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Hollyhocks

Every one of Dudley Fenton's six older brothers is married, and when Dudley is drunk, he can't remember the names of their wives. On nights when Dudley is locked out of the house, his head buzzing, the harder he tries to remember, the more the names elude him. The only sure thing is that eventually he will remember them, and eventually, he'll get back inside the house. As he circles from one door and window to the next, he knows he's safe: Philip the cook will have left a pantry window cracked open for him. Yes, there is the window: he finds it in the moonlight. The window is high off the ground, off the brick patio at the back of the house, facing the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Dudley has to haul a stepladder from the tool shed, climb it, part the hollyhocks that grow so tall beneath that window, all stiff and dead with stalks so spiny they cut his hands, and jimmy the window up. The effort takes all his strength. While he pushes and pries, thoughts of his sisters-in-law run through his mind: the rich one, the shady one, the fussy one, the loud one, the prissy one, and the sweet one, who is his age and a new bride, and whom he loves.

Who locked him out? Why lock the doors of a house so far out in the country, you can't even shout to your neighbors? His own mother did it. It's her comment on his drinking. She waits until he goes outside to check on the dogs or to get a hidden bottle from his car or from the barn. Then she'll lock the windows and the heavy doors, and he has tried them, every one. In the summertime or the fall, he'll climb the ladder, or a tree limb, if necessary, to the second floor, to ease through a French door or an open window. In winter, if it weren't for Philip and the pantry, he'd be out of luck.

The cold's a bear on his back, hanging onto him, blasting its breath down his neck.

When at last the window is up, he launches himself inside, crashing across the cabinet beneath the sill, a space cluttered with glassware and crockery and cake pans, his body unwieldy, knocking all those clattery breakables to the floor. Always he plans to thank Philip for leaving the window unlocked, but they have never spoken of this. Philip understands

about Dudley's loneliness and the drinking and probably, Dudley figures, even knows how Dudley feels about Patsy—there, her name comes to him even as he untangles his legs, bumping an iron skillet to the floor—Patsy, the sweet one. The visits to her husband's family, Dudley can tell, are a trial to her. Constantly she twirls strands of her hair or bites her lips. She doesn't have the competitive spirit of the other wives. Her husband Barrett, Dudley's next-oldest brother, blurts out truths that embarrass her, revealing how she worries about thank-you notes, wondering if hers are all right. Barrett announces these things at the table, and Patsy flushes red. The other wives pick on her or ignore her, except for the shady one, who is sometimes her friend.

This big house, where Dudley and his brothers grew up, contains three floors and twenty-two rooms, not counting the bathrooms. When Dudley's brothers, their wives, and children visit for holidays and vacations, the house easily holds the entire Fenton family. Usually, only Dudley and his seventy-year-old mother live here, and Philip the cook and Edmonia the live-in maid (though Dudley thinks Edmonia declared a half-day off, this being Christmas, and went home to her people), along with Dudley's mother's two spoiled Standard poodles. Those poodles ought to be out with the hunting dogs, in Dudley's opinion, out in the pen in cold fresh air acting the way dogs ought to act, but nobody can say a word to his mother about her dogs or her horses.

It is Christmas, 1953. Dudley leans against the cabinet and catches his breath, and the night air rushing in behind him smells of cedars and woodsmoke. It's 2:00 a.m. by his watch, so he guesses it's really the day after Christmas. In a moment, he will close the window, but first, he'll rest.

Just before supper, there was a scene. It all comes back to him. The rich wife announced her new necklace was missing. She'd left it on her dresser, she said, and it was gone. She is from New York, and in times of excitement, her voice goes very nasal. Standing on the steps that lead down into the dining room, where everybody was gathering for the meal, she accused the shady one: "I think you took it, Theresa."

"I saw your old necklace, and it's too ugly for me," Theresa shot back.

"And the fur flew," Dudley reports now to his nephew Bobby, son of the rich one, Bobby who appears in the pantry rubbing his eyes, having gone to sleep immediately after the large mid-afternoon lunch and dozing all through the adults' cocktail hour, the drama of the missing necklace, and the argument itself, in which his own mother had starred.

"I heard a little bit about it," Bobby says.

Dudley steps away from the window, and Bobby closes it with some difficulty. Bobby is twelve, and his uncles are beginning to include him in their manly talk and quail-shooting excursions. "I think everybody's still mad," Bobby says.

