

BLUEBIRDS

Michael Byers

"Now, if we could just—what's your full name?"

"My full and complete name is Mary Hempstead."

"No middle name?" He seems disappointed; possibly she is imagining it. He is half-hidden behind his broad, polished, tidy desk, the mullioned window cranked open behind him to the shaded summer air that finds this side of the building: a leafy courtyard beyond, paved with brick, iron benches bolted down. The doctor has a big-boned, lineman look to him: sandy brown hair, a heavy chin, nice square teeth. Dr. Miller.

"No," she tells him. "Just—Mary Hempstead. That's all."

"And where were you born?"

"Scranton, Pennsylvania."

"And where do you live?"

"You mean when I'm not in the booby hatch?" She waits; his pencil remains suspended above his pad. "With my brother Hollis. In Cambridge."

He writes this down. "Address?"

"Well—I don't know, actually. I only just got there a few weeks ago. It's on Harvey Street. The Emerson, actually. Apartment 645."

"Only a few weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"You moved from Scranton?"

"Yes."

The doctor makes a note of this. "And what is your age?"

"Twenty-three."

His gold glasses wink. "And in what year were you born?"

"In the year 1904. And you?"

"Oh, I'm an old, old, old man," he sighs. "And what year is this?"

"Well, 1927."

"What month is this?"

"July. It's the thirteenth. Friday the thirteenth, in fact. You must really get some interesting cases, it sounds like."

He gives a little huffing laugh through his big nostrils. "What city is this?"

"Boston."

"What place is this?"

"Well, doctor, this is the nut-college wing of Belmont Hospital for the Insane."

"How far from your home is this?"

"Oh," she guesses. There is a banging from the corridor: a cart being wheeled past, loaded down with pots. "As the crow flies it's about two miles give or take on corners, depending on your speed, I guess. I mean, you know—your *route*."

"When did you come here?"

"I came here on Wednesday morning. This week."

"What did you do when you arrived?" Now he looks up at her. Green eyes, very nice. But utterly neutral, unattached to anything. It is a frightening look, suggestive of the serious spot she has found herself in.

"What did I do?"

"I mean, what happened first."

"Well, first, there was a little while when I guess I got stitched up, and then someone gave me something in a glass of milk and then I slept for about twenty-four hours consecutively, although nobody's exactly confirmed that for me. I know I woke up with dog's breath and it was the next day. I mean, *all the way* the next day, if you see what I mean. I still have terrible—" She breathes into her palm. "It's just this awful taste. Even after having breakfast, or whatever it was."

"That's only the paraldehyde," the doctor explains. "It's very fast acting, but it does have that sort of effect on a lot of people. We use it to help people sleep, that's all. Do you remember who brought you here?"

"Here? My brother Hollis did."

"He's the one you live with."

"He's my only brother. Our parents are dead." He has no reaction

to this, either, only enters it dutifully. "Look, are you really going to write down everything I say?"

He aims a rueful grimace at about the middle of his desk. "I'm sorry I take so long. If I don't make myself go slowly I can't read what I've written later. Do you mind?"

"No. I mean, I guess not."

"How did you come? I mean, by bus, on the car line—?"

"Is that the next question on your list, there? I'm sorry, I'm peeking."

He turns the pad around. "You can see it. It's the same list for everyone. If we don't have it down in a list like this it's hard to remember everything in the right order."

"And then you write down what I say."

"It helps us poor doctors keep track, that's all. It's slightly more objective than just sitting around a table and saying, Well, she seems all right. That's all. It's nothing more than that."

"There are a *lot* of questions."

"We like to be thorough to begin with. Later on we can be lazy, if you prefer."

"He jokes!" She pushes the pad back to him. "I didn't know that was allowed."

He blinks, calculates his answer. "We're not all that serious," he says. But even this seems neutrally offered, a piece of instruction or information, meant to reassure.

"Well," she says, "we came in a taxi. Once we got one that would stop for us, I mean. With me bleeding like a pig all over myself. And poor Holly, you know, trying not to faint."

"And do you feel all right, right now?"

"Well, aren't you *very* charming to ask, I guess, but—honestly. I mean, look at me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this, *this*." She reaches up to touch the swaddling of gauze around her head. "It's not exactly the *style* right now."

"No."

"I look like a giant cotton swab. And this *garment*. Whatever it is. It's not even mine. The tag in it says Olivia McCovey. I don't guess she really misses it, though. I'd probably take action if you mailed

this back to me, once I got out. You know, I could look her up and cause a scandal, couldn't I? Or maybe she *didn't* get out. Maybe she *expired*. Of dog breath."

"You'll get your clothes back today. As soon as they're labeled. And we'll move you out of the admitting room and into your real room. We'll get you nice and settled." He is writing, idly, casually, eyes down. Now he takes the pad off the table and, still writing, leans back in his creaking swivel chair. A rustling enters at the window: ivy, stirring in a breeze. When he is done writing he looks up at her sharply. "Would you say you're depressed?"

"No," she decides after a moment, "I wouldn't say that."

"Excited?"

"No. You mean mania?"

"Excited, stimulated, you know—"

She shakes her head. "No."

"Do you feel anxious?"

