

# ONE

spring 1992

THE BEST WAY I can introduce myself is to tell you what happened when my wife died. Joachim Carruthers wrote, “No man is better known than in grief,” which is the kind of pea-brained aphorism that we all consider doubtfully after two or three thinkings about it, but in my case it bore out rather eloquently. On that otherwise unremarkable day in April, I learned of grief, and through grief discovered more about myself than I really wanted to know.

My wife was Carolyn DuMont Lovett, in the full flowering of her mid-thirties, gradually adjusting to her tenth year of marriage. Carolyn was a Virginian, daughter of Reginald, a God-fearing and gun-toting real estate developer, and Eliza, a wilting Ante-Bellum plantation princess given to the fluttering of fans and sporadic late-night calls to her daughter inquiring after her health. Carolyn’s physical health

was superb. But her mental health, which seemed to me to be her mother's principal legacy to her, caused me increasing concern through our marriage: insomnia, feelings of persecution, grave doubts about the purpose of it all. These were maladies for which I had no cure.

We lived in a small country town west of Boston, in an oddly shaped little farmhouse situated in the crook of a "Y" intersection of two bumpy country roads. After dark, headlights would sweep through the bay window of our dining room, to the right, to the left, to the right again with the kind of mathematical regularity that proved the equal popularity of both routes. To the left, cars would reach the center of town — the library, Unitarian Church, town hall, police station. To the right, they would feed onto Route 22, thence to the Mass. Pike or the Interstate. Anyone driving too fast along the stem of the "Y" might not see the sign saying "Dangerous Intersection," might miss the red reflectors in front of our low stone wall buttressing our tiny lawn from the street, might find themselves accidentally trespassing our boundaries. In our six years of living here, cars had twice failed to negotiate either turn, crashing spectacularly into our stone wall. In both cases, thankfully, the injuries were minor, but the thunderous concussion of car metal, glass, and stone was something not to be forgotten, and both times our ancient dining room ceiling opened up its patched-over crack, spilling white dust onto our harvest table.

I recovered quickly in each case, called the police, rushed outside to see what help I could offer before the EMTs arrived, then returned to check on Carolyn, who did poorly under stress and tended to hyperventilate, her mouth wide open sucking air, her eyelids fluttering in terror. In a day or two she was sufficiently herself again to insist that we either move to a safe street or build a much higher wall. Since we could afford to do neither, we finally agreed to install an eight-foot stockade fence around the perimeter of our little

lawn on the inside of the stone wall. Carolyn was appeased; it reduced street noise, kept car headlights out of our house, and offered the illusion of safety and separateness from the anarchy of the outside world.

I know now that this was Carolyn's main problem. Beyond a certain few intimate spaces (our house, the second grade classroom where she taught, the plush interior coziness of her Saab) the world was becoming more and more threatening to her. A Friday night adventure into Boston once was a great time for us both. Soon it became a psychological chore, populated with fears of other drivers, ugly faces on the street, the overcrowding of restaurant entryways as we waited in line for a table. I held her little hand more often and gave it comforting squeezes. She'd look up at me with a grateful smile and flick her eyelids. Increasingly, I felt sadness for her.

Increasingly, she was attracting outside male attention. Men loved her liquid, sugary Virginia drawl, mistook the timorous twitches of her full mouth and wide eyes for sexual signals. What I knew to be the surface ripples of deep anxiety Carolyn magically conveyed as something catchingly "come hither," which could be deadly for any man on the prowl. The clincher was her body, and her unthinking immodesty in dressing it. She was short and small-boned, but her frame was thickly fleshed with big hips and wonderfully rounded breasts that invariable strained at her shirt, blouse, sweater — it didn't seem to matter what she wore. When I first met her in 1978 at the Harvard School of Education, I was enthralled with this body, and I fantasized how her name, in three vertically stacked syllables, musically mimicked the hourglass of her body: Car - o - lyn. Hips, waist, breasts.

Shortly before she died, she confessed to me that Thorny Albright, the school's gym teacher, had made one terrific pass at her at the school's Christmas party months earlier and pursued her in the weeks ahead, pleading for an affair, before finally throwing in the towel. Tears welled up in her

eyes. I did everything I could to twist the shame she felt into a sense of triumph, the pride I felt having her at my side, my new respect for her honesty, and the magnificent certainty that other men should find her alluring. I love you so much, Carolyn.

But in truth I was too concerned with other things to care much about Thorny Albright and his clumsy advances. Several times I tried and failed to find the courage to sit with Carolyn and talk them through, fearing that the frailty of her mental health wouldn't tolerate what was truly bothering me. At last, on the pretense that the business with Thorny needed a more complete airing, I convinced Carolyn to go to counseling with me.

Dr. Donald Berger was a small, sharply featured man with a mouth that seemed too full of teeth. The effect was disquieting: he was afflicted with a perpetual grin. Carolyn and I sat silently together on his love seat, holding hands while he leered at us like a monkey airing its gums.

"Well, you *do* have a reason for being here, I presume."

Carolyn's body trembled. "I almost had an affair."

"Mm hm. Almost. And what stopped you?"

"My love for Jack." She turned to me, doe-eyed.

"Jack. Why are *you* here? Because you're still troubled by what almost happened?"

It is a rarity to have the right time and place to confront the truth, to grab truth like a wet dishrag and wring every last drop of meaning from it. This was the time and place. Berger's toothy face gaped with expectation, his entire body sizzled with the kind of electricity that antennae use to *receive*. Outside, in his driveway, he had a red Camaro with huge wide tires: he was a man in a hurry — to catch all the drops of truth and exercise all his genius to make good, hopeful sense of them. He seemed about my age, he was male, he would understand. I broke free of Carolyn's soft grip and started to massage my hands, wanting to wring out the truth.

"We're all safe here," Berger intoned gently, encouraging me to get on with it.

"Trust me, Jack," Carolyn croaked, on the verge of tears. "Thorny means nothing to me."

At last I found my voice. "I need to talk about me," I said.

"I thought so," Berger replied, leaning back in his chair.

