed lips tell me. "Sorry," she says, "I have to…" She gets up.

My hand closes around her wrist. I've lost control of the scene, and it makes me furious. Furious at that moronic retard on the phone who thinks dialing a few numbers entitles you to her attention. Furious with her because she dropped me for an electronic whine. This is our life, damn it. We don't need anyone else sticking their noses in. Just ignore the idiot machine.

"It's my mom," she says. "I really have to get this. Otherwise she'll start worrying."

My inflamed desire surges up from my underbelly, itching impatiently in my fingers and winding its way to my tongue. "You cunt," it shouts. "Selfish slut. Who do you think you are? You think you're the boss of me? Turning your back on me like I'm some lifeless sack of shit? Filthy fucking whore. I'm not swallowing any more of your crap!" I shove her back onto the couch and slap her hard in the face with my free hand. She grabs her cheek, shocked, as if she's never been hit before. And stares at me. The telephone stops. A calm settles over me. The house, which was flooded with jangling and shouting, starts to return to normal. Her thin wrist throbs between my fingers like a frightened animal. Nothing's wrong. Just a slip. Nothing more. Now I have everything under control again.

If she'd only allowed that blissful peace and quiet to go on for a few minutes more, who knows what turn things might have taken. But all of a sudden she gets scared. She starts screaming like I'm some kind of monster, when all I did was lose control for a second.

I cover her mouth with my hand, and the stupid bitch bites me. I moan, but I don't back down. My right hand shoots toward the knife she used to cut the cake. I feel her sharp intake of breath, her eyes widen. My knee forces her hand against the arm of the couch. It's a good sharp blade. One swipe separates the tip of her middle finger from the rest of her body.

"That's how we deal with women who scream and bite," I say. The fury the telephone unleashed in me has hardened into calm, cold determination. I survey the whole dizzying range of possibilities the situation affords me. "Every time you make noise, you lose a finger. OK?"

She gapes dumbly at her mutilated hand, from which a steady drip of blood falls to the couch and runs down to the floor. The fingertip that's no longer part of her has rolled underneath the coffee table. I slowly remove my hand from her mouth. She is silent. "Does it hurt?" I ask. "Answer me, does it hurt?"

She calculates, trying to guess what I want to hear. “No,” she rasps. “No, I can’t feel a thing. It just stings a little.”

“In that case, I wouldn’t mind another cup of coffee.”

With a fearful look at the knife in my hand, she reaches for the coffee pot. Her hurt finger touches the hot glass for an instant. The pain takes her breath away, I see her abdomen contract beneath her silk blouse, but she doesn’t make a peep.

I take the bloodstained cup from her hand. “Good stuff,” I tell her after the first sip. “You should have another cup too.” She shakes her head. Desperate tears well from the corners of her eyes. She’d better not start crying now, because then she’ll be useless. “As long as you do what you’re told, you’ll be fine,” I say.

She nods vigorously, but her body can’t lie. It shakes and shivers. The faux leather couch that connects her to me conducts those intimate, uncontrollable twitches to my buttocks. This sets in motion a warm swirling in my underbelly, and a tentative swelling between my legs.

I stand up decisively. “What are you cooking up for me today?” I ask, waving the knife at the gas burners.

She blinks in surprise.

“You’ve got something on the stovetop there,” I clarify. “What’s for dinner?”

“Beef stew with potatoes and salad,” she says in a quavering voice.

I grab her upper arm and lead her to the open kitchen, where she gets out a peeler and sets to work on the potatoes, with a nervous glance at my knife. In the cupboard under the sink, I find disposable gloves. I pull out a pair and put it on. Her distrustful eyes track my every movement. My plastic-wrapped hands are what frighten her most. “No.” The word slips out.

“I won’t do a thing to you,” I kindly reassure her. I sit down at the head of the kitchen table, keeping a careful eye on my housewife so she doesn’t get out of hand. The longer I look at her, the more satisfied and shameless I start to feel. By the time she sets the table with light-pink blood-spotted plates, my love and pride are almost choking me. At my insistence, she sits down next to me and serves the food. Although the skirt steak is tough, I compliment her on her culinary talents. She shoves a potato back and forth on her plate. “Come on,” I say sternly. “You’re spoiling our nice meal.”

“I really can’t eat right now,” she says, with a couple of long, heaving sobs.

All it takes is one threatening look and she puts the potato in her mouth. I cut off a stringy piece of steak for her. She chews on it a couple of times but then lifts her hand to her gagging mouth. “I can’t… I’m going to…” she gasps.