"Right now? Well, not exactly. I mean—but yes, anxious is a fair description of the general case."

"When did this feeling begin?"

"Begin. Oh, well, honestly, I don't know. *Begin*. I mean, I don't know how to pick the day out from all the others: You can't go back and check the dates."

"More than six months ago?"

"I don't know. It's just something that's sort of crept up on a body. One doesn't keep track, exactly."

"Do you feel sad?"

"Sad. Well, yes, a little. I mean, my brother. Just—making him do all this on my behalf. Sad, and guilty, too, is that acceptable?"

"Yes." As an afterthought, he nods. "Do you feel afraid?"

"Afraid? Well, I don't know. Sometimes."

"Of what?"

"I don't know."

"Would you say you have a feeling of generalized fear, not *about* anything in particular, or would you say you have a fear of something in particular?"

"That, doctor, is a very complicated question."

He writes this down, waits for more, and when it doesn't come he says, "All right. Maybe we can come back for that one. Next. Have you had any peculiar experiences?"

"Is that what they're calling it these days. Well, doctor, a girl my age is always having peculiar experiences. If it's not one thing it's another. You tell them you've got business elsewhere and they want to know what it is. If you can get out of the car you get out of the car. Otherwise you just slap the hell out of them until they stop. I know how to defend myself, if that's what you want to know."

"Have you ever been attacked seriously?"

"Oh, I suppose *no* is the answer. No more than any other girl. You do learn how to handle it. *You* know, doctor."

"Do you see things?"

"You mean imaginary things. I do not."

He studies his pad. "Is there something else you would like to say about that?"

"No."

"Any unusual sensations or convictions?"

"Well, for one thing I'm very *tired*."

"Anything else?"

"Aren't you going to ask me about my childhood and so on? I thought that's what went on in the bughouse, anyway."

He addresses her now, blinking rapidly. "Actually we don't do much psychoanalysis here. As a staff we don't have any very hard-line Freudians around. Not on purpose, it's just not the sort of area—I mean, not speaking for the Hospital, but I happen to think the whole family romance idea is sort of buncombe. And that bunch all tackle the master urges so differently you begin to suspect they don't really have their shoes tied right."

"All right. I wasn't really keen on talking much anyway."

"Oh, you'll *talk* enough. You and I. But most cases like yours resolve themselves after a period of rest and physical re-assortment." He shifts, his chair screeching. "Now, we *will* have cause to examine you from the aspect of something we call glandular psychology. Which is a sort of extension of endocrinology, which means really the study of your internal secretions."

"That sounds like you'll poke me."

"Indeed. We'll poke you plenty. We'll draw blood at different times of day, we'll take your temperature, we'll examine the chemistry of your eliminations."

"Oh dear."

"It does sound pretty ghastly at the outset. But you'll get used to it. Really it just goes toward putting together a general picture of your overall health. We'll also look you over from the aspect of what we call the autonomic nervous system, which means more or less all the things your body does on its own. It's a biologically much older system than the central nervous system, and it can have its own problems."

"That sounds like it might take a while."

"No. Well, we find that usually six weeks is pretty well sufficient in a case like yours. I mean: no previous history. An anxious period, a move, and a single attempt at self-injury. No promises, of course, but I'm optimistic."

"And I imagine by then this'll be healed."

"Oh, yes. The scalp heals very quickly. Dr. Farber is very, very, *very* good at that sort of stitching up. You'll be surprised when the bandages come off for good how little you can see. Especially since you have good thick hair. It'll be completely unnoticeable after it grows out again back there. Does it still hurt much?"

"No. I mean, a little bit, but. No, it's all right."

"You gave yourself quite a treatment." He sets the pad on his desk.

"Yes." She resists the urge to touch the gauze. "I guess you want me to say a little more."

"It's an unusual place to hurt yourself. You know, up on the sort of back, you know, *top* of your head. It just seems hard to reach."

"Not *that* hard. Just hard to see what you're doing."

"I guess a mirror."

"Well."

He leans forward slowly, a gentle, deliberate pounce. "So: Look, do you see things, Mary?"

"No. You've asked me that already, haven't you."

"Do you have any unusual sensations, or convictions?"

"You asked me that one, too."

"Any unusual physical sensations?"

"No."

"It has something to do with your head?"

"I said no." Her hands clamped together in her lap, she tips her head back and forth, tasting the air. "No."

"Do you feel there's something inside your head that needs to get out?"

"No. Don't be ridiculous."

"Do you feel there's something on your head that you want to get off?"

She faces him directly. "No."

"All right." He turns the clipboard around and slides it across to her. The printed questions followed by his painstaking scratches. Evidence. "So, if there *were* something—I mean, if you *had* answered yes to any of those questions, then I would ask these questions here." He indicates each question, slowly, with the dull, polished ball of his pencil tip. "Does the thing seem to move, or does it remain in one place? Can you see it in a mirror? As a shadow? Is it always there, or only sometimes? Does it seem natural? Does it have the color you would expect such a thing to have? Is it transparent, so that you can look through it? Can you get it to disappear?"

"I can read," she says.