"Mercy," says Dudley.

They laugh. Dudley wants a drink. He has hidden bottles everywhere, no matter that his mother and Edmonia root them out. Right here in the pantry, behind a row of canning jars, is a bottle of whiskey. He offers some to Bobby, but Bobby shakes his head. He's got a bag of candy in the pocket of his bathrobe, and while Dudley sips the whiskey like a man just come off the desert, Bobby sifts through the sack for the little red flower-shaped sweets that the family calls cranberries, hard enough to break a tooth.

The house is quiet until you listen close, and Dudley, drunk, has ears like a lynx. The Christmas tree shifts in its stand out in the well of the staircase, like a tired, thirsty person who has stood up too long. It is Dudley's job to water the tree, yet he has forgotten; he should apologize to the big shaggy cedar in its tin bucket, the bottom of it swathed in a sheet. He was the one who found the tree in the field, cut it down, and brought it back to the house on a wagon drawn by one of the horses. He should get some water for the tree right now, but the thought wavers out of his mind. He takes another drink.

In the very silence of the house, he hears all those people upstairs, his sleeping family, on the second and third floors, except maybe Philip who sleeps out in the stable, Philip who knows so much about them all. Philip goes for men, not women, and doesn't drink anything stronger than the cocoa he served the boys on winter nights when they were growing up, cocoa made with milk from the farm's own cows. Philip would whip an egg in each cup to make the boys grow up strong.

Bobby is a big boy for twelve, always hungry. He sets down the candy, and he and Dudley make their way to the kitchen, where Bobby opens the refrigerator and takes out a Smithfield ham. He carves the dense, dry meat and eats the slices from his hand. "Last I heard, Mom still didn't find her necklace," he says. "They looked all over. Dad wanted to call the police, but Grandmother wouldn't let him." Bobby's lips shine with ham fat. He carves and eats, picking out the cloves from the fragrant brown-sugar crust and setting them on the platter.

How did Bobby turn out to be such a sensible boy? Dudley will always wonder. Bobby's mother, the rich wife, sometimes puts her hand

on Dudley's arm and looks him in the eye in a way not unfriendly. She was elegantly dressed when she announced her necklace was missing, her waist bound in green satin, her breasts displayed in a shiny bodice as if on a shelf.

Flying to her aid was the loud wife, the second-richest one, money being its own greatest ally. Together, then, the rich one, the loud one, the fussy one, and the prissy one shut out shady Theresa and sweet Patsy, so that there, too, an alliance formed, a flimsy trust built on shared ostracism, forbidden laughter between shady and sweet.

Between them, Dudley and Bobby reconstruct all of it: the genesis of the fight and its continuation. Dudley takes a pull on the bottle. Christmas night, 1953. He is twenty-eight years old. He should be Bobby's age, going to prep school.

"So then they all went to bed," Dudley says. There's a satisfaction in that. Everything's clear and in focus. He still has the youngest child's pleasure in being the last to go to bed. "We're smart, Bobby," Dudley says. "We know enough to stay out of trouble."

Bobby laughs, but it's the polite laugh of a child who has stayed up too late. In a flash, Dudley sees Bobby in fifty years: good-natured, his face red, swollen, his voice and gut a boozers'. "Stick with candy, Bobby," Dudley says. He stands up from the kitchen table. Philip will be in this kitchen rolling biscuit dough by six a.m.

Dudley wobbles, and Bobby's beside him steadying his arm. "Easy, Uncle Dudley." Bobby's father is the brother Dudley likes least—Vernon, the third brother, four ahead of him. Everybody caters to Vernon. Philip always fixes sweetbreads at Christmas time, because Vernon loves them. Such a mean streak in him, yet he got the rich wife. Real rich, heiress to a grocery store fortune.

"What kind of necklace is it, anyhow?" Dudley asks.

"Kind of a pretty one," Bobby says. "Diamonds and stuff."

"Aw, it's around here somewhere. Could it be in your mother's pocketbook? Maybe she stuck it in there and forgot about it."

"I guess so," Bobby says, bored. Then he blinks. "Hey, Uncle Dudley. Have you ever looked in that dresser in the room where I am?"

Dudley knows the dresser, up on the third floor, part of a set of mahogany furniture that was once in his mother's room. "What's in it?"

"Fur. Tails," Bobby says. "Dead animals."

