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"The Little Wife"

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THEY FLEW FROM BOSTON TO BANGOR on a mild February morning. Gail pretended to read a dumb novel selected by her group. Max brought some scientific tome. But he kept the volume closed on his knees, and on top of it he had opened the Beethoven score, Opus 66, and he was practicing on his wide thighs. Gail playfully inserted a manicured nail between two of his busy fingers, and with uncharacteristic irritation he flicked her hand away.

They were in their late sixties, both retired. They were going to Maine to see their friend Fox, probably for the last time. Gail, fond of Fox, nevertheless looked forward to this finale with curiosity as well as dread. Every death foretells your own — there would be something to learn. She had been a schoolteacher; discovery was a lifetime habit.

I

There is an anecdote attributed, though not traceable, to Beethoven: in Vienna, seeing a passing woman, he remarked to his friend Janitchek, “What a magnificent behind, like the beloved pigs of my youth.”

Long ago, when they were in college, Fox instructed Max not to believe this tale. Fox said that if anybody made the remark that person was not Beethoven and not Janitchek either but Janacek, the Czech composer who lived almost a century later and who so loved the Folk that he probably loved their livestock too. Beethoven was a city boy, argued Fox; he knew pigs only as sausage. “But a pig’s behind is indeed a thing of beauty,” Fox went on to say. Fox’s uncle had been a gentleman farmer in Vermont, and during a few summers spent with this relative Fox had come to appreciate the plump joyousness of swine.

Max was acquainted with pigs mostly from the warnings in Leviticus. He did remember carcasses behind the window of the Italian butchery on Avenue J, which he had passed every day on his way to grade school. They hung there for all to see, upside-down like Mussolini. “Dead and cured,” Max told Fox.
"A pig deceased bears little resemblance to a pig alive," Fox informed him.

"How did you and your roommate find each other?" Gail asked Max a decade later. They had just met. Seated next to each other at a Bat Mitzvah luncheon, they were asking each other question after question, rudely ignoring the other singles at their table.

"Fox and I? We were married by the University shadchan."

Gail understood; the Housing Office had placed them together as freshmen. "Not an obvious pairing," she ventured.

"We, too, wondered about it." In those days freshmen were assigned to room with fellows who resembled them in backgrounds, religious and athletic preferences, secondary educations. In none of those particulars — except, perhaps, that neither played a sport — did there seem to be a match between Foxcroft Whitelaw and Max Chernoff. One of Fox's grandfathers had been governor of Maine and the other President of a small New England college; further in the past a Protestant Divine cast a wrathful glance over his own and succeeding generations. Max's ancestors, keepers of small unprofitable stores, receded namelessly into the shadowy shtetls his grandfathers had abandoned. In their turn his Brooklyn parents abandoned most observances, though they did keep kosher to please the old folks. During the first years of their marriage Max and Gail did the same in honor of those ancient grandparents, who sometimes took a meal with them. When the last grandparent died the young Chernoffs gave up the practice, and soon they were boiling lobsters in their own kitchen.

Max hadn't always been Max. But entering college had given him the opportunity to discard the affected "Maurice" his parents had saddled him with. Later, though, when he'd become established as a historian of medicine, he was grateful for the dignity of "Maurice Leopold Chernoff" decorating both his books. Shortly after the publication of the first book a gift came in the mail: a recording of Maurice Abravanel conducting Maurice Andre and the Utah Symphony Orchestra in trumpet works by Ravel. Foxcroft, said the enclosed card. Max turned the record over and over in his hands. "Neither of us plays the trumpet, neither of us likes Ravel..." he wondered.

Such a learned man; such a sometime dope. "He thought this had your name on it," Gail explained.

Music connected the roommates — perhaps the college Housing Office had been shrewder than it seemed. As a little boy Max had
been taught scales and finger exercises and Für Elise by a monstrously unmusical great-aunt. ("It's a wonder you can even hum," Gail remarked after meeting this redoubtable, still alive when they married.) Then he studied with a real teacher on 23rd Street. During the first semester of freshman year he sometimes played after dinner in the dormitory’s common room — jazz, mostly, but also Bach and Chopin. He was an adept amateur. Fox, thoughtfully listening, mentioned that he himself had tried various members of the string family. Then, the day after Christmas vacation, while Max was memorizing formulae in their shared bedroom, he heard Fox returning to their shared living room, making more than the usual amount of noise. Small wonder: he was carrying a battered cello case and had to kick his second suitcase. From the cello case he withdrew a magnificent instrument. “I just thought,” he said. Max hoped the thing was insured.