“Don’t make such a fuss. It’s delicious, you’re a wonderful cook.”

Dinner, cake, and coffee all spill out together in one sour wave.

"What a waste," I say.

She looks down helplessly at her plate, on which the uneaten food is now covered in brownish-pink sludge. The smell of vomit hits me too, turning my stomach. That's how I know how heartless my demands are. With my knife to her throat, I force her to pick up the spoon and lift a bite of the half-digested food to her mouth. Hoping to outsmart me, she tries to dig for an unchewed spoonful of meat and potatoes.

"Tut, tut, tut," I chide, wrapping my hand around hers to guide her. "Here, try some of these tasty morsels."

Together we spoon up the chunky stomach soup. Her eyes bulge, glued to the approaching spoon as if it were a bullet from a firing squad. At the final second she starts rolling her eyes and screeching, "No, not this! Anything but this!"

That was a dumb move. After all, this one action means nothing to me. My goal is to humiliate her, to break her. Instead of resisting me with the means at her disposal and triumphantly taking a bite, she's now placed herself entirely at my mercy. Now I can use her own words against her. It's not me hurting her anymore, she's doing it to herself.

I rest my head against her blonde hair and caress her cheek gently with the flat of the knife. "I'm not an animal," I whisper tenderly. "You don't want your dinner. Fine. And in return, you tell me I can do anything I want. Anything. Well then, give me…"—my eyes drift over her body— "… your ear."

She doesn't understand how literally I mean it until she feels the blade against her outer ear. Then she panics and tries to resist. The chair wobbles, and the table shifts an inch or two toward the counter. I grab her forehead with one hand and press her to my chest, the other hand still poised at her ear. "Listen," I pant, "I've been generous to you. But we have an agreement. The choice is yours: you eat, or I take your ear."

She realizes she's walked into a trap. "What do you want from me?" she asks, sobbing. "I don't understand. I can give you money…"

She's ruining the whole thing. Who brings up money at a time like this? This is about her and me. About us. About guilt, hatred, and inescapable love. Not about worldly possessions. "If you won't choose, I'll do it for you," I say, angry now. I draw the knife down her ear. It dangles from her skull by a piece of cartilage. I'll have to cut again. My hand smothers her cries.

Her blood spurts onto my shirt in the shape of a red rose. Like a proud doctor showing his patient the kidney stone that was causing all the pain, I present the ear to her. She stares at it. I'm as surprised as she is. The purpose it served when attached to her head was the only thing that made it meaningful. Now that it's no longer part of a larger whole, it's become unrecognizable and absurd.

I carefully rinse the ear under the faucet and place it in the fridge among the cold cuts. At my command, she scrapes off the plates into the garbage and then starts stacking the dirty dishes on the left side of the counter. "Come with me," I say, "I need your advice first." With the absent movements of a

sleepwalker, she follows me to the stereo system. I ask her to pick a CD. Without looking, she pulls one from the rack. I lose my patience. “Try a little harder, please! You told me you’re a Sinatra fan, and your favorite album was…”

“*Close to You*,” she answers meekly.

I slide the CD into the slot and set it to play tracks 6, 12, and 13 on repeat. As we walk to the kitchen, the string orchestra starts to play. A brief pause, during which everyone holds their breath, is followed by Frank’s emotional, expressive voice. He croons gently to his listeners as if he’s just woken up beside them and is murmuring thanks for last night. As the song continues, he gets wrapped up in his own enthusiasm, pulling himself up straight against the pillows. The orchestra swells to the rhythm of his feelings.

Goosebumps ripple down my arms and back. I must have heard the song a hundred times, but never did it seem so right as here. I know she can feel it too. I glance over at her as I take a warm, sudsy glass from her hand. From now on, “Don’t Like Goodbyes” will always be about this moment. From the first notes, she’ll think of me and feel pain and unimaginable fear. I’ve taken away her favorite song forever. Of course, it might help her put that loss in perspective if she recognizes she’s going to die this afternoon. In that case, one little song doesn’t matter, maybe it’s even a good thing. One last chance to hear Frankie.

I let her enjoy tracks twelve and thirteen too, and then the whole cycle repeats itself. During the second performance of “The End of a Love Affair,” the soapy water gurgles down the drain. You’d hope that such a noisy, distracting process would at least be effective, but the water leaves a frothy ring around the sides of the sink. I turn on the faucet and try to coax the greasy foam toward the drain. She puts away the clean dishes in the cupboard. A trickle of blood runs down her neck, vanishing into the darkness of her blouse, right at the crevice that turns a low neckline into a promise but also an obscenity.