Dudley laughs. "That's your grandmother's hobby. Fox hunting. Well, used to be, when she was younger. She kept the brushes, the tails.

You go on back to bed, young fella.”

Bobby heads out into the hallway and up the stairs, and Dudley is alone again. He puts the bottle back in the pantry, resolute as he hides it behind a jar of dried beans. He has the whole house to himself. He wanders into the living room, where the Christmas presents are piled: shirts and cashmere sweaters folded in cardboard boxes, bottles of Arpege perfume and talcum powder, sets of crystal goblets and monogrammed sheets, things people want when they are grown up and married. Deputized, he bought many of these items himself, with his mother’s list in his hand and her money in his wallet as he navigated stores in Culpeper and Charlottesville, enlisting the help of clerks.

“For your girlfriend?” a salesgirl asked smiling, as she wrapped bottles of cologne.

“That’s right,” he answered, thinking of Patsy.

He touches the tissue paper that surrounds a pair of leather gloves. Each son received gloves this year. His mother gives all of her boys the same gift. There are stock certificates, too, and sterling silver spoons. Each son and each son’s wife can lay claim to a designated stack of lovely presents in this room: on the mantelpiece, in the armchairs, on the embroidered bench in front of the fireplace. The Christmas tree is dazzling with its ornaments and tinsel. Its lights are still on, bound to be scorching hot by now.

The logical place for that necklace to be is down the rich wife’s dress.

Dudley laughs out loud. Did she look there? Thinks she’s so smart. Maybe she found it in her brassiere when she took her clothes off and didn’t tell anybody. Spiteful, that one, her and Vernon, with all that money. How is it young Bobby has such a level head? But the daughter, Bobby’s sister Elizabeth, is another story. She’s fifteen, hates her mother, wouldn’t come home for Christmas, insisted on going to visit a friend from boarding school. Last summer, when Elizabeth was here, she banged her head against the wall because her parents wouldn’t let her go out with a boy too old for her. She’s scary, something not quite right about her, and Dudley doesn’t like the fact that her mother lets her smoke. Oh, he started smoking when he was younger than Elizabeth, but it’s different for boys.

How long has he been sitting in front of the Christmas tree, its lights pulsing in his nearsightedness like glowing fists opening and closing? He reaches up and brushes the cedar branches, the tips so

needle-sharp he jerks his hand back. Has he been sleeping, sitting up? His glasses are gone. He might have set them down somewhere or they might have fallen when he was outside. That seems hours ago, when he checked on the dogs and drank in his car.

Just as he remembers that he needs to put the ladder away, the ladder out there in the cold darkness, he hears footsteps on the stairs.

Even without his glasses, he recognizes Patsy, her hand on the bannister, Patsy wrapped in a quilted pink robe, her hair pressed to her head with little pins. She pauses on the steps. He's always surprised by how tall she is, how large her feet are in her pink slippers. Usually, tall women aren't shy, the way Patsy is.

She says, "I was just about to fall asleep, and then I wondered if anybody remembered to unplug the lights."

"Oh!" Dudley cries, as if Patsy has announced a fire burning right in front of him. He crawls beneath the tree and yanks the plug from the socket, which results in total darkness, except for scanty starlight, or moonlight, which glimmers through the long windows of the living room. Awkwardly, Dudley rocks back and sits on his haunches. For a long time, they are quiet, and again Dudley wonders if he has fallen asleep, if he dreamed that Patsy is there.

He has lain on the front lawn, drunk under those stars more times than he can count, beginning when he was younger than Bobby, out in all seasons, hot summer nights when the Milky Way blurred over the Earth and his ears buzzed with the cries of insects. He has been so drunk, he has fallen down in the snow and would have died if Philip hadn't come looking for him, flashlight in hand, nudging him awake: "Mr. Dudley, lemme help you up," though whether that was last week or ten years ago, Dudley can't say.

Somebody laughs: Patsy. She gives the relaxed chuckle that he loves and says, "Let's plug them back in."

He does, fumbling under the cedar branches, knocking an ornament to the floor with his head, working the prongs into the socket. As the lights come back on, one bulb fizzes and pops. Patsy hurries over beside him and picks up the tiny shards, collecting them in her palm. He thinks it was a red light, but the bits of glass look black.

"Where should I put these?" she says.

As he stands up, his head spins. "Give them to me." As she puts the broken pieces into his hands, her fingers brush his. He takes tissue paper from one of the boxes of gloves and wraps the pieces in it.