"I'll be thirty-nine soon. You look about my age, are you?"

"Close enough," Berger said.

"This woman next to me, my wife, this charming Southern beauty with her softness and vulnerability, is the weight on the other side of my scale. My balance, my opposite. I measure my life with the pull of this weight, this balance. There is between us a thing, a deeply satisfying sufficiency between us. Just enough money, enough friends, enough rooms in the house, enough pleasure in the motions we make — better yet, the itinerary of our little travels. About the house, the town, her job, my job."

Carolyn was straightening herself up, blinking away the moisture from her eyes.

"You say 'deeply satisfying,'" Berger prodded, "but I'm getting a slightly different sense."

"The different sense is... the sufficiency is, by definition, sufficient. It is the insufficiency that I need to know about. Just to find out if it's even there. Thirty-eight, almost thirty-nine. These are things, within *me*, nothing to do with Carolyn, isolated little gnawings of things, and they sort out into two boxes that I imagine to be far away and hard to reach. But I'm trying to get to them, like in a dream landscape across a hot desert. In one box there are moments, I see them sort of like marbles, all different colors, these moments. Moments that are full of terror, upheaval, even violence. Marbles that signify these moments that so many people have, whose lives are altered by violent change, who've never had that sense of sufficiency. My life has been exquisitely tempered. Machined. By basic needs, and simple wants."

Good lord, it was hard to turn these visions into something sensible. Donald Berger kept smiling, unable to wrap his thin lips around his piano keyboard teeth.

“What’s in the other box, Jack?” It was Carolyn who wanted to know, her voice locking into that range and tenor that implied an anticipation of hurt.

“The other box doesn’t have marbles. It’s more like something warm and viscous, and green.”

“What’s viscous?” Carolyn asked not me, but Berger.

“Like a thick liquid, or a Jell-o. Not quite solid. Go on, Jack.”

“Tell me about the Jell-o,” Carolyn murmured with that same tone.

“Baby, it’s just an image, a vision. It’s peace. At least that’s what I think. Pure warm inner peace, instead of this feeling of being gnawed inside by little animals. Imagine, Dr. Berger, we’ve had a nuclear war, and we’re down in southern Australia waiting for that cloud of radiation to come down, like in *On The Beach*, where the curtain of death was slowly dropping and everyone knew it. I see myself waiting to die, and next to me is Carolyn waiting to die, and those sufficiencies are not enough, they won’t sustain us. We’re too anxious or too sick to have sex. But we should be heroic enough to be at peace and be comforted by that feeling of warm Jell-o, and wouldn’t sex be wonderful if that’s how we felt?” I couldn’t go on, I’d lost the thread of my own visions.

When he realized I was finished, Berger cleared his throat. “Okay, let me tell you about *me*. What I’m not. I’m not the kind of shrink who keeps asking you what you think and what you feel. I’m an interventionist. I have ideas and I want to share them, and I will. Typically in fifty minutes, I’ll do a third of the talking. I think we’ll make much better progress that way.”

“Can you talk now?” Carolyn asked. “And tell Jack what’s bothering him?”

“I can try. Jack, what if you got the boxes together, and put the marbles into the Jell-o. Are you with me?”

“I can’t get to either box, they’re too far away.” And my legs were like rubber, useless in the deep sand.

“But if you could, isn’t that what you’d do? You’d make a change, and you’d blend these moments together. Peace and satisfaction with turmoil. But Carolyn is a balance weight on the other side of your scale, that’s how you described her, and you feel that weight steadying you.”

“Yes.”

“Carolyn? Is this something you can respond to?”

Her response was to lose control and cry into her hands. At my touch, her shoulder wriggled in rejection. Berger plucked two Kleenexes from a box and pressed them into her hands. When she could find her voice, she sputtered, “I thought we were going to talk about *Thorny*. I thought *I* was the crazy one.”

The craziness was that while I sensed the truth, I couldn’t understand it. Truth that is perceived but not really *seen* becomes far more trouble than it’s worth, as Carolyn reminded me several times over the next few days, picking at me with invocations of marbles and Jell-o and boxes on the horizon. Fortunately, we’d both had positive enough reactions to Donald Berger that we arranged to see him the next Monday evening at six to continue the search.

Part of my frustration must have been connected to career. Shortly after marrying Carolyn I’d given up teaching to take a mid-level administrative job in human resource development at one of those educational outreach programs that flourished during the late 70s. The day I was supposed to report to work the job fell through. After several months of floundering and fidgeting and tapping every contact I could muster, I ended up in the development office of Boston’s public television station, WMHT, as a “fulfillment associate” for about \$15,000 a year. I helped run machines that folded

letters and stuffed envelopes to go out to viewers begging for money to keep their favorite programs on the air. In time I graduated to my current job, managing a dozen people in Viewer Contributions for about double the salary, getting those letters out, opening the returns and forwarding checks and credit card numbers to the station's Comptroller. Ceaseless daily rhythms of begging and thanking. I hadn't pursued the job; I had simply lapsed into it.

By Friday my anxiety about Carolyn and myself and my life had become a struggle to manage. The symptoms were physical — my skin was too tight for my body or it wasn't there at all, exposing my flesh raw to the elements. At work my friend Rob Hornaday, who was coming to dinner that night with his wife Sheila, asked if something was the matter, volunteering with a mastery of understatement that I looked "a bit peaked." I blamed it on work. Five days of mechanical breakdowns and personnel problems, coupled with the unending odors of leaking electricity, drying ink, and hot paper coursing through the chronically *thump-thumping* folding machines. Rob worked in odor-free Marketing and Distribution, trying to swing syndication and home video deals for our programming. His week, unlike mine, was clearly scored by success or failure.