Fox turned out to be accomplished and dedicated. He was soon practicing an hour a day, and he joined a student quartet, and he played duets with Max in the common room on afternoons when neither had a lab and no one else was around. They both enjoyed these sessions, though the disparity between their instruments — Max’s the dormitory’s upright, Fox’s the invaluable cello — and between their abilities reminded Max of the other disparities that sometimes grieved him. Flatbush boys, Gail thought when Max told her of this old distress; is there any species so easily stung?

Fox went to medical school in Chicago, Max in New York. Fox married before graduating. “A surprise to me, that early marriage, said Max to Gail at the fateful Bat Mitzvah. “He was wary of girls in college. Well, so was I . . .” Sophia was a bony, unadorned young woman who had flouted her aristocratic background, skipped college altogether, tramped around Europe like a hobo. At the wedding she danced with all the men and also with her sister, Hebe, an undersized ten-year-old in love with her horse.

“Foxcroft’s sister-in-law is named — what?” Gail inquired. They were still only an hour into their lifetime companionship; each had just been issued half a chicken. “Hebe? As in Heebie Jeebies?”

“As in the Greek Goddess of Youth.”

Max was then working on his second graduate degree, in history. Gail was teaching fourth grade. (She took time off after the birth of their only child, a son, then returned to the classroom for another thirty years.) Her hair was curly and her nose was fixed. She read a lot and collected Art Deco jewelry. She had her choice of suitors,
including a rich one who had loved her when she still wore an owl’s profile, but she felt elevated by being chosen by a doctor even if he was not planning to hang out a shingle. (For her part Sophia seemed to consider medical practice on an occupational level with window washing.)

Fox joined an endocrinology group in Maine. Max taught in Boston. The families sometimes spent weekends in each other’s homes. The men listened to music and played duets; the children — the Whitelaws had a daughter, Thea — played checkers and in later years chess; the women went to the museum if they were in Boston and to crafts fairs if in Maine. Once Sophia drove Gail and Hebe (the Goddess of Youth visited her sister frequently) all the way to Lewiston to see some notable antique farming tools. The crone who collected and sold the stuff also dealt in jewelry, mostly worthless; but there, tossed onto a table, was a circle of diamonds banded in silver banded in black enamel. Gail put the bracelet on. What a transformation — she felt like a queen, or at least like a commoner with a royal wrist.

“I could bring the price down a little,” said the witchy proprietress.

“Won’t you have a birthday one of these years?” said Hebe, fondling Gail’s upper arm.

“Filch the housekeeping money. Insist on a special gift,” advised Sophia. “Satisfy yourself,” she urged, this Yankee who didn’t wear even an engagement ring.

Gail slid the conspicuous shackle from her arm and shook her head: No. Some weeks later Sophia, satisfying her own self, left husband and teenager and resumed her life of vagabondage, in South America this time.

II

“Someone in your larger cohort has to die first,” Max mentioned early on. “To start the avalanche.” In the first decades there were the accidents, the horrific early cancers, the suicides. And there were deaths of children, other peoples’ children thank God, but Gail was never without fear for her own boy. Luckily the Whitelaw daughter and the Chernoff son turned into healthy adolescents and then healthy young adults — nobody nowadays considered male homosexuality an affliction, not out loud anyway.

After a while came diseases predictable by any actuary. Somehow Fox and Sophia and Max and Gail avoided them. They couldn’t avoid growing old, though. The men grew old in differing ways. Neither stayed fit — neither had been fit to begin with — but Fox at least was
naturally skinny. Max steadily gained weight — that was natural too, or at least familial, or at least not pathological (he pointed out to Gail); extra flesh, his grandmother had assured him, is protection against various ills. A statistical analysis published early in the millennium supported this unlikely truth. Max’s narrow shoulders contracted through the years and his broad hips broadened. When, naked after lovemaking (an activity increasingly rare in their age group, studies show; studies show also that both members of an ageing couple tend to think about movie stars during the business), he walked from bed to bathroom, Gail sometimes imagined that she was watching the retreat of a satiated woman. But when he returned after the scrubbing he considered necessary — Gail would have lain around in sweat and jism until morning — with his member shrunken and a smile stretching his bushy mustache, he looked male again. Her man.