“Now that the kitchen’s clean, it’s your turn,” I say matter-of-factly. I lay my hand under her collarbone, just above her left breast. She gasps, more afraid of me than of the knife. I run my index finger through the trail of blood and bring a few drops to my lips. It’s a taste of her insides, of the soft filling that is the domain of surgeons and single-celled organisms, just as the outer layer belongs to me. She knows herself as an elusive tangle of thoughts, as the point from which the world is observed. But never will she see herself the way I see her. Her naked back interrupted only by her bra strap as she pulls her T-shirt up over her head. Her hair, outspread like bobbing seaweed over her pillow as she sleeps, the bovine expression in her eyes as she nods off in front of the TV. She has no idea how different her inner image of herself is from the outer view, how carelessly she exposes herself, putting herself at my mercy and digging herself ever deeper into danger.

I poke at her waist with the knife, and she obediently starts moving. We climb the stairs to the closing strains of “If It’s the Last Thing I Do.” Frank looks on in satisfied silence as his orchestra does its work, and the clarinet, like a babbling brook, leads the strings to a harmonious finish. A sense of solemn

anticipation steals over me, as if we're climbing the rope ladder to the trapeze with a drum roll in the background, and the circusgoers can't wait to witness our superhuman feats, or our fatal plummet.

A few steps later, however, she rudely spoils my heroic mood. Without any orders from me, she stops at the door to the bedroom. She must not think much of me. "You're too dirty for that," I say, with barely concealed contempt for her misjudgment. I hold up a pinch of her bloodied blonde hair between my fingers. "A wash will do you good."

I force her farther down the hallway. Where the cream-colored carpet ends, I push the door open with my foot and turn the lock to "Occupied" behind us. "Not bad," I say approvingly, noticing the lustrous, hygienic state of the fixtures. I have to suppress the urge to grab a bath towel and wipe away the bloodstains she's making on the tiled floor. Every drop desecrates the tidy pride of this clean house. But it's not my house.

I turn the faucet and water splashes into the tub, a soothing sound. "Shouldn't you be getting undressed?" I remark, because she's leaning anemically on the sink as if I'm the one who needs a bath. She takes my measure with distrustful eyes. She's one of those dimwits who believes female nudity turns every man into a beast.

I grab her irritably by the collar of her blouse. With a sweep of the knife I slice off the buttons. They tinkle one by one onto the floor. She instinctively tries to hold the garment shut, but I pry her crossed arms apart. "I won't be so careful next time," I hiss in her face. "A flap of skin might get in the way." I slide the knife menacingly under her bra.

With trembling hands, she removes her blouse. I step back for a better look. She's a little too thin, but she has nice, full breasts and slender legs. Those advantages are negated, however, by the fact that she leaves her socks on longest, a habit I consider exceptionally unattractive in a woman. Afraid to provoke me, she avoids my probing eyes, quickly shuffling toward the bathwater she seems to hope will shield her naked body from my gaze.

As she swings her leg over the edge of the tub, I grab her by the calf. "You don't lie in the bathtub while you wash your hair," I say. "That's not right." I turn the knob, grab the showerhead, and force her head down with the same hand. Water cascades over her blonde hair, turning it black. The blood from where her ear used to be billows into fast-growing treetops in the full tub.

I find some shampoo in a cabinet and squeeze a dollop onto her head. As I'm massaging it into her hair, soapy water runs down into the wound and she moans. "I don't want to hurt you," I apologize. "It's important for you to be clean." To show her I mean it, I let her rinse off the soap herself.

Standing by the sink, I evaluate the effect. Her feet on the light green ribbed mat. Her breasts hanging heavy over the tub. Her spine hiccuping down to her tailbone and drowning just below in the flaccid curves of her rear, which dangle defeatedly over her thighs. In some inexplicable way, she is both attractive and repulsive at once.

I approach her from behind. In one quick motion, I place the knife between her shoulders, tracing the pearl necklace of her backbone with the blade. It's a caress of what is beautiful in her and punishment for what is hideous. After a few seconds' delay, a narrow line of blood forms on her back. She clutches the edge of the tub with both hands, shouting something unintelligible. The only word I understand is "Pig!"