Also coming to dinner Friday night were Bill and Rosetta Tremewan, who lived a mile or so away in the center of town, just down the hill from the Unitarian Church. Carolyn thought Sheila and Rosetta, both tennis players and young mothers, would enjoy meeting each other, although their homes were a good forty-five minutes apart. Bill Tremewan, a local contractor, would be the odd man out. He would have nothing to say to Rob, or to me, or vice versa. The last time we were together as a couple, in their house, he completely exhausted me with a very long story of a phenomenally intricate real estate investment deal he'd just bought into (and subsequently wished he hadn't) before slipping into

the kitchen to pretend to help Rosetta and Carolyn load the dishwasher, cleverly manipulating his body into the space between the eating "island" and the sink so that Carolyn, ever dutiful as a dinner guest, could not politely avoid the grazings of his bluejeaned thigh against her rump. This kitchen *pas de deux* might well have been the crowning achievement in his extracurricular social life. Worthy of a man (a carpenter, after all) who knows better the potentials than the limits of small, awkward spaces.

It rained during the day and then turned suddenly colder at night, as so often happens in New England in the spring, when the forsythia buds fight the cold to push out their blossoms. The Tremewans arrived first, Rosetta pecking me on the cheek and sidling into the kitchen to help Carolyn cut up crudités, Bill complaining of iciness on the hill turns of Hargrove Street and summarily blaming the ice on the Selectmen, none of whom I knew. Just as Bill had emptied his conversational inventory of all things not related to real estate or house construction, Rob and Sheila Hornaday blessed us with their arrival. They apologized for overdressing; Rob quickly unknotted his necktie. Rosetta emerged from the kitchen and apologized for under dressing, her slacks and sweater, prompting a lewd remark from her husband. I wore dark corduroys and a plain blue shirt, Carolyn was in a comfortable blue cotton dress already stained with a dot of French's mustard, errantly squirted from the squeeze bottle while she aimed for a circle of sliced bologna in her hand earlier in the evening. (I loved her for these little indulgences of extravagance, of unkemptness.) *We're all fine*, she said to everyone about how they'd dressed.

Dinner was wonderful: a golden squash soup with curry and flecks of grated red chillies, medallions of pork loin in a sherry cream sauce with roasted potatoes, string beans with crumbles of Parmesan cheese, spinach salad with almonds and red onions. And wine, two bottles of Beaujolais Nouveau

courtesy of the Hornadays, two Cabernets from our wine rack on top of the fridge. In candlelight, everyone looked happy and healthy and Rob was discoursing cheerfully about the intrigues of working at a large public television station, dumbing it down just enough to keep Bill marginally interested. By the time we'd cleared the main course, I was rapidly forgetting my troubles. At the other end of the table, Carolyn glowed with the friendship she felt all around her. Flanked by Rob and Bill. Laughter came in surges. Giggling, Carolyn would lean forward with the tips of her breasts trembling against the table edge, would touch her hand to Rob's arm, then Bill's. If knees met under the table, I didn't mind.

In fact, during these bursts of merriment, Rosetta's knee was clanking against mine, artlessly enough to suggest nothing more than gawkiness, but too frequently to be merely careless. She, the tennis player, her birdlike body topped with a head of dancing brown curls. The other tennis player, Sheila Hornaday, at my right, was the most restrained. A tall, big-boned woman, she had the bearing and the beauty of a stage actress who needs only to step into the light to command attention. When the others laughed, she simply smiled. They groped for clever answers to easy questions, she nodded wisely at the right response. Rosetta's knee clanked against my leg; my hand, wrapped around my wine glass, was tickled by the waywardness of Sheila's freckled forearm.

Bill couldn't hold back when Rob described construction of WMHT's new building, begged to know the details of its heating and ventilating systems. Carolyn tuned out and poured more wine for herself while I slipped into a state of calm fascination with Sheila's bare freckled arm and its surprisingly ideal shapeliness. She had hardly looked at me all evening, but when my knuckles edged close enough to graze her skin her eyes flicked at me with reassurance. She nodded wisely when Rob told Bill that heating and ventilation would

amount to half the cost of the station's new building. And her leg touched mine as softly as my hand had brushed her arm.

Before I could make any sense of my behavior or the tinglings of arousal I felt for a woman I barely knew, I saw that something had gone wrong at Carolyn's end of the table. Her eyes were fluttering and Rob seemed to be wanting to comfort her.

"I'm sorry, Carolyn," he said.

"I just don't *understand* it, that's all."

"It's kind of technical," Bill said.

"That's why I don't understand it. Can't I talk with you instead of just listening?"

"I'm sorry," Rob repeated very quietly, apparently stunned by her reaction. Bill and Rosetta had seen Carolyn falter like this at least once before, bursting into tears when there had been too much talk of babies, which Carolyn knew from adolescence she could never have. But this was about heating and ventilation. And how men sometimes talk *around* a woman to each other. The table stilled; a bell jar came down on us, trapping us with the sounds of our breathing, our alarm that among these six hale and hearty celebrants one had just become a victim.

"Oh, please. And now, the ghastly pall." On the threshold of crying, her chin crinkling, she pushed away from the table and arose to move past us to the kitchen. At the door she stopped and turned. "I'll be fine in a minute. I'm so sorry. I'm just a wreck." As an obligation to our guests I started to get up, but I knew Carolyn didn't want me to. "No, Jack. I'm *fine*. I'll bring out dessert."

When she'd left, Bill flashed an embarrassed grin at Rob. "My fault."

Rosetta jumped on him. "You do this *so* often. I don't blame Carolyn at all."

Sheila glared across the table at Rob. "Dinner for six should be conversation for six."

“Sorry.”

“We’re all smart enough to know that,” Sheila added, startling me with the touch of her hand on my knee, her fingers widening to encircle and knead the flesh of my lower thigh. “Smart enough to be considerate of each other.” On *other*, she gave my leg a firm squeeze and I found myself strongly tempted to extend my right leg, to harden the bulb of muscle just above the kneecap where her hand held me, but something else happened instead. Under the table I placed my hand on hers, my thumb and forefinger tweaking and wiggling the diamond nub of her engagement ring.

“Maybe we’re not so holy,” Rob was replying to her.

“Bill always talks shop,” said Rosetta. “It’s so *dull*.”

Would Sheila get the message? Marriage — mine and hers, her husband my best friend at WMHT? I twirled her wedding band around the bone of her finger. Her hand slipped away down below my knee, squeezed my shin and pulled away.