“Well,” he says, throwing the pieces into a trash can. He wonders what he should say or do next. His mother used to tell him and his brothers that they would learn manners if she had to beat them to death. It’s got to come naturally, she said. She did beat them, with hair brush and riding crop, on the fanny and the hands, though by the time Barrett and Dudley, the last two, came along, she was sick of raising boys. She hardly paid them any mind, was always off on horseback. She had another man, would ride off to see him, even when she was what, forty-something. He pushes that thought away. His father dealt with that situation with such, he searches for the word, dignity.

So it’s Christmas night, and he is alone with the woman that he loves, Patsy, here in her robe beside him at the Christmas tree, with a little smile on her face, as if they’re children having a party of their own. She says, “Wasn’t that awful, about that necklace?”

He laughs, wishing for a drink. “It was right bad.”

“I do hope she finds it, though.” She reaches out to the tree and touches a hollow glass globe. Santa and his reindeer ride across it, in white glitter. Patsy’s red fingernails sparkle.

He has lost his train of thought. They were talking about a necklace. He has to bring in the stepladder. If he forgets, Philip will cover up for him, struggling to fold the ladder and stow it in the toolshed before anybody else is up.

“What are you thinking about?” asks Patsy.

“Nothing much. Don’t get cold down here,” he says and could kick himself, for now she’ll go away.

But she stays where she is, examining the decorations on the tree. “I like the real old ones the best,” she says.

He points out a tin star. “This one’s mine. Dad gave me that, when I was a child.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“I hated that nickname they used to call me. Dovey. Terrible thing to call a boy.”

Many women would laugh, but Patsy doesn’t. “You outgrew it, though.”

“Sometimes Mother still calls me that.”

He knows nothing about women, has dated several but they drop him quickly. He’s been to a few whores, white and black. He can’t remember the last time he saw Patsy, probably the Fourth of July. She and Barrett live in Roanoke, a long drive away. Oh, not that long. They

just don't visit very often. Who could blame Barrett for wanting to keep Patsy to himself?

"You picked out this tree, didn't you?" Patsy asks. "How did you choose it?"

Nobody else would think to ask him that. Before he can answer, Patsy clears her throat and says, "I'm going to have a baby."

"Oh. That's wonderful," he says, too fast. And he feels shocked and breathless, the way he did when he was kicked by a horse, back when he was twelve years old.

HE AND ALL of his brothers fought in the war, despite flat feet and bad vision. Vernon is deaf in one ear. Barrett lied about the eye chart: he'd overheard the man in front of him say the letters. Their mother wanted to keep Dudley safe. He was so young. She offered to have a word with the right people, but he stood his ground on that and wouldn't let her. He was in college then, down at Blacksburg. He left college to enlist. He felt so slow in the army, commands always registering late on his ears. He dug the ground in Belgium with a bayonet, pretending he was a child again, digging for arrowheads in the red Virginia clay.

He and the land go a long way back, though he's better at birds and trees than he is at farming. Black walnut trees show the land is good. His mother grows the traditional crops of the Piedmont, corn and wheat and hay, but the overseer, Mr. Ellis, does most everything. Mr. Ellis and his wife practically raised Dudley. He spent so much of his childhood at their house, in their yard. Now that he's grown, he and Mr. Ellis still talk about weather and crops and fishing, but it was better when he was ten years old and could ride the tractor with Mr. Ellis, then go to their cabin up in the field and ask Mrs. Ellis for milk and pie.

Dudley has been telling his mother to let him buy a few cattle, he'd like to try his hand at raising them. She wants him to raise horses, to love them as she does, she who rode daily—sidesaddle, which is harder than riding astride, she likes to emphasize—rode until just recently, when old age and arthritis caught up with her. She scolds her daughters-in-law for their fear of horses. Only the loud one is comfortable in a saddle. Dudley doesn't blame the others for their trepidation. Truth be told, he doesn't much like horses. Falling off and being thrown really hurt, and the animals are dangerous and sly, rewarding their benefactors with nips and bites, developing dozens of

ailments that used to keep his mother out in the stable at all hours of the day and night, tending lame legs and sores and all manner of ills, never trusting the stable boy or even the vet to take proper care of her beauties.