"All right." He doesn't look at her. She can see the neat parting in his hair, the milk-white scalp, the gray hairs among the brown. He is older than he appears. After a moment he takes the clipboard, spinning it with his broad fingers, sliding it into his lap as he chucks himself back in the chair. "Now, a few more, all right?"

"All right."

"Do you dream?"

"At all? Yes."

"How often do you dream?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose about every night. I don't keep track."

"Do you dream of things that have happened to you recently, or some time ago?"

"Both, I guess. At different times. Or sometimes, you know, it's all invented."

"Do you dream of seeing things, or of hearing things, or of things tasted, smelled, touched?"

"Seeing, I guess, mostly. Hearing."

He writes. "Does the same dream come twice or more?"

"All right, let's see; I dream about home sometimes, I think." She sees him waiting for more. "Just about being in the house, with my mother. I mean, she's somewhere in the house, and—you know, I'm upstairs in my bedroom or somewhere, and it's sort of not exactly our house, the rooms are arranged differently or the decoration is different, but—" She waits for him to stop writing. "She's there, that's all."

"Your mother."

"Yes."

"You mentioned that she's no longer living."

"Yes, she died two years ago."

"Were you living at home then?"

"Yes."

He considers this, puts it aside for later. "And would you say the dream is pleasant? Or disagreeable?"

"Well, mostly pleasant. You know, but sort of melancholy, I guess."

He nods. "I'm almost done with you. After this we're going to take you down the hall and Mrs. Gouch is going to show you where your room is, and show you around a little bit, and then she'll take care of you for the rest of today, all right?"

She feels an exhausted subsidence, and tears come to her eyes. She blinks them away. She does miss her mother. And how embarrassing—how ashamed she is, suddenly, to be here, to have failed so completely at everything, at being a woman, to have landed here in the hands of head doctors! She sniffs. "All right," she says.

"Just a few more things. First, I'm going to give you this, and I'd like you to read the story aloud to me. Then I'm going to ask you to give me the point of the story in your own words."

"A Cowboy Story?"

"Yes."

"You want me to read it aloud?"

"Yes, please."

She takes up the paper. "A Cowboy Story. A cowboy from Arizona went to San Francisco with his dog, which he left at a dealer's while he purchased a new suit of clothes. Dressed finely, he went to the dog, whistled to him, called him by name, and patted him. But the dog would have nothing to do with him in his new hat and coat but gave a mournful howl. Coaxing was of no effect, so the cowboy went away and donned his old garments, whereupon the dog immediately showed his wild joy on seeing his master as he thought he should be. 'Well!'"

"How would you describe the content of the story?"

"The content? I suppose: Man can seem to change his nature simply by changing his appearance. Even one's friends can be misled by one's disguises."

"All right, but I would say that's more like a *moral*."

"Well, the content is—well, what I just read!"

"Which is?"

"Oh for Pete's sake. A cowboy gets a new set of duds and his dog don't recognize him no more. Whereupon he goes to change into his old duds and his dog is rejoicing. What on earth *this* is supposed to tell you."

He writes quickly, then nods. "All right. Two more things. First, I'm going to say some words and phrases, and I want you to repeat after me."

"All right."

"Third riding artillery brigade."

"Oh for the love of god." It is too silly. But there is a reason, no doubt: to test her somehow. And she was always an excellent student.

"Third riding artillery brigade," she says.

"Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."

"Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."

"Conservative."

"Conservative."

"Statistical."

"Statistical. That one's tricky, doctor."

He nods again, not to be deterred. "Irretrievable."

"Irretrievable."

"Perturbation."

"Perturbation."

"Fastidiousness."

"Fastidiousness."

"Autobiography."

"Autobiography."

"Very good! Full marks. Now, finally, I'm going to dictate just a few more things and I want you to write them down here, on this sheet of paper." He slides it across to her, hands her a second pencil from his drawer. "You can write as slowly as you like. I'll say them one at a time, but I won't repeat them. Understand?"

"Yes."

"We're almost done, all right? This is the last little bit."

"Yes, yes. Go ahead." She holds the pencil poised. It is nicely like being back in the office again, taking dictation.

"All right: the United States of America."

She writes. Slowly, evenly. But not *too* carefully—that would be a sign of something, she imagines. "All right."

"The evening has come."

She writes. Looks up. He is somber as a cleric. Only his voice betrays something, a concern, an intention to do right by someone, by her, by everyone. The light in the courtyard is green with summer. "All right."

"Contentment is a pearl of great price."

She writes. "Yes," she says.

"Last one: Where shall I find hope?"

"Well," she says, and writes, and lays her pencil down. "Where indeed. How artful, doctor. What a note to end on."

He laughs again, a little chuffing snort. "That was Dr. Nathanson's contribution," he says, taking the paper. "Don't look at me."

She is not surprised to see that her room is white. What else would it be, her room in the nuthouse? White indeed, and painted white so often and so emphatically that the paint is soft, the layers so thick on the jamb that they accept the inquiring pressure of her thumbnail. Her room. A ticking radiator stands in the corner, blasting heat, and

to cool the air Mrs. Gouch waddles over and tugs the window up. A gray metal grille will prevent Mary from jumping to the bricks six stories below, should she find herself moved to do so. The window shade is a brown fabric on a spavined roller. Mrs. Gouch yanks on it twice, but it won't take.