“Carolyn’s had a difficult week,” I said finally, hoping Carolyn was well out of earshot.

“School?” Rosetta asked.

“A number of things,” I said. “School might be one of them, I’m not sure.” In fact, she liked her second-graders very much, and they liked her. Almost *adored* her. Mrs. Lovett with her soft sweet voice and wide brown eyes and deep reserves of compassion for her pupils’ little problems, how she would crouch down beside a child’s desk and mother the problem away.

“You couldn’t pay me enough,” Bill declared. “You’d have to be a saint.” I looked at Bill’s face, still flushed with embarrassment, and I imagined him sitting at a tiny second-grade desk with Carolyn scrunching at his side to make the hurt go away. The image worked: Bill was still a child.

Rosetta wasn’t going to let her husband off the hook. “It helps to be good with people. Children are people.”

“Not mine,” he said with an awkward laugh.

“Okay, guys,” Rob interjected with a long sigh.

“Carpenters have terrible social skills,” Rosetta pressed.

“Wood doesn’t talk back.”

“Shouldn’t you go to her?” Sheila asked me, her hand bumping mine on the table. As she hoisted her wine glass, candlelight shimmered across the density of freckles on her arm, rendering them into something galactic. My chest contracted, I felt astonished that this small exposure of her body was so intriguing to me.

“I s’pose I should try.” I excused myself, got up from the table and went through the swinging door into the empty kitchen, past the stacked dishes by the sink. The other kitchen door led into our tiny hallway. A light glowed through the partly opened door of the back room I used as an office and library, and now Carolyn swung the door open. All smiles.

“Jack, please, nobody should worry, I’m *fine*. Much better.”

“We were a little worried, that’s all.”

“Well, no need for that. I hope they’re not feeling all crummy and rotten. I feel awful about my little outburst.”

“No, they’re fine. Do you want to talk about it?” Among the many wise things Donald Berger had advised us, this was foremost: talk it over, talk it through, keep talking.

“No no no no, you get back to them. I’ll bring out dessert.”

“Okay.” I leaned in and kissed her gently on her lips, touched her cheek. I thought she might have gone into the back room to have a little cry, but her eyes were bright and clear. When I rejoined the others, they greeted me with faces expectantly upturned.

“Dessert’s on its way,” I said.

“Everything’s all right,” Rob offered, a remark poised halfway between a question and a statement, and I nodded. During my brief absence they had changed. Collectively they

had become a single dark and sober thought: *this marriage is in trouble*. Sheila's long sandy lashes flicked at me in sympathy as I sat down. Bill Tremewan was still embarrassed, a child who, otherwise blameless, feels guilty just out of habit.

I recalled the scene again of Bill and Carolyn and their lower bodies rubbing each other in the Tremewan kitchen last fall, and I felt a shiver of disgust that he and his crude appetites should be here at my table feigning civility. Bill was such an obvious tits-and-ass man, like Thorny Albright, and Carolyn with her clichéd centerfold body was an obvious prize. Here they are, Carolyn Lovett. Does Carolyn Love It? These, I believed, fully defined the profound ordinariness of Bill's lust and his capacity for describing it. Could he or Thorny ever appreciate Carolyn for the crinkles in her chin, her saucer-sized eyes that shone gleefully, then melted with sadness? Or how the endings of her ginger-colored eyebrows feathered into an almost invisible sheen across her temples? No. She was tits and ass.

In the kitchen, past the swinging door, she mewed and hummed with her effort to gather and present dessert. Our guests began to emerge from their stark silence just as I was wishing they would all go home.

"Here we go. Jack can serve," Carolyn chirped as she entered the dining room behind my back.

Days later, I would have a much clearer understanding of both species of the gnawing little animals — the one inside my gut, and the one inside her skull — that had so insidiously preyed upon the love we shared and, unseen, driven us to the precipice of this moment. But now, as she arranged the bowled dessert and six dishes in front of me on the table, I was seized with a totally irrational panic that forced me to confront the most agonizing of my self-doubts — my stupidity. Did I know her at all? And, not knowing her, could I know myself for all my assumptions about her?

Standing at my side, Carolyn lifted her chin to her guests and spoke. "I'm probably crazy, but I had to do this."

"Wonderful, lime Jell-o," Rosetta squeaked. "What's on the bottom?"

"Oh, nothing much," Carolyn said, her hand squeezing my shoulder. "I assumed while I was gone you were probably talking about *me*. But now, let's talk about *Jack*. And his favorite dessert."

With genuine concern, Sheila looked up at her. "Carolyn, are you okay? We can help —"

"I'm *fiiinne!* This is a little surprise. It's about Jack. He can tell you about this, and what it means to him."

I was serving with our large silver spoon, reaching deep into the bottom. The dessert clanged into the first bowl, the inaugural ring of my new life. We were over the brink.

"What *are* those?" Rosetta asked as I handed her the bowl to pass.

"Those are marbles," I said.

"Jack can tell you," Carolyn said, sidling around Sheila and Bill to take her seat. "Tell them about the marbles."

"This is really bizarre," Bill said to her.

"Oh Bill Bill Bill, you don't actually have to *eat* it. Tell them, Jack. I've made a terrible scene with this dessert, and now you can rescue me."

The table was diagonally webbed with locked gazes between spouses. They were all thinking, let's get out of here. At me, Carolyn was wiggling her eyebrows, urging me to continue.

There was nothing to lose. "Carolyn and I just started... some counseling." I was looking at Rob, my friend, who must have been feeling some of my pain. His eyes had narrowed to slits, perhaps seeing that the one serving of marbles and Jell-o had come to rest in front of him. "This dessert is a sort of — metaphor. That I used — very spontaneously. In our first session. I'm not sure it made much sense —"



“Dr. Berger thought it made wonderful sense,” Carolyn said evenly. “Although I myself am totally baffled.”

“Of course I believed it was all in confidence.”

Sheila grabbed my knee again. “It was, Jack. And it’ll stay that way. Rob?”