Luckily, the horse that kicked Dudley when he was twelve was just a foal, and he was standing close to it. The farther away you are, the worse the kick; the kick gathers power. He finds himself explaining this to Patsy as they sit on hassocks pulled close to the tree.

“That’s how I got this scar,” he says, pointing to his cheek, “and why my eye looks funny. It broke the socket.” Pressing the skin with his fingertips, he feels the craggy bone.

He and Patsy are smoking cigarettes, with square glass ashtrays on their laps. Where did the drink in his hand come from? There’s a bottle at his feet. Vaguely he remembers searching in a sideboard, closing his fingers around the bottle, insisting they celebrate. Patsy has a cup of eggnog in her hand, but she won’t let him add whiskey to it, because of the baby. He realizes she has never liked to drink, that she’s glad for the excuse of the baby. She is the only daughter-in-law who doesn’t drink champagne by the tumbler. The others are proud of how much they can hold. That always surprises him, how bold they are about it, how they tease his brothers for not keeping up with them. They do not tease him. He has collapsed in front of everyone, has fallen off the porch, has disgraced himself so many times. His drinking has ceased to be a joke. His brothers have had hard talks with him, prompted, he knows, by their mother, though all of his brothers except Barrett keep six-packs of beer in their cars even for short drives. And his brother Gordon, the only one who used to drink even more than Dudley and gambled, too, a high roller, Gordon ran over a man at a railroad crossing but never went to jail for it. During those talks, Dudley is Dovey again, meek and sickly, the youngest, nodding while a brother lectures. When the talks are over, he always goes out to his car in the garage and has a drink.

“I can’t imagine,” Patsy is saying, “what it would be like to grow up in such a big family. It must have been fun, growing up with all those brothers.”

“A lot of the time, it was fun,” he says. “Not always, though.”

“Boys can be mean. Children can be so mean to each other, even in a family,” Patsy says and nods, as if she’s the only person ever to realize this. She is the most innocent person he has ever known. He

would die before he told her how his brothers used to shove him down the stairs; how it was Gordon's fault that the foal kicked Dudley in the face, because Gordon was hitting the little horse with a stick.

Dudley and Barrett were at the mercy of the older boys. Vernon and Gordon were the worst. One time, Vernon held Barrett's head underwater until Barrett almost drowned, right outside in the pond, frozen now with rough ice, his mother's fantail goldfish sleeping numbly in its depths, descendants of the fish that lived there while Vernon pushed Barrett's head under the water and laughed as Barrett thrashed, until Dudley and some of the others, he thinks it was John or Alex, the two oldest, pulled Vernon away. For the first time, he wonders if Vernon is crazy, if the cruel streak in him and Gordon is more than just meanness.

"Barrett has told me the others heckled him right bad. You didn't, though," Patsy adds, with a smile in her voice. "I thank you for that."

"Barrett and me, we stuck together, being the youngest ones," he says and drains his glass.

"You and Barrett got the blue eyes in the family. Your father's eyes. I've seen pictures of him. I wish I could have met him. That was a lot of children, wasn't it?" Patsy says, as if she's getting sleepy, as if she's looking through a window far back on his life or Barrett's life or maybe her own. After a pause, she says, "It took me a while to learn all the names of your brothers. Barrett used to get me to say them out loud before we'd come here, to practice. Seven boys! John, Alex, Vernon, Gordon, Miles, then Barrett of course, and you. Gordon and Vernon, I used to get those two mixed up."

"You do just fine," Dudley says.

She is here beside him, her slippered feet tucked beneath her on the hassock, putting out her cigarette.

Then her eyes open wide. "Listen. What's that sound?"

Dudley cocks his head. "It's Philip. He's in the kitchen to start breakfast."

"You mean it's morning?" Patsy is incredulous. That is what he'll remember best about her: her amazement, what the other wives call *naïveté*. He'd never heard the word before they hissed it, bandying it about like a code: naive. It is not a compliment. The other wives are much more experienced, even the prissy one, who finds opportunities to remind everybody that she has a head for business, why, she kept the books at the airplane hangar where she met John and was mighty good

at it, too. All but Patsy are experienced in this wide world, meeting it with fashionable faces and proud bosoms and maybe a cuss word and a hangover thrown in for good measure, some of them Yankees like his mother, and others, like the loud one, Miles's wife, Southern debutantes, and one—the shady one—a Westerner, from Colorado or Nevada or some such place, with sun-strained eyes and a smile like barbed wire. Patsy has more class than any of them, and now she doesn't have to worry about this family any more. Her life will be her children, a life of hiding behind the youngsters as a way of avoiding these family gatherings, or when she must come, she will mother her little flock every moment, hovering away from the grownups until even Barrett chides her.