A few ailments did afflict them. Gail’s fibroids required a hysterectomy. Max had to have a hernia repair. Fox suffered various side effects from various anti-depressants; one such unintended consequence was constipation so severe he had to be disimpacted in the hospital. But Sophia — she was never sick. And her gaunt attractiveness mutated into blinding beauty: the excellent bones and good teeth; the unlined skin that had never known a moisturizer; the pale hair, only slightly faded, bundled loosely at her nape. She still climbed, skied, went scuba diving. She returned to Maine frequently to visit her family, and Hebe joined her there. The Goddess of Youth had developed crows’ feet like everybody else, and her little teeth were yellowing. Sometimes the Chernoffs were invited for a weekend. They’d find Sophia rewiring the porch lantern, or, mounted on one of the gables as if it were a pony, shingling the roof. They’d find Hebe chattering at Fox.

Back home: “Sophia will bury the rest of us,” Gail predicted to Max. “Somebody has to be the last.”

Sophia wouldn’t be the last but the exception; but Gail kept this more precise insight to herself until she could share it with young Thea Whitelaw. One summer Thea, working on her Masters in Teaching at Harvard, stayed with the Chernoffs between apartments. “Your mother may live for centuries,” said Gail.

“Oh, she will,” said Thea. “She’s part Cetacean. Cetus is Latin, from the Greek ketos…”

“Sea monster, yes. We grade-school teachers haul around a lot of facts. Pseudo-erudition.” Gail spoke in a stern voice — pseudo-stern. She had grown close to this young woman, dark gray eyes like a rain
cloud, brown hair in one thick braid.

Someone in the smaller cohort has to die first, too.

One of those usually curable carcinomas sought out Fox. But in his case... not so curable. Still, several years went by: treatments, time off, new treatments, everyone knows the drill.

There had been no Whitelaw-Chernoff visits since the diagnosis. Fox’s therapy took a lot of time. And the Chernoffs’ son now lived in Savannah; his parents tended to travel south when they traveled at all. Max’s weight hampered him a bit. Gail was frequently fatigued. Her eyelids had become pleated, but the rest of her face, she knew, was still lively, still pretty: the tilted chin, hers by right; the tilted nose, hers by rhinoplasty. She was glad they had sold their house and moved into a condo. Its kitchen had all the latest devices, and granite counters, too. She didn’t care if she never cooked another meal, but she liked laying palms and then cheek on the cool stone.

Thea was back in Maine, living in her father’s house. Her mother was sometimes there; Hebe too. Thea was teaching fifth grade. She called one January morning.

“It’s almost over, Gail.”

“What do you mean? Max and your father talked just last week... well, last month... before Christmas. Is Fox in the hospital again?”

“No. He’s limping around, can do just about everything but eat, takes stuff for the pain. I don’t mean he’s dying. I just mean he’s dying.”

The difference between the imminent and the soon: yes. There was also the inevitable, but they all belonged in that group, even Cetacean Sophia.

“Come up, please,” said Thea. “Bring music.”

“Well... which music?”

“Beethoven?”

“Oh, too difficult. Max hardly plays now. Some kid stuff, that’s all, for the neighbors’ daughter.” A brat, that little girl: or perhaps Gail hadn’t yet made peace with her no-grandchildren destiny. “The other morning he did do a marvelous riff on ‘Mr. Golden Sun’,” she admitted.

“What about the variations on the Magic Flute Thing?”

“Ein Madchen...”

“...oder Weibchen. Please don’t tell me I’m pseudo-erudite.”