I was impressed by her courage, to do the necessary and obvious thing. Rob started to wriggle out of his seat.

“Bill?” Rosetta echoed, pushing her chair back.

“No no,” Carolyn said with an edge of panic. “*We’re* the ones who are embarrassed, not you. Please don’t go.”

“You guys,” Rob started, with his hand resting lightly on her shoulder. “You guys need to spend some time.”

“We need our friends,” she said. “You and Sheila. Bill and Rosetta.”

“We need each other,” I said to my wife.

“Donald’s coming right over, I wanted you to meet him.”

Tellingly, Rob looked to me for elaboration. “Dr. Berger,” I said. Bill, behind me, whispered “good luck” as he twisted around my chair to go into the hall and fetch coats. I caught Carolyn’s eye. “You called Donald.”

She nodded, her jaw set. “I need him here. To tell me I’m not crazy.”

“You’re not crazy, Carolyn,” Sheila said softly, full of love.

“I need *Donald*.”



For the first few minutes alone we said nothing. The house seemed huge and dark with its silences layering over us like blankets. Under my feet the oil burner rumbled on and off in the basement, responding to the unseasonable chill. The refrigerator hummed in the kitchen, ice cubes spilled and clattered from the icemaker into the tray. Something metallic buzzed somewhere. My racing heart drummed in my

ears as I knelt before the dwindling fire in the living room, debating with myself the wisdom of adding another log or two. Carolyn stayed in the dining room, seated in my chair, idly, mindlessly toying with her creation in the serving bowl. Marbles rang against the glass.

Twice I padded down the corridor, unseen, into the back room, my office, to stare at the telephone and imagine whom I could call to report the news: *Carolyn’s lost it*. My brother Ross and his family were on vacation in Florida at Disney World. My mother and father were at home in Buffalo. In the aggregate, they hadn’t the faintest notion that Carolyn was anything but the healthiest, happiest woman any man could ever wish for in a wife. My friends here in town — none of them was a doctor or a shrink or a counselor of any kind. Rob and Sheila, Bill and Rosetta were friends, and in Carolyn’s moment of crisis their best judgment was to get their asses out of the house.

On my second visit to the phone, scored by Carolyn’s improvisational suite of “Marbles, Jell-o, and Glass,” I considered the option of calling the emergency room at Loeb Memorial Hospital, one town away, to inquire what they might recommend. Yes she’s calm, no she’s not violent, she’s fiddling with a bowl of Jell-o and staring into space, not drooling, not shaking or sweating. Very calm and very nuts. As *I* must have been, fleetingly, not to realize that help was on its way, any second now: Donald Berger and his benevolent wisdom and his chimpanzee mouth.

Or so Carolyn had said. But in this last week, and certainly in this last hour, our trust had suffered a catastrophic decline. She could have been lying about Donald. Or, she could have simply *imagined* that she’d called him. I might have poked my head into the dining room to verify, “are you sure you called Donald?” but such a basic doubt about her sanity might have inflamed her. Instead, becoming coolly rational,

I touched the “redial” button, knowing his would have been the most recent number dialed.

A recording. Dr. Berger is not in his office at the moment, please leave a message or in an emergency call some other doctor at some other number.

I was enormously relieved. Arriving here to mediate our problems, would he perceive Carolyn’s dessert as sufficient cause for taking real action? Not a sit-down, handholding quiet-voiced session of poking and probing and conciliation, but something tough and decisive. The patient, Dr. Berger, is not Carolyn Lovett. The patient is Jack Lovett, he needs relief, he can’t handle the anxiety any more. He can’t handle his wife. Shouldn’t we go to the Emergency Room?

Tentatively, I edged back down the hallway toward the dining room door. First, I saw just her hand on the spoon, methodically mixing and folding the dessert into a dark stony mush. It stopped. She knew I was there.

“Jack?”

I stepped into full view. “Yes.”

“Would God forgive me if I killed myself?” Her big brown eyes were deep and sad, as they had so often been these days.

“Perhaps He would. But I wouldn’t. I need you.”

The house noises filled the gap. And the sound of an approaching car.

“I’m crazy.”

“You need some help.”

“But you were flirting with Sheila,” she said. “I could almost hear your hard-on shredding your pants.”

The approaching car did not stop, or attempt to stop. It entered the house through the dining room bay window no longer as an automobile but as a twisted sculpture of red metal, glass, splinters of stockade fence and white clapboard that instantly vomited a weapon from its maw — a human being rocketing the length of the table and targeting Carolyn, her face scrunched in curiosity, slamming her backwards

against her mother’s antique sideboard. Some of this I saw then, with a calm photographic eye; some of it was naturally pieced together later. The house quaked violently, as if somebody had yanked the entire structure two feet to the rear, and I grabbed at the wall to keep from falling. But most memorable was the noise, an explosive thunderclap inside the house that had my ears ringing several seconds later as I talked on the phone to the dispatcher at the police station two miles away in the center of town. He said, yes, they’d heard it themselves.

My next useful memory was having to fight with the EMTs over Carolyn. They wanted me to let go of her so they could see her. I had her head in my lap and one hand under her left breast wanting to feel her heartbeat and my shirt was smeared with her blood. They couldn’t get me to let go of her, not without a struggle, and there was this other large impediment draped across her legs. Donald Berger, the driver of the car, his long bloody teeth clenched in a horrible smile. When I was sensible enough to relax my hold on my wife they pulled her away. The back of her head was matted and bloody and something was sticking out of it near the base of her skull. A cop, leaning over me, was muttering a stream of things at me — “s’okay buddy take it easy s’gonna be okay buddy you’re okay buddy” — but I was getting the black worms in my eyes and starting to faint. I leaned back on the floor, my head under the sideboard, was curiously refreshed by the swirl of cold air that swept in through what was left of the bay window and wall. I stayed conscious.

“Officer,” I said.

“Mr. Lovett.”

“Is my wife dead? Tell me.”

“I’m afraid so, Mr. Lovett.”