Dudley knows that his feelings for her will never change. She is his age, and she will put on weight with each child, and her hair will go gray early. Unlike the other wives, she'll never color it, will stop wearing makeup and lipstick, and will wear shorts bought at a discount store and socks that fall down around her ankles, but to him, she'll always be breathtaking.

"It's morning, all right," Dudley says. Already he smells the wood burning in the stove. There's a new electric stove in the kitchen, but Philip prefers the old one. Soon, there will be bacon and eggs and biscuits, and oranges sliced in half, and small glasses of pineapple juice.

"I've never stayed up all night in my life," Patsy marvels. "My sisters and I, when we were little, we used to try, but we always fell asleep." She sets down her empty eggnog cup and rises from the hassock. "Nobody knows yet," she says, "about the baby. Not even Barrett. I'll tell him soon. Don't say anything."

Dudley stands up too, swaying a little. An ache started some time ago, a slight drilling behind the eye with the socket broken so long ago by the foal. "I won't tell anybody," he says. He decides to stop drinking. Yes. Today. He'll have a drink before breakfast, and that will be the last one. For good. Yet as the pain sharpens to a beam behind his eye, he knows he won't stop, not yet.

When at last he does, in forty years, he will do so by attending meetings three nights a week in many different counties, at country churches and VFW halls all over central Virginia, tiny buildings whose lights look orange as pumpkins in the cold dark. He will stop drinking, successfully and forever.

To his surprise, smoking will prove easier to quit. At seventy-five,

he will attend a single session of hypnosis—he, who on this day after Christmas in 1953, would scoff at the idea of hypnosis. The hypnotist will announce to a hundred smokers in a Holiday Inn conference room: “Ladies and gentlemen, after I clap my hands, you won’t ever want another cigarette.”

In his sobriety, Dudley will realize the hollyhocks died back so completely each winter that they disappeared. He must never have contended with them when he crawled through the pantry window, yet the memory of those weedy stalks lives on in his hands. He will marry twice, both times in his old age, but those women are not Patsy, who will die long before he does.

“Time to give the lights a rest,” Patsy says and maneuvers carefully beneath the Christmas tree, as if she’s already months along in her pregnancy, to unplug the lights. The time he has spent with her was far too short. He has never known a night to pass so fast, a morning to come so soon. But before the house wakes up, before all the others wander downstairs and the hubbub of breakfast begins, he’ll answer the question she asked about how he chose this Christmas tree, how he couldn’t decide on one tree among the thousands of cedars and pines on his mother’s land, and then snow started falling, and all of a sudden, there it was: this one.

Patsy announces, “The tree needs water. The bucket’s almost empty. I can tend to that.”

“Just stay here and rest,” he says. “I’ll do it.” He’ll get water for the tree, speak to Philip, and maybe take a drink to knock back the ache in his head, a hurt that cups his eye now as if the socket is one big bruise. He’ll have one drink, and then he’ll tell Patsy how he found the tree. “Want anything from the kitchen?” he asks her.

“Oh, let me think a minute,” says Patsy, as if there are a thousand pleasant things she might desire.

It’s so early that the house is still charmed and secretive. In the northeast room where Bobby sleeps, the fox brushes are gathered in close, dark places. When Christmas is over, when all the others have departed, Dudley will go to that room with its sleigh bed and looming dresser and take out the pieces of fur which once belonged to living animals, killed by his mother during hunts in the days when she rode. It has been years since he thought of those brushes, all soft and a lovely shade of red, with something of their wildness still there. Alone in that room, in the still silence of winter sunlight, he can hold up the brushes and admire them.

“A cup of coffee would be nice,” Patsy says, stretching her arms above her head, “with lots of cream and sugar.”

“Patsy,” he says, and the words come out as if he’s dreaming, “I love you.” He’s clear, mind and body, as if it’s been weeks since he drank, clear and steady. “I might as well say it.”

Patsy looks at him for a long time. She touches her hair, still tightly pinned, and smiles up at him. “I know,” she says. “I’ve always known. It’s okay.”

But by the time he comes back from the kitchen, Patsy is gone.