"Good enough," Mary says.

Mrs. Gouch sighs, sends Mary a weary, householder's look. "It's been balky. Someone must have given it a spin. Mrs. Donovan, maybe."

"That's all right." She must enter, but still she hesitates. The two metal beds are narrow, also white. The pillows are plump, the gray blankets look clean. A portrait hangs above the bed in a birdseye maple frame. It shows a pretty woman in a pink dress with mutton-chop sleeves. Her mother, it may as well be, though really there is no resemblance—only a kind of familiar period smile, fat and happy, sending out the old upgazing Edwardian glow. Stupid, it seems, whoever she is, this substitute mother to anonymous nutters, the sole ornament on these otherwise blank white walls. There is also a cane-backed rocking chair, reared back and waiting for a sitter. And a dark old bureau with a fancy mirror, slightly fogged.

"Mrs. Donovan is your roommate," Mrs. Gouch tells her, sensing her reluctance. "She's an old sweetheart. Very quiet and reasonable." Mrs. Gouch slips her hands into the deep, pouchy pockets of her cardigan to extract a green translucent toothbrush and a red-and-yellow tube of Ipana. She hands these over.

Mary takes them. The toothpaste is a slug of lead in her hand. *GOOD FOR TENDER GUMS*. "A present for me," she says.

"Your clothes should be ready in a little while. I thought it would be nice to have you clean up a little before then."

"I think I'd rather not, actually."

"You'll have to come and clean up now, Mary," Mrs. Gouch tells her. "It's required."

"Required by whom?"

Mrs. Gouch gives her a small warning smile. "It's required."

This is clear enough. She is not up for a struggle. Her feet hurt, her head bothers her for the usual reasons, her eyes smart. She feels half

hung from whatever they mickeyed her with, and she wants a drink, a cup of coffee, a glass of seltzer, a cigarette. Her breath is disgusting. And she wants a magazine, the radio, something to distract her from her head. None of these is coming, and she knows it is hopeless to inquire after them. It is quiet in this tall unlit room. It is quiet everywhere, the corridors empty.

She asks, "So where do you keep all the loonies, anyway?"

"Everyone's down in the gymnasium with Mrs. Howard playing basketball. They'll be coming back soon."

The radiator groans, steam throbbing through its winding interior.

Mrs. Gouch waits, hands clasped in official patience at her waist. She is heavy bottomed, full bosomed, her collar buttoned high, her hair in an unstylish grandmotherly pile on her head.

"All right," Mary says. "Lead the way."

The washroom is large and open and clean. The air smells of soap and drains, reminding her of the Taft High School locker room. Empty, it holds the suggestion of many girls in motion. Women, she corrects herself. Dozens of nutters, all in one place. She feels a poisonous loathing drop through her. Fear, too. They will eat her alive. A sober light gleams through the high amber window. Mrs. Gouch watches while Mary brushes her teeth, spits, avoids her reflection.

"You're very pretty," Mrs. Gouch says. Her voice is hollow in the empty washroom. "Are you in pictures?"

"Huh," she fends, "I've heard *that* line before. Believe it or not." She looks up to see Mrs. Gouch watching her in the mirror. It is that familiar examination, the sort that women of a certain age tend to wear, comparing her to their daughters. Or to their old lost selves. "No," Mary says, relenting, "I'm not in pictures. I'm a secretary. When I'm not in the booby hatch."

Mrs. Gouch blinks, nods once, performs a tiny bow in return for Mary's politeness.

She washes—splashes water on her face, mostly. Back in the room, her clothes have reappeared. Her blue dress, cleaned and pressed, is on the top; beside the pile sits a tidy arrangement of her underwear. Someone has sewn, into everything, a little cotton label upon which

the name *Mary Hempstead* has been carefully inked. The radiator makes its busy, violent noises. There is a blue bulb on the wall, behind a cage.

"This light," Mrs. Gouch says, "is always on. Please don't try to block it with anything. It might bother you at first."

"All right."

"Is there anything you need?"

The question begs to be mocked and in this begging defies mockery. Behind Mrs. Gouch stands the illuminated corridor, a checkerboard of brown and white. She hears a bustle from far away, and she dresses in a rush. She folds Olivia McCovey's nightgown into a neat soft square and hands it to Mrs. Gouch. There is a stiff, chemically abrasive feel to her dress, as though it has been washed in acid, but she will ignore it.

"I'm all right," Mary says.

"Lunch is in an hour. Until then, you can meet some of the other patients in the Common Area. I'll be just down the hall, if you need me."

She hears voices now—women, a pleasant rowdy burble. The nutters on their way home. They will find her here, the bears finding Goldilocks. The blue light makes moonlight shadows in the corners of the room. She has never been more afraid in her life. Even so, she steps into the hall to face the crowd.