I called it the Week of the Blue Tarp. In the brisk northerlies that arrived that weekend, it flapped and fluttered across the cavernous opening of the dining room bay window until I drove in more nails, fired in more staples, to make it snug. The two dining room doors, to the kitchen and the hallway, were closed and sealed with duct tape to keep the rest of the house warm.

But every time I left the house or come back to it, there was the great Blue Tarp. And, as often as not, a tourist or two parked by my crumbled stone wall to see the place of the fatal accident, where both the driver and the woman in the house died.

The police figured Donald Berger's red Camaro was doing a good solid sixty, maybe seventy, when he hit the ice patch and could not even think to stop. The car easily vaulted the stone wall, burst through the stockade fence and was still doing fifty or so when its transmission housing slammed into the stone foundation and sill beneath the bay window. Instant stop. Dr. Berger, unbelted, was for just a split second airborne within his car like an astronaut in space before torpedoing through his windshield (it was this impact, they decided, that killed him) onto the dining room table and into Carolyn, his head knocking hers so hard against the sideboard behind her that one of its brass drawer handles entered the base of her skull. Chief Weygand assured me her death was instantaneous and painless. Still, if she'd survived the collision with Dr. Berger, she might well have choked to death on a marble that the Medical Examiner was surprised to find lodged in her mouth near the top of her throat.

Even before they'd finished foaming down the front yard where the gas had spilled from the Camaro's ruptured fuel tank, Dr. Eliot Wilkerson, our family doctor, had arrived to feed me a couple of Valium and talk to me of the grieving process. I wanted to call my brother Ross in Orlando, but the police were tying up the phone, trying to reach Berger's

wife. In time, when the Valium had thoroughly dulled me (I had the metabolic equanimity of shirt cardboard) and the police were out of the back room, I telephoned Ross. Then my parents in Buffalo, then Reginald and Eliza DuMont in Richmond — all after the magic hour of eleven o'clock, when telephone calls bear either very bad news or drunken greetings from long lost friends. Ross said he'd go to the airport and get on the first possible flight, with Debbie and the kids to follow Saturday. My parents chose instead to drive, an eight-hour trip, leaving at dawn. They were shocked, of course, but otherwise sensible and restrained.

Eliza DuMont was the one most difficult to talk to. Chief Weygand had offered to make the call for me, but I felt in my cardboard state to be capable of such a call, to handle it with confidence and poise.

"Eliza, it's Jack."

"Jack, heavens! At this hour. What's wrong?"

I had not rehearsed the words. After a long sigh they came out of me freely. "There's been a terrible accident."

"My baby! Is my baby all right?"

"It's very bad news. Carolyn died. A car came into the house."

Eliza was waking up Reginald next to her. I heard her say to him, "It's Carolyn." Then she was back on the phone with only enough strength in her voice to say "Yes."

Yes. Yes, she knew this? Yes, please go on? "A car crashed through the dining room and the driver went through the windshield and his head hit her head, and she died instantly. There was no — it was very fast."

Eliza just breathed. I heard Reginald in the background demanding the phone. "Let me speak to her, for Christ's sake!" Eliza told him, it's not Carolyn, it's Jack. He said, then why did you say it was Carolyn? Either Eliza gave him the phone, or he yanked it from her hand.

"Jack, it's Reginald. What's going on? Is Carolyn okay?"

“Carolyn was hit by a car, in the house. It came through the wall — “

He bellowed at me. “That damn wall! You were going to fix that wall!”

“I should have, I feel terrible.” Eliza was whimpering to him, she’s dead. “The driver launched through the windshield — “

“Just like that, she’s *dead*? Our baby girl is gone, is that what you’re saying?”

“I’m afraid so, I’m sorry.”

“Why are you so damn *calm*?! Jesus!” He was starting to cry.

I said, “The doctor gave me some pills. I’m sort of in a Twilight Zone.” But Eliza had taken the phone from him. “That wall. You two promised you would fix that wall. And now she’s dead.”

I was stunned that they were so preoccupied with this bit of home fix-up. They were both now sobbing with grief and attempting to blame me for their daughter’s death.

“I feel just as rotten as you do. She was my wife.”

“*Was* your wife,” Eliza retorted. “Now she’s gone. You sound like some kind of recording, you’re so calm.”

“I’ve taken some pills, that’s why.”

“The driver died, too?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“You say, like their heads hit, and they both died like two hard-boiled eggs hitting each other? Is that the image I’m to be left with?”

“I don’t know about images. Eliza. You and Reginald need to come up.”

“Don’t tell me what I need. My girl’s been squashed like an egg and you’re telling me what I need.”

“I’m sorry,” I said for the umpteenth time. “I love you. I need you to be here, I’m sorry you’re so far away.”

“Jack, it’s me,” said Reginald, sobbing. “You say a prayer for my little girl. And you say it like you mean it. That’s the least she deserves from you.”

“Yes sir. I’ll say a payer, a really good prayer.”

He hung up.



In my ten years of marriage to Carolyn, I never had any grave concerns that Reginald and Eliza might not like me. At the beginning, Reginald might have believed my principal attraction to his daughter was for her centerfold tits-and-ass body, not for her heritage, her quiet humor, her solid values and dimpled chin. Eliza might have questioned my suitability as a husband, a man who was quite determined to be a high school teacher and not much more, letting the financial chips fall where they may. Reginald could have harbored doubts about my relative red-bloodedness as a patriot and capitalist; Eliza may have wondered that I so readily pursued marriage to a woman who could not have my children, that I was not the vision of the square-jawed American male bursting with sperm and plans for a large family. But when we were together we enjoyed each other’s company and I was sure that they liked me.

Carolyn had two older brothers, Raymond in Texas, and Arvin in Florida, each with wives and kids. They all came up Saturday afternoon and took six adjacent rooms at the local Red Roof Inn, just one block, as fate would have it, from Donald Berger’s house and office in the next town. None of them came to the house. We talked by phone two or three times a day, with Reginald assuring me he saw no point in coming to the scene of the tragedy. It would be enough, he declared, to congregate with me and my family in church on Tuesday afternoon for the memorial service.