“Okay,” said Gail, complying with the request, and also agreeing to the programme: Beethoven’s Variations on Mozart’s Maiden or Little Wife.
III

Bangor. The plane banked over pines, over water. Thea’s boyfriend was waiting for them. They got into his Piper, Max taking the co-pilot’s seat. This flight took ten minutes. They landed on an oblong of earth with spruce trees at its margins. And then, in the boyfriend’s jeep, they drove along the ruts of a road from island to island, across meager bridges, and then reached the last in the series, the familiar outcrop with its fifty-odd houses. The easternmost house, brown-shingled like the rest, belonged to Fox. A deep porch wrapped around the three sides of it that faced the fierce sea. Inside were angles, odd windows, nooks, all grown familiar through the years. The music room held a Steinway bought on the occasion of Fox’s birth. In the attic stood a hard double bed. On it Gail and Max would make love as they always did here, as if it were a guestly obligation.

The big main rooms were farthest from the road. Their windows opened onto the porch and the sea beyond. There too was the front door. Max and Thea’s boyfriend carried the suitcases under a trellised arch, and disappeared. They’d go up the steps of the porch and enter the house. Gail wrenched herself out of the jeep. She looked up at the rear of the building. She saw, in a high window — the back stairs landing, wasn’t it? — a female form: Thea, carrying two pillows no doubt destined for their marital bed. Thea waved, continued upwards. One story below, behind a window with purplish glass, stood Fox. Fox raised a hand. In the kitchen moved another female figure — Sophia. And in the now open back doorway that led into a kitchen of elderly appliances where the family took all its meals, stood little Hebe, hugging her own freckled arms in excitement. “Gail!” piped the Goddess of Youth, and ran down the wooden stairs, and threw herself upon Gail’s unenthusiastic bosom.

And then, within the house, more greetings. Beauteous Sophia. Emaciated Fox. Thea, exhausted.

Thea and Gail had a long established hideout. About two hours later, Fox asleep in his room, Max napping in theirs, the boyfriend gone, Sophia and Hebe shopping for groceries like mortals, they found each other there. The room had been a pantry once, and perhaps a meat larder before that. No heat reached it. Though the afternoon was still not cold and a thin layer of snow was shrinking in the sun, their little place retained the iciness of the previous months. Gail wore her parka. Thea wore her grandmother’s patched sable.
“He looks awful, doesn’t he,” said Thea.
“Yes.” Fox’s hair had turned the color of spume. His skin was as transparent as the weak bulb hanging above their two sorrowful heads. He had joined them for lunch without participating in it. He was kept alive on some canned medicinal nutrient to which he attributed his frequent vomiting. Treatments and their sequellae were what was killing him, he said; the disease itself had vanished, he claimed. “I’m cured and dead,” he said, in helpless fury. The sound of his vomiting — Gail had heard it twice — was not the copious cascade of a drunk; it was a prolonged unproductive gagging.
“I brought some fancy chocolates; whatever was I thinking,” mourned Gail.
“Hebe has swallowed the entire box. Pa likes high-tasting stuff liked spiced crab cakes, runny cheese, and smoked meats. He adores bacon. So for a while Ma made bacon every morning and Pa ate it and pretty soon he chucked it up. Finally she wouldn’t make it any more and they started to have those fights they adore, shouting pseudo-footnotes at each other, Pa quoting from something medical…”
“A digestive tract.”
Thea managed a weak smile. “…and Ma invoking British novels, all those gentlemen gouty from port and pork. Also she quoted Deuteronomy…”
“Leviticus. ‘And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be cloven footed and cheweth not the cud, yet he is unclean to you.’”
“That one, yes. Then Ma started making the bacon in the middle of the afternoon, while he sleeps, like now. It’s a drugged sleep, bacon won’t wake him, the house burning to the ground wouldn’t wake him. So he started getting up in the middle of the night to fry it himself.”
“You could just not buy it.”
“Oh, dear, Gail, do you think swine is unclean?”
“Of course not. The pig is fastidious if given the opportunity.”
“Oh, good,” said Thea. “Anyway, Pa yells that gout is one of the few conditions he doesn’t have, and that Old Testament restrictions don’t apply to Whitelaws. There’s not a Yid in his lineage, sorry Gail, it’s the word he used…”
“There’s a Yid in everybody’s lineage,” said Gail evenly.
“…hic, he says, bacon must be good for him. And Aunt Hebe is always his ally; she swears that bacon alone sustains her existence. What a useless existence it is… Oh, don’t listen to me, I love her…”
“Darling.”
Gail was sitting on a high stool and Thea on a lower stool, and it
was an easy matter for Thea to lay her cheek against Gail’s denim thigh. They remained in this position for a while. Then Thea raised her head again. “Now I lock the bacon in the trunk of my car. So Pa goes without. But the fight isn’t over. They won’t stop fighting until he’s dead.” She swallowed. “He won’t die while the fight is on.”