The surprising thing about being inside, Mary soon decides, is that you are really mostly alone. Of course there are plenty of patients who will grab your elbow and make you sit down for a few hands of rummy or who will jabber out their stories across a table in the dining room while stirring spoon after spoon of sugar into their hickory coffee. And every afternoon the whole crew is allowed, in shifts, to walk around in the nice enclosed brick courtyard sunk in its deep well of stone and ivy, where a garden of ferns surrounds a little slate-rimmed fountain, and you can make comments about the weather or pick out what you think are the doctors' windows or remark on the huskies who follow everyone out here and you can feel briefly as though you are part of a charity group, possibly

inspecting the facilities. But in fact no one is really interested in you. And while the doctors are eager to inspect you they are mostly interested in your bowel movements and urine and the character of your blood and something obscure to do with the shape of your iris that Mary suffers them to examine, a very close lens peering into her eyeball while she sets her chin on a little steel cup to steady herself.

But mostly she is left alone. In her room, sitting at the window with Mrs. Donovan, Mary Hempstead watches birds flit to the gutters, clutching the copper drainpipes. Patients press hidden bread and crackers through the grille to the birds, who drop from the gutters to cling to the grillework with their minute black talons, then when they have a bit in their beaks they release themselves and go swooping away through the shaded passages among the buildings. No patient's window faces the street but each is designed to get some light and air, so the birds do find them. At first she was confused as the nurses and attendants are called bluebirds and it seemed true madness to steal food to feed them, as Mrs. Donovan urged. Now the woman shows her, her olive-walnut complexion fierce and stoic as she awaits the first sparrow. Mrs. Donovan is partly Negro is Mary's first suspicion but Mrs. Donovan says she has a liver complaint. "It turns me all *tawny*. I can't go out in the sun or I get black as a spade. That's why I don't go outside. I never go outside anyway, because when you're all out there together they'd just as soon cut off your legs once you start making trouble. They cut *mine* off," Mrs. Donovan informs her serenely, "when I was back in Ward Five with the howlers and the hummingburgers, all the Germans and their elementary engines. That's not my business, that's yours, but if you've got any German blood in you they'll find it out and put you on the toilet to get it out of you." A sparrow whirrs to the grille and without alighting plucks the cracker from Mrs. Donovan's fingers and disappears. She replaces it from the supply in her pocket without moving a muscle more than necessary. "That's how you do it," she whispers.

Mary slips a morsel of cracker through the hard whorls of the grillework and holds very still. There is a shivering something in her tusk as it feels the air move in the top of the room. Then a bird flutters into view and with a hard little tug removes the cracker and vanishes, dropping away and dipping into the shadows.

"They cut *my* legs off," Mrs. Donovan says again. "But they grew back. That's how they can tell if you're blessed by God. It's a slow test but it's always right. The Germans think they're so smart but that's the best they can do. Everyone else back there, they've cut them all off. Some of them don't even have any arms left. There's a woman back there who used to be a friend of Mrs. Featherstone's who's only just a head left. That's what they do when they don't know what else to do."

When Mary has had enough of the birds she steps backward quietly, leaving Mrs. Donovan poised at the window. In this hour after breakfast they are allowed to be in their rooms or in the Common Area, where the fifty or so Ward Three patients drift under the brass planters and sawtooth palms. There are card tables and a long sidebar with copies of the *Herald* and the *Transcript* and the *Globe* arranged down it and magazines you can take back with you to your room or read here on the printed sofas. There is a polished piano that is kept locked. Mary pats the pockets of her dress and takes out a cracker to eat herself and takes a *Cosmopolitan* and goes to the sofa to read. Six or seven bluebirds are here to assist but it is a mostly calm bunch. One patient, Mrs. Halbert, thinks in a sort of genial way that she is a rooster and when she takes a trick at hearts she crows with joy. Mrs. Conroy thinks she is Madame Blavatsky and will grasp your hands and give you a Rasputiny glower and attempt to give you a reading. And many others besides, women muttering or flinching or staggering around as though drunk or merely sitting in a sulfonal daze absently massaging their numb ankles, their guts burbling audibly. It is not too terrible if you don't think about it very much. At least it is pretty quiet. If you are not quiet you do not stay on Ward Three very long. As for Mary she is assumed to be only one of the Ophelias, who wear bandages or bright red wounds or who have the carved and haunted look of someone recovering from a poisoning.

After the hour of rest in the Common Area the patients go to Crafts. Mary has been assigned to weave baskets along with about twenty others. One of the bluebirds walks around with an armful of reeds and lays them down as though presenting vintages. The job is to

insert about a hundred reeds into a bamboo vise with movable metal clasps and then, once this is clamped down, to do the same operation the other way but weaving the reeds through. When the reeds dry out they get slippery so the bluebirds go around with sponges to dampen the works in progress and to offer encouragement. The idea is that this is "occupational therapy." There are mutterings and cursings but Mary does see the point. You do this difficult thing with your hands and it is so difficult that if you aren't occupied by it you can't do it; so when you are paying attention there is another *unoccupied* part of your mind that slips free without anything in it and sort of caroms around. And for a few minutes she is not thinking about the tusk. She is not sure whether it disappears during this period or whether, like a clock whose ticking vanishes for long stretches, she simply fails to notice that it is there.

She does this for a while. She is pretty slow. As she works a reed splits in two and one shaft of it slides instantly under her fingernail and when she slips it out again a tiny bead of bright blood wells up. It is a sort of comfort that she has blood inside her, like everyone else.