With the exception of the DuMont clan, the first day of the Week of the Blue Tarp was thronged with family and friends, stuffing the freezer with lasagna and Chicken Kiev and garlanding the living room with baskets of flowers. My brother Ross moved into the guest bedroom to live. Debbie and the two girls, Jacqueline and Monique, stayed at home in Dedham, about ten miles to the east. Ross, the lawyer, made checklists of things to do and people to notify as he took up occupancy in the back room. I made a stab at composing Carolyn's obituary to send to the city papers and the local MetroWest tabloids. Three drafts later, it still seemed too short: second-grade teacher, library volunteer, wife. Age 36, killed in an accident at home, she leaves her parents, her brothers, her husband. When he'd received that last draft by fax, the obit writer at the *Globe* asked if there was anything else — children, hobbies, interests? No, she was simple in her tastes and pleasures. And the precise nature of the accident, just so readers don't mistake it for a suicide? I explained what had happened. Perplexed, he suggested "automobile accident near her home." I pressed for the truth: "automobile accident *in* her home."

There was enough room for my parents in the house, but they reluctantly decided — then stubbornly insisted — that they stay in a nearby country inn for a hundred and thirty dollars a night. This was better for my mother, who was overly sensitive to any hint of disharmony in the Lovett family, between Dad and his sons, or between Ross and me, for it was inevitable that over the span of a long weekend we would scrap about something, even if I continued to float in my soft Valium haze.

Bill Tremewan couldn't deal with the tragedy at all, but Rosetta came twice with food and flowers and a deep curiosity about the peculiarities of the entire evening, from Carolyn's abrupt departure at dinner to the details of her death. Most of all, she begged to know more about the lime

Jell-o and the marbles, but I insisted it was a private matter that surfaced in our initial meeting with Dr. Berger — a spontaneous metaphor that clearly got terribly out of hand. Rob Hornaday came also, on Sunday at lunchtime, without Sheila. His timing was perfect. Even with the Valium, I was becoming testy and impatient with my brother and his flawless organizational skills, with Reginald DuMont's abrasive phone calls ("I'm calling for Eliza, who wants to know how big the pews are and where you plan to stick us all"), with my mother's tenacious battle for perfect family harmony, and with myself — for having less and less to do.

Rob and I escaped the great Blue Tarp and went out for lunch at a simple old-fashioned themeless restaurant called Wally's, in Jethro, the next town to the west. The main room was old pine paneling stained with smoke from an age-old kitchen fire, the menus were waxy with previous use, the waitress sported horn-rimmed spectacles — the incarnation of everyone's most feared great-aunt. But I loved the genuineness of Wally's. And they had a bar, which delivered in little bathroom glasses our two Bloody Mary's, the primitive recipe of house vodka and foamy tomato juice and nothing else. We threw them back and ordered another round.

As a close friend, Rob didn't have to ask, but he did anyway, just to get me going.

"How you doing?"

"Rotten.

He snorted in agreement. "Never thought I'd come to visit you twice in the same weekend. Both times pretty strange."

"Very. First the crazy dessert, then the blue tarp."

"I want you to know, Sheila sends her love. And of course her deepest condolences. Goes without saying."

I hadn't forgotten about Sheila but I'd kept her image at bay. The last living thought that Carolyn had was of me flirting with Sheila, before Donald Berger crashed through the wall. The flirtation was not so innocent and I should have

felt some guilt, but I didn't. I just wanted to forget. How would I have handled it, if Carolyn had lived? Badly. How should I feel now, knowing the nature of her last thought and imagining it to be circulating through her brain like hot water through plumbing only to freeze at the moment of death? Eternal jealousy locked in place: I could hear your erection shredding your pants.

We ordered Wally's club sandwiches and a third round of tiny Bloody Mary's. I wondered if Rob, like Carolyn, had the same acute perception from his end of the table to detect those incalculably discrete motions between my knuckles and Sheila's freckled forearm as anything purposeful. Christ, she'd squeezed my quadriceps so hard I'd practically yowled. Sheila made the first move; I was simply there, a host.

Rob wanted to know the family cast of characters who'd be filling the front pews of the church. When I got to the DuMonts, Reginald and Eliza and then the two sons, Raymond and Arvin, whom I'd laid eyes on all of three or four times in ten years, I became angry enough to lace my narrative with the word "fucking" more times than I'd used it in months. They're one step up from Appalachian blue babies and they flew up here to stay at the fucking Red Roof Inn with their fucking snot-nosed single-helix offspring. Friday night when I called them they had the fucking nerve to lay me out for not rebuilding the fucking stone wall. They call me every fucking three hours to bitch and moan about the weather, the traffic, how small the fucking church is, and they sure as hell fucking hope that when the minister reads Corinthians he fucking uses the word *love* and not fucking *charity*.



*Carolyn, I love you. I want you back.* During the "Introit" I was saying these words to myself for the first time since she died.

*I want you back.* We could pick up from that moment of accusation and carry on from there. Yes, I was flirting with Sheila Hornaday, as you once flirted with Bill Tremewan in his kitchen. As you very seriously flirted with Thorny Albright. I still want you back, and I want us both to forgive each other.

"I want you back." My mother, seated next to me in a box pew at the front of the church, leaned against me as she heard these words and laid her palm across my clasped hands as gently as air. Only she heard. Dad had his bad ear next to me. Ross, Debbie, Jacqueline and Monique were squeezed in next to him and not looking at me.

Carolyn and I had been to this church perhaps a dozen times, usually at Christmas, sometimes at Easter, and over the years we'd successfully befriended Ike McGowan, the minister, as a pair of occasional Christians forever in search of the perfect liturgy, which would have to hover in the midst of that huge space between Unitarianism and Trinitarianism. I'm sure that Ike considered us slightly odd, but I think he liked us. On Sunday afternoon, he came to the house to review the order of service and see if any of us was considering delivering a homily or reflection on Carolyn's life. This meant calling the Red Roof Inn because Reginald had implied that Arvin, the youngest DuMont, was interested in saying a few words. Ike took the phone in the back room, I listened in on the kitchen extension, and Arvin read fragments of some piece of goop he thought might be appropriate. I could almost hear Ike's eyebrows arching in response. When we'd dispensed with Arvin, Ross volunteered that he had something in mind that he hadn't yet composed. Ike was delighted that the family wished to take such an active role. He himself would offer a word or two after a hymn and before the Lord's Prayer.