“Then bacon is keeping him alive,” said Gail.

Dinner, cooked by Thea and her mother, consisted of chicken, salad, and wine for everybody but Fox, who again ate nothing and drank only his thick green liquid. Thea’s boyfriend returned. Hebe and Max gabbed about politics. Fox said nothing, focusing on the battle within. Sophia’s lordly attention too was elsewhere. She insisted on cleaning up without assistance. Fox went upstairs to vomit, and didn’t come down. “I will take a walk in the perilous dark,” Hebe announced. The boyfriend left. Gail and Max and Thea sat reading in the living room. Hebe came home safely and told them so. The sea beat on the rocks.

Gail awoke in the middle of the night. She had forgotten to pack her Valium. Max was lightly snoring. It would be unkind to wake him, and for what purpose anyway. She could tiptoe downstairs and into Fox’s room, rummage around in his pharmacopeia until she found something that induced sleep. So what if she laid her hands on a lethal medicament. But to wake a dying man would be worse than unkind. She got up. She pulled somebody’s oilcloth coat from a hook and put it on. She had forgotten to pack her robe, too. Sometimes it seemed that slippery places were forming in her brain. She walked almost noiselessly down the back stairway, and on the second floor switched to the main stairs. Its threadbare carpeting should muffle sound. But every footfall produced an audible creak. She stopped, leaned over the banister.

Moonlight had entered the music room to brush against disregarded heirlooms and dust the Steinway with silver.

Fox and Sophia were sitting on chairs angled toward the broadest window. Their knees almost touched. Fox was wearing a striped hospital bathrobe, borrowed or filched during one of his stays. Sophia was still in slacks and a ragged flannel shirt. But above their schmattes, what noble heads those aristocrats wore, even the one about to die. What enviable profiles. She tried to listen to the couple’s soft low conversation — she wasn’t really a guest; she had been summoned to attend the dying; she had a schoolteacher’s obligation to eavesdrop. But all she could hear were a few syllables that might
have been, that should have been, that probably weren’t, Love, and Remember, and Afraid.

Max tried the piano in the morning. Fox lay on a ratty sofa. The weary Gail, hoping to remain unnoticed, hunched on a chair in the dim dining room where the family took none of its meals. She held that unreadable novel. She could see the music room in one direction through an archway, the kitchen in another direction though a narrow door. The piano was in perfect tune. Fox’s cello case — the one he’d dragged from home to college and back again — stood in one corner. Max left the piano and walked through the dining room. He didn’t notice Gail. In the kitchen he poured some coffee and sugared it heavily. Fox now got up from the sofa. He unpacked the cello and inserted its post like a prosthesis. He sat on a stool with the instrument in front of him at an exaggerated slant. The post dug into the Aubusson. Fox was still wearing his sleeping garments and that robe whose stripes Gail had noticed last night. Now she saw that it bore yellow stains.

Sophia and Thea and Hebe were sitting on the porch. The weather was still unseasonably mild. Or perhaps seasonably — Gail knew that the Maine coast had experienced balmy winters two years in a row during the nineteenth century and also in 1929. The boyfriend had not yet appeared. Gail could not remember his name. Did he remember hers? Was there anyone on earth who remembered 1929 and the daffodils that perished by Valentine’s Day? Fox drew the bow across the strings. He played a Bach suite, the stuff cellists warm up with. He ignored wife, daughter, sister-in-law trouping in from the porch. They found Gail immediately. Sophia announced that the girls would skate while the boys practiced.

“I forgot my skates,” said Gail.
“I have an extra pair,” said Thea.
“They’ll be too big.”
“We’ll stuff them.”