When she sees Dr. Miller again (one afternoon after lunch) her bandage is much smaller. The stitches no longer hurt and the first thing Dr. Miller does when she sits down across from him is slip his glasses down his nose and get up halfway from his chair and take a look. "That's not bad," he says. "I promised you, didn't I?"

"Now I only look like I went through a window backwards," she says.

"Or a backward window forwards," he answers.

"They didn't have those where I was growing up, doctor," she tells him, "but you must remember I'm not *from* around here."

He has another clipboard but he does not pick up his pencil. He looks the same, big muscular hands with a sort of square puffiness to the fingers and hairy wrists where they vanish into his cuffs. "You're feeling all right?"

"Yes," she says. "Especially now."

"How are you liking our little kingdom?"

"It's very well run, for a kingdom. But I guess that has to do with who's the king."

"That would be Dr. Ignatiev."

"Everyone seems to think *you're* the king."

"Tell that to Ignatz and see how far it gets you." He gives her a flat acknowledging grin. He is a male beauty, she suddenly recognizes, and is actually used to this sort of thing. But she can hold her own, all right. "You've met a few people?"

"Yes. Or they've met me. I can't say I remember everyone's name. I remember the ones who think they're someone else but then I get them confused with who they think they are, if you know what I mean."

"Mrs. Gouch says you're pretty social."

"Well, if you can call it that. I wouldn't exactly describe it as a social life."

"You like the food?"

"If you can call it that." He looks suddenly wounded and she assures him quickly, "No, it's just fine. Down to the tomato soup."

"Do you like playing basketball?"

"You ought to see me, doc," she pipes, "I'm a regular Dutch Dennert. I guess I could do without those baths, though."

"You don't like them? They're supposed to be relaxing."

"Well they're relaxing enough, all right. But they go *on*. I get all *pruney*."

He pulls the clipboard toward him now and makes a note. "All right," he says, "ixnay on the athbays."

"Do you know why a prune doesn't mind Prohibition, doctor?"

"Why."

"Because he's always getting stewed!" She can't help it, she giggles.

"A joke!" he remarks.

"Well," she allows, "if you can call it that."

He smiles a little bit again and adjusts his glasses and glances down at his clipboard and makes a few preparatory breathing noises before he puts his pencil down. The old neutral expression comes on him. "So, now, Mary, now we should come to a little bit of the point here."

"Yes." She is so happy to see him again that she doesn't even mind

what she knows has to be coming. "We must be serious."

"Well, just a little bit."

"I can be serious, if you want."

He steepled his fingers. "Well," he says, "you did do a serious thing to yourself, didn't you."

"I know."

"One of our charges is to give you a clean bill of health so we can responsibly release you knowing that you won't do it again."

She nods.

"How's your sleep been?"

"Fine."

"Even without the paraldehyde."

"Yes."

"The baths may be helping you with that. A lot of people have trouble sleeping at first. If you begin to have trouble sleeping we'll need to think about the baths again."

"All right."

"Now," he says, "I'd really like to see if we can talk about why you cut yourself."

She folds her hands together, good girl. "I know."

He waits, professionally motionless in his chair. Through the open window the ivy fluffs and rustles.

"In fact," he says, "mostly I'd just like to know what you wanted to do."

She asks, courteously, demurring, "What do you *think* I wanted to do?"

"Well," he responds, "for one thing, Mary, I don't think you were trying to kill yourself."

"No?"

"No." He shakes his head once firmly. "That's not where people do it. No, I think you had some sort of idea."

She waits.

He says, "It's still there, isn't it? Whatever it is."

She is shaking her head in negation while behind her through the closed door someone tocks in hard heels down the corridor and in front of her through the window a tall narrow segment of freedom

stands like a portal to the upper world. If she were to acknowledge the tusk that is still on her head, still there, six feet long and like a wand, flexible and bowing, she would admit that it is itching and that it wants to pull her head back to expose her throat, the tender hollow there between her clavicles; that it wants to be scraped against the wall. "What sort of girl do you think I am, doc," she whispers.

He answers, quietly, "Well, just a regular old girl."

She lets herself look at him. He leans back in his creaking chair and unhooks his glasses. After a long while she sniffs, "They said six weeks."

"Oh, well, I think six weeks is still very possible, for a first go-round." He is subdued now. "I don't think it's going to go away in six weeks, though, Mary. What we can do in six weeks is the work we need to do to make sure you don't try to cut yourself open again. As long as you're not a danger to yourself we can let you go. Maybe just knowing what you've got is enough to keep you from doing it. A lot of times it is." He lifts the clipboard again, consults it briefly, and nudges it away from him onto the desk. "But the thing about this sort of thing is, Mary, if you don't go after it, it tends to get worse."

"You don't say."

"The condition tends to develop," he says. "To become more elaborated. Unless you really take it seriously. We're allowed to let you out of here once we're convinced you're not about to hurt yourself. But if we decide to do that you'll have to promise you'll find psychotherapy as an outpatient."

"I'll try."

One short shake of the head. "No good."

"I don't have any money."

"No good either. There's plenty of places to go."