The church was almost full. Many faces were strange to me. In the back of the church was a bunch I presumed to be Carolyn's colleagues from Pinewood Elementary. Un-

doubtedly there were parents of the children she taught. Our friends the Tremewans, the Bickwells, the Kariotises, the Pratts and others — her library buddies, the couples we saw at Christmas parties. Rob and Sheila near the front on the far side, with Dr. Eliot Wilkerson and his wife seated behind them. Some other friends from work: Ed Stripling and his wife whose name I didn't know; Joan, Karen, and Bobbie from Viewer Contributions; and a surprising number of people my parents' age, in their sixties and seventies. And of course the DuMonts across the aisle from us, squirming uncomfortably in the first two pews and avoiding any eye contact with the Lovett clan as Ike recited the King James' version of John's letter to the Corinthians, using the word *love*.

When called by Ike, Arvin DuMont swung his linebacker-sized body out of the pew and lumbered up to the altar and the podium, unfolding a tattered sheet of yellow lined paper that I saw to be scribbled with blue and red ink, and maybe pencil, too. Arvin, like his father, had a thick jowly face and bristly sandy hair, sharply receding. He was deeply tanned from whatever it was he did outdoors in Florida — construction or swimming pool installation or real estate, I was never quite sure.

"On behalf of my little sister and my family, I want to thank y'all for coming today. She woulda been proud." My mother's hand found mine again, gave it a squeeze. Arvin was full of voice; his eyes flashed at the congregation; in his opening sentence he'd snubbed the Lovetts.

"I have this script to read that my family and I been working on and it's scrambled with all our different thoughts, and I think it's too long, so I think I'll just expediate this with a summary. The main thing we all thought was, well, we're angry. And we got a right to be. How can't you not be angry when your baby sister in the prime of her most productive years gets her life snuffed out inside her own dining room?"

This was not even close to what he'd read over the phone to Ike on Sunday.

"Understand, we're southerners, you can hear it plain in my voice. Carolyn was a Virginian. First, foremost, and last. When she went to school here in Massachusetts, she said to all of us, don't worry, I'll be back. Not right away, but someday. Sure, she lived here as a devoted and sacrificing wife, but I think deep down her roots were calling to her and it was hard for her that maybe she didn't really fit in up here. Oh yes, she fit into *your* lives, because you were her friends. But Carolyn was a Virginian."

Across the church Rob caught my eye and raised his eyebrows.

"Through our anger and our tears, we pray for her soul, finally freed from the prison of flesh and ascending to its eternal reward. And now, though my brother and my parents thought this was too sappy for you northern folks, I want to end with a little story that happened to me and Carolyn when she was just a little sprout of a girl about eight years old, and I was eleven.

"Our house near Richmond had a big back yard that ended in a huge bramble patch with thorns as thick as nails in a keg. Me and her, we were playing catch with a baseball in the spring, 'cause she wanted to play on the Little League, even though they were just boys then. She had a rubbery throwing arm and she'd kind of bite her lip when she threw the ball and her aim was terrible, but we were having fun. Now the rule in the DuMont back yard was, whoever threw the ball over the chain link fence into the brambles had to fetch it himself. Well, I was throwing popups to her, and darned if the ball didn't hit right on top of the fence and bounce deep into that thicket of thorns. I cussed at my bad luck, and little Carolyn said, 'Don't worry, Arvin, I'll get it for you.' I said, 'honey, it's my goof, I'll chase it.' She got that look in her eye that said, you stay put, and quick as that she was scrabbling

up over the fence with her chubby pink legs dangling under her. She furrowed about for some time while I said, 'heck, Carolyn, leave it be, I'll go buy another ball,' and I could hear her yelping as she got sliced by the thorns. She found the ball and climbed back up over the fence where I waited for her, and landed at my feet with a big grin on her face and her skin half slashed to ribbons. She said, 'Here, Arvin,' and handed me the ball."

Arvin seemed to hiccup; his chest jerked and his eyes started to blink. The entire congregation was in the palm of his hand, breathless. My nieces, Jacqueline and Monique, twelve and ten, had their jaws down around their knees. Dad was scowling, impatient at Arvin's protracted struggle to find his voice. Ross and Debbie, like me, were seething with outrage.

Arvin fought past his grief to conclude the story. "That was Carolyn DuMont, and always will be. A young woman who gave so much of herself, and never felt the pain."

Returning to the pew, Arvin dabbed at his eyes, effectively shielding the Lovett family from his sight. We stood and choked out "A Mighty Fortress" and then Ike called Ross to the altar. Ross spoke eloquently and with impeccable organization about Carolyn's life as a celebration of love, the love she gave her family and friends and her *husband*, and how we should rejoice for the thirty-six years we were able to share with her. Ross was good, but he sounded like a lawyer appealing to a skeptical jury, and his delivery was so mannerly that others in the church, like me, must have wondered if he secretly aspired to the ministry. The abstractions piled up and began to twist into themselves in a snarl of lovely convolutions that just couldn't compete with the image of Carolyn as an eight-year-old presenting the lost baseball to her brother after a hellish journey through a Virginia bramble patch. The memorial service was a debate, and the dryly

intellectual northern Lovetts were having their asses handed to them by one semi-literate conniving southern redneck.

Ike McGowan apparently ditched his homily, sensing that the entire church was drained by Arvin's anecdote and the obvious tensions that burned between the rival families. He offered instead a short prayerful paragraph that ended with an appeal to God that He treat this soul gently, that Your sea is so big and her boat is so small.

With that last line, I forgot my anger and started to weep. Dad leaned against me from the left, and my mother from the right, until we were forced to stand one last time for the final hymn.