“With what,” said Gail, following the others to Thea’s car. They drove from island to island until they reached the mainland. There they drove to their favorite pond, black, sprinkled with nubbles of ice like kosher salt. Thea’s skates, with the addition of a pair of mismatched socks she’d snatched from the line, fit Gail as if made for her. Gail thought of the winter she’d taught her young son to skate; it was as if no time had passed since then, as if he were still that merry little boy and she his delighted mother.

She executed a few turns. Thea and Sophia were waltzing. But the
Goddess of Youth was the star. In a long skirt salvaged from some trunk belonging to her brother-in-law and a tight jacket and a tophat, another Whitelaw relic, Hebe twirled, raised one leg and then the other, leaped, landed like a butterfly. Gail, quickly tired, watched her from the edge of the pond. How kind it would be of some real deity to shrink that scrap of a person, transform her into a piece of porcelain, set her atop a music box to spin forever. “She rents a one-room cottage on a New Hampshire horse farm,” Thea had said. “She comes up to prattle at Pa, takes buses to get here, about seventeen of them…” But now Hebe’s right blade seemed to catch on a protrusion of ice, or perhaps it was a root that had worked itself upwards during the thaw like a child throwing off its blankets. The tophat fell off and rolled in a wide arc towards the center of the pond. Hebe fell flat on her face.

Well, not really. “The body will do almost anything to protect its eyes and nose,” Max once said. “The hands shoot out—a lot of broken wrists happen that way. Only an unconscious person forgets his face. One night in the emergency room I saw…” and he’d gone on to tell her about a drunk whose tumble had resulted in total shattering; he mentioned the bones by name, like friends. Max’s capacious memory had stored everything he’d seen during his internship, before he abandoned the urgency of clinical work. He thought Fox had at most a month to live.

Hebe lay still. But her face was turned to one side so her nose probably wasn’t broken. Sister and niece sped in her direction. She pushed herself into a crouch (her wrists weren’t broken, either) and curled into a half-sitting position, legs (also unhurt) swept beneath her. Gail reached the threesome. Thea was kneeling beside her aunt. One side of Hebe’s face had been severely scraped, but there wasn’t much blood. “Okay?” Sophia inquired.

“We ought to attend to that skin,” said Gail.

“I was all at once nauseated,” said Hebe. She took Thea’s hand and scrambled to her feet. Gail followed them to the shoreline. Sophia glided to the middle of the pond and retrieved the tophat.

They found Max alone at the kitchen table. “Fox is sleeping,” he said. “What happened to you, Hebe? Let me see.” Thea fished keys from her jeans and ran outside again. Gail saw her open the trunk of her car and lift out something wrapped in unyielding white paper. She came in again, threw the keys onto the counter, opened the package, uncovering a slab of pink, glistening bacon. She sliced the
meat and handed the slices to her mother, already standing at the old stove, already shifting a big black pan on the burner. The slices curled, puckered, bubbled. The aroma slowly filled the kitchen.

Gail set the table. Max advised Hebe to wash her face gently in lukewarm water. No emollient was required. Hebe went off to obey. Sophia served the first slices.

The fragrance grew stronger — the smell of defiance, of sumptuous caloric energy, of *traif*. Before the rage for standardization Gail’s fourth grade had done happy units on farm animals. Gail of course prepared thoroughly. The sow is particularly motherly, she learned and then taught her charges; pigs of most breeds are prolific and also efficient at converting grain to flesh. Your pig has a small stomach within his ample frame. His fossil remains, the ur-pecary, were discovered first in China . . . This may explain the glory of Chinese food, she had silently speculated, though glory cannot be explained, any more than can life or death or sexual preference. Once, when her son was about three, they had come across a toy pig in a store, a very small sow, scrupulously realistic. They counted the teats: twelve. “Here is where the milk comes out,” she said; and they hugged each other in sweet remembrance of lactation…

“Trichinosis,” Hebe said when she came back. “You get it from pigs, don’t you?”

“You do,” said Max. “Pigs get it from rats, though. But yes, Hebe, if you eat raw pig meat you may ingest the encysted larvae of a roundworm and get very sick. So we cook bacon thoroughly, and it releases that tranquillizing scent.”

“No wonder Fox craves it,” said Gail, and suddenly she could no longer open her mouth.