Her voice reverberates from the tiles, taking on the sound and significance of a choir of wrathful women. The outcry bores into my happiness like a bee sting. The bathroom shrinks around me, and I feel the outside world laying siege to the house's walls, attempting to seep through every crack and cranny and disrupt our intimate union.

Out of control now, I wrench her around with one hand. The other plunges the knife deep into her belly. The blade sinks into her soft flesh as if into cheesecake until the hilt reaches her navel. She heaves a peculiar sigh, like a bicycle tire deflating. I eagerly lift her head for a look and brush the wet hair from her face. But I see no fear in her eyes; I've broken her. Her pain's as unbearable as her knowledge that it will soon be over. Her mind has no room now for the future, only for this moment in this steam-filled bathroom, with me.

Of the two of us, I'm the only one who will recall this scene. My pleasure therefore takes precedence over her suffering. I forbid her to collapse to the floor. With difficulty, she remains upright against the bathtub, her arms folded over her belly as if that could staunch the blood. Through her finger, I see bundles of translucent gray intestines. From behind, I insert an inquisitive hand into the wound. It's like a lukewarm, underfilled sausage, slippery and twisted, and I can feel her heartbeat, each contraction squandering more of her life. I'm inside her. Fear, love, hate, I feel it all, without any words between us.

I take the fleshy tube in my hand and squeeze it hard. She doubles over. "Ahh," she says.

"Stay on your feet," I order her, jerking her upright by her hair.

I want to know how it looks, so at suitable moments I can see through other people's skin and imagine the muck inside. Through the opening in her belly, I yank out some of her intestines. The sight most resembles some newborn animal taking its first steps, its umbilical cord dragging along behind it. She groans and gasps but does not react to the glimpse I offer her of her innards. No monstrosity can shock her now.

I drag her to the fogged mirror and wipe it clean. "Take a good look at yourself," I say. She stares wide-eyed at the creature I've made of her. Pale, dripping with blood and water, and too far gone even to be frightened. She no longer recognizes herself. Her body consists of pain, her head has already let go of life. But on the outside, she's still human. That understanding brings a futile hope that cracks her armor. She lets out long, harsh sounds, crying, or maybe screaming, I couldn't say which. But she's more desperate than I've ever seen a person before. Pleasure shivers down my back and pirouettes in my belly.

But I can't let this intoxicating moment go on too long. Like all ideal situations, it comes with the risk that the enchantment will pall, tainting the whole situation in retrospect. Besides, her desperation is

awfully loud. I pick up the showerhead and, with all my might, slam it into the back of her head. Her screaming stops. It's as if she's staring in fascination as her mirror image receives the death blow, but I assume she's no longer capable of seeing. Her brain is too busy wrestling with death to pass on the images that assail her eyes.

A second blow and she collapses. I catch her with one arm. She's draped against me, limp and heavy. I hit her three more times and then cut open her carotid for good measure. Not because I want to, but because I have to. I can't permit her to remain alive.

I let her slide slowly to the tile floor. Her head lolls against the edge of the bathtub. In the bedroom, I pick out clean clothes that fit her. Nothing too formal. Something that will let her be herself. A well-worn pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, a wide, dark green sweater, no socks. I lay it all out at the head of the bed for her.

In the bathroom, I wash the shampoo and blood from her hair and then blow-dry it. In my hands, it turns its original strawberry-blonde color. I haul the body upright, heave it over my shoulder, and struggle to my feet. I can just manage the few steps to the bedroom. My load falls to the bed with an indecorous thud. I slide it to her side, by the window. Then I wrestle her into the clothes I picked out. I comb her hair and gather it into a sloppy bun.

She's just come home from work, changed, and laid down for a nap. Her eyes fall shut, shielding her from everyday cares. She's breathtakingly beautiful. All mine, yet beyond reach. I kneel before her and let it slowly sink in that she perished by my hand. The sorrow I summon is not real. I weep the tears of a nephew at the funeral of a wealthy uncle he never met. But as I sit there by her side, her death becomes more vivid. Never again will she climb the stairs ahead of me, her buns swaying seductively, never again will she laugh with her mouth full, never again will she long for me, think of me. The result is not a feeling you might call sorrow. It's a terrible darkness, wresting its way inside my ribs. It swells and swallows me up like a hungry amoeba, engulfing me completely. At the same time, I know this is all just make-believe.

"Farewell, my dearest," I say after an appropriate period of mourning. I rise from my attitude of bent-kneed devotion and leave the bedroom door ajar as I exit, so it won't take her husband long to find her.