"Can I come see you?"

"Not unless you sign the papers and let us put nametags in your clothes. I'm strictly an inside man."

"Can I still make baskets," she manages, "even if I'm out of the union?"

"Just don't let Al Smith catch you at it."

"I like doing it," she admits. "It's nice to have something to take your mind off things."

"That's just it," he says approvingly. Then he has a thought and begins yanking open his desk drawers until he comes up with a little hand loom and a skein of coral-orange yarn. "Here's something else we have people do, for variety. You know how these work?"

"Yes."

He slides the disassembled contraption across the desk at her. "If you need to have something to do outside of Craft hours. We can trade this for your baths, how does that strike you."

She takes the loom into her lap. A gift from Dr. Miller. "It's a deal."

"You're doing very well, Mary," he tells her. "The first two weeks are always the hardest. In two more weeks you can see your brother. And two more weeks after that—" He leans away from the desk again, his big weight making the chair springs groan. "Well, we'll just see, won't we."

It is when Mary's bandages are completely gone and the stitches have been tugged out by Dr. Rosen and she has produced about a foot of coral-orange scarf that Mrs. Donovan's family comes to visit. These reunions are conducted in the Common Area and Mary has seen enough of them by now to distinguish first-timers from those who have come before. Mrs. Donovan's visitors are entirely comfortable, greeting some of the patients by name and handing off their hats without a care to Mrs. Gouch, who gives them an admiring close-lipped smile. Mr. and Mrs. Franklin are a handsome middle-aged couple, Mrs. Donovan's daughter and her elegant, Ascot-sporting husband. "How do you do," Mrs. Franklin says to Mary, after Mrs. Gouch introduces them. "It's nice to see she has someone young around her. I hope she's behaving herself."

"Oh, yes. She's been very helpful to me."

"I was worried that she only talked to people her own *age*," Mrs. Franklin says. "I don't think that's very healthy. It's not like the real world where you have to talk to *everyone*. Actually I requested someone younger for her after her last roommate left, so I'm glad to see someone actually listens around here. Well now *that's* very nice. What a good color."

Mary is still holding the hand loom. "Oh," she says, flapping it. "It gives me something to do, you know."

"I imagine there's a certain shortage of activities," Mrs. Franklin inquires. "I've always thought they could do quite a bit better on that score."

"No," Mary counters loyally, "they give us plenty to do."

Mr. Franklin is standing off, giving Mary the occasional wondering glance. She is used to it, but it has been so long—weeks—since anyone looked at her this way. At last he plunges forward and extends his hand. "Pleased to meet you," he mutters, then withdraws as though yanked back on a leash. As though there is something horrible about her.

That afternoon at the grille Mrs. Donovan is silent, working her gums around some invisible trouble and flinching at nothing, and after lights-out she begins groaning. At first it is only a thoughtful, conversational moan, nothing more than a dozen other patients are prone to do. The caged light makes Mrs. Donovan a blued shadow. Then she begins rolling fitfully, still moaning, and then she sits up in bed like a sorrowing child and begins to bellow. After a minute or two this brings a pair of bluebirds with a rubber-wheeled metal cart on which are folded a stack of sopping wet sheets. In the blue low illumination the leaning bluebirds work with a spidery deftness. "There, there," they murmur, "they're gone, dear. They're all gone now." They strip Mrs. Donovan of her nightgown and roll a rubber mat over her mattress and proceed to wrap her in the damp sheets, snugging them tighter and tighter until the old woman is perfectly immobilized in her wet cocoon. Then from a chrome box one of the bluebirds takes a cloth bag of ice and sets it on the old woman's head, snugging it down with an elastic band. Once this is in place Mrs. Donovan quiets as though this is what she was asking for. One of them places the back of her hand on Mrs. Donovan's cheek for a moment; then together the bluebirds roll their cart away. Mary has never seen the pack administered though she has heard of it. Mrs. Donovan makes not a sound except a little peaceable elderly snoring but after a while Mary gets a little spooked of the long white shape in the other bed, wound in its funeral sheets. But if she is seen awake

she will be dosed with something or given a similar treatment and she does not want this. So mustering her courage she dips her tusk across the room and pets the long damp shape a few times and with this achieved she lies very still in her own bed and for an hour before she sleeps she listens to the *spat—spat* of the wet sheets dripping onto the floor beneath Mrs. Donovan.

Mrs. Donovan, who will never, ever leave Belmont.

She weaves her scarf and makes her baskets until her fingers are wrinkled and callused and walks out into the courtyard with the other patients. She plays rummy with Nora and two other Ophelias, the four of them suddenly fierce and silent at the table as though they have been instructed to play for their lives. There is a sensation when one of the nightgowned howlers from Ward Five gets loose and bangs through the double doors at the bottom of the main hall and comes sprinting at a miraculous speed barefoot to the Ward Three Common Area where she begins padding smoothly around the room as though hoping to blend in, tucking loose strands of hair in her mouth. And Mrs. Ferry discovers a storeroom where the Christmas ornaments are kept on a high shelf and appears in the dining room chewing one of the glass bulbs. There is some concern about whether this will kill her but Rosen forces her jaw open and extracts a webby piece of it like the shell of a hardboiled egg and pronounces it probably safe. And a few patients are discharged and a few are graduated up from Ward Four and one old woman, Mrs. Prince, is send up to Ward Nine where the senility cases go when they can no longer manage for themselves.