Hebe said with unaccustomed earnestness, “Maybe it really is bad for him”; and Gail, lips pressed together, saw that Hebe loved her sister’s husband in her arrested way; that those two sometime housemates must have a fairly good time together: one skating, one fiddling; one talking, one with his fingers in his ears; no need to bother with sex…

“Bacon’s not bad for Fox. Nothing is bad for him any more.” For all his lardy softness Max wasn’t a man to cry. But the gentle voice broke, and the narrow shoulders slumped, and a pudgy hand covered the twitching mustache.

Sophia kept the slices coming for a while. Finally she stopped. Upstairs Fox slept his assisted sleep. Thea stacked the dishes. Sophia handed bacon and keys to Gail. Gail went outside, locked the package
in the car trunk, and then, bending, holding onto a stunted pine, she threw up. Under her palm the bark felt like a tweed arm. Then she straightened and returned to the house.

Night came at last. They gathered in the music room after the dinner that everyone but Fox had eaten. To be festive he had poured his noxious nutrient into a champagne glass. He had inspected Hebe’s face. “You will have a splendid bruise in the morning,” he assured his fellow sufferer.

Beyond dried eucalyptus in a tarnished pitcher on the piano Max’s face looked metallic — pewter mustache, pressed tin skin. His eyes seemed like disks of aluminum under their sparse lashes. A stranger walking into the room would have fingered him as the dying man, not Fox, head bent, spindliness concealed by his instrument.

They played. Two old men, their instruments older still but destined for a longer stay on earth. Perhaps the piece had rarely been played so faultily, perhaps never under such circumstances. The Twelve Variations on Papageno’s tune had been written as a salon exercise for amateurs. Gail knew that. She knew that the opus was lesser Beethoven, unambitious Beethoven; she had learned much about music during the long decades of her marriage. Max messed up a passage. If she had been chosen by a man with an interest in modern art, in football, in cooking, she would have learned about those things. She herself had brought to the union a passion for teaching, and also a cigar box of pins and buckles and clips. She’d planned to add to the collection, to sell, to trade. A dolce vibrato by Fox went sour. Gail’s hobby, neither encouraged nor demeaned, had failed to develop. The musicians got through all of the variations in a quarter of an hour.

The boyfriend clapped. Fox went upstairs to vomit. The boyfriend left. Max stood by the piano, his score under his arm. Hebe trotted up to him, her red face raised, wondering again about Vaseline. Thea and Sophia went around turning out the lights.

“Leave your face alone,” said Max to Hebe. And to Gail, “You’ll come upstairs soon?”

She nodded. In fact she followed on his heels. In fact, naked, she was in their hard bed before he was, and she wrapped him in her limbs with a spider’s ardor. At the moment of irreversibility, the wave breaking, she thought not of Michelle Pfeiffer but of that bracelet of diamonds and silver and black enamel that might have been hers. She was still seeing it when Max returned from his ablutions. His naked
pear-shaped body glowed in the moonlight; his eyes now looked like worthwhile coins. Mein Mannchen, she thought. My little man.

She slept for a few hours. Then, awake as if she had been smacked, she got up and put on the oilcloth coat and went downstairs, not worrying about noise. The music room was empty. The door to the porch was ajar. Thea was alone out there. She was sitting on an aluminum chair, her arms resting on the porch’s wooden railing, her head resting on her arms. With a light scrape Gail dragged another chair towards the young woman and sat down beside her. Thea raised her eyes. Their hands touched.

What was there to say? That the pair of oddly matched roommates Foxcroft and Maurice had made a reasonable go of the lives they had been given to lead. That if anyone cares to inquire I have done the same. “Helping one man die — it is the work of many persons.” She did say that.

From within the house they heard a groan — inanimate; the back door had opened. The footsteps of one person sounded on the wooden steps outside the kitchen. Then a little yawn: a car trunk opening — and a little clap: a car trunk closing. The pair of feet, seemingly stronger now, returned to the house, and the back door closed again...

Thea sat up straight.

“The car keys — I left them on the counter,” said Gail. “He saw them, at dinner. Your mother saw him see them. I saw her see him see them.”

... and kitchen noises, now, including a sizzle; and pretty soon a heavenly fragrance, its source the high-temperature cooking of the sliced back portion of some magnificent pig.