Yes, she tells Dr. Miller, she understands that there is nothing on her head, not really.

Yes, she understands that cutting at it will not make it come off.

Yes, she promises to enter psychotherapy once she is discharged.

Yes, she nods, hands together in her lap; she promises.

When four weeks have passed and her brother Hollis is at last allowed to visit she waits at the visitor's entrance until he appears, fat and unhappy in his silver suit, his hair long and flopping behind his ears now and a hazelnut tan on his forehead. "Holly!" she cries, and

embraces him. "You're so dark!"

"Man of leisure, I am," he utters, through clenched teeth. He is stiff and wary, looking quickly around at the crowd of nutters, glancing at her head. "Some place you've got here, Mare. Who are all these friends of yours?"

In her joy at seeing him again her loyalty dissolves in an instant. "These are *your* friends, Holly. That one over there is a queen and that tall sloping one is a heroin addict and that little fat one by the window is a lesbian who can't stop shoving things inside her." She feels ugly and good about it, the old gossip in the halls of Taft, pulling Loretta Sims aside for a burning consultation. "Much more your sort of people, I'd think. Would you like some tea?"

"What's it dosed with," he says warily.

"Just the slightest wee bit of chloralamid," she tells him. "Special for our fairy friends who need correction."

In honor of visitation day there is to be a musical performance for the patients and their guests given by Mrs. Frederick Winters in her blue dress and tidy pearls and neatly marcelled hair. One of the bluebirds flashes the little gold key that unlocks the piano and from a leather satchel Mrs. Winters pulls a booklet of music. There is a settling as the Ophelias arrange themselves skeptically among the pillars under the palms and the loonier individuals get a sense that something unusual is about to transpire. She herself feels an anticipatory interest along the woody length of her tusk but she dutifully ignores this, it is only a figment of her imagination, and with more vigor than she really feels she tucks Holly beside her on the sofa, shoved up against the arm so he does not have to be seated next to anyone but her. He is miserable among all the crazies and she leans over and whispers protectively in his fleshy ear: "We have to listen," she tells him, "it's only polite."

"This ought to be good."

"No, Holly, *she's* not a nutter. She's doing charity work here, to come play for *us*. Because we're very starved for culture in here. The most we get is the old Bees-Knees on a nightly basis when anyone can decide on a program."

"All right," he whispers back.

Well, possibly it is sentimental buncombe. But the old crow starts to play and the place goes almost quiet. Mrs. Harmon stops her endless undead groaning and Mrs. Chester's shuffling, stamping feet settle into their slippers, and the air above the big plants in their copper urns takes on a quality of clarity and order, as though Mrs. Frederick Winters is putting up a trellis of light up which everyone's tangled thoughts can climb. Who knows what the number is in question but at any rate for Mary as she sits there beside her brother she feels, for a little while, that everything might be all right. His big shoulder against hers. A pulse of hope, of life, goes through her. She will be all right. She will return to the world.

Hollis feels it too. When it is time to part his expression is peaceful. "This isn't a bad place, is it," he remarks.

"No," she says. "It's pretty good, Holly."

There is the bustle of goodbyes around them, people shrugging into coats, accepting hats from the patients who have been assigned to the checkroom.

"Thank you," she says.

He rejects this swiftly. "No, no, no."

"I'm getting better, Holly."

He takes this in, tips back on his heels and examines the polished toes of his shoes. "I've got a new place for us," he tells her. "When you come out. I've been sort of getting furniture and things."

"Are you back at Weber's?"

He shoots her a pained, valiant look. "I do all right."

"Well, as long as you don't worry about me, Holly. Whatever else you're worried about, you can take me off the list for the time being."

"I want you to come home."

"I will," she says.

"You're my only sis," he says.

"Oh, stop it. You're going to make me start bawling. You know if I weren't already as crazy as a hoot owl, I'd certainly go crazy about you."

"I'm going to put that in a song."

"It's *from* a song, you dum dum." She leans forward, kisses him. A simple happiness. For a moment, it seems the tusk has gone—

the music, something, has whirled it away—but when she tweaks her head again it is there, shivering. But that it can disappear at all, ever, is enough to send her up on tiptoes to embrace her big froggy brother. Hefty, solid. A protection. All she needs, she thinks.

When she returns to her room, she finds the issue of *Cosmopolitan* tossed onto her bed. On the back cover, Mrs. Powell Cabot lounges on her gold chintz sofa. Roses and hydrangea blossoms are bunched, purple and red, behind her. She is smiling and saying: Camel's costlier tobaccos are *Milder*.

With slanting strokes of a pencil, someone has filled in the type so that now it says: Mrs. Poel Cat.

Or, read another way: Mrs. Pole Cat.

She shudders. Someone knows. She shoves the magazine away. A secret message.

But no, she corrects herself. Not a message. Not a sign. Just some wit with a pencil. She inhales. She takes up her weaving again.

She will sit and convince herself for as long as it takes.

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