ELIZABETH McCRACKEN

Property

FROM *Granta*

THE AD SHOULD HAVE SAID, *For rent, six-room hovel. Quarter-filled Mrs. Butterworth's bottle in living room, sandy sheets throughout, lingering smell.*

Or, *Wanted: gullible tenant for small house, must possess appreciation for chipped pottery, mid-1960s abstract silk-screened canvases, mouse-nibbled books on Georgia O'Keeffe.*

Or, *Available June 1—shithole.*

Instead, the posting on the website called the house at 55 Bayberry Street old and characterful and sunny, furnished, charming, on a quiet street not far from the college and not far from the ocean. Large porch; separate artist's studio. Not bad for the young married couple, then, Stony Badower and Pamela Graff, he thirty-nine, redheaded, soft-bellied, long-limbed, and beaky, a rare and possibly extinct waterbird; she blond and soft and hotheaded and German and sentimental. She looked like the plump-cheeked naughty heroine of a German children's book having just sawed off her own braids with a knife. Her expression dared you to teach her a lesson. Like many sentimentalists, she was estranged from her family. Stony had never met them.

"America," she said that month. "All right. Your turn. Show me America." For the three years of their courtship and marriage they'd moved every few months. Berlin, Paris, Galway, near Odense, near Edinburgh, Rome, and now a converted stone barn in Normandy that on cold days smelled of cowpats and on hot days like the lost crayons of tourist children. Soon enough it would be summer and the barn would be colossally expensive and filled with

English people. Now it was time for Maine, where Stony had accepted a two-year job, cataloguing a collection of 1960s underground publications: things printed on rice paper and Popsicle sticks and cocktail napkins. It fell to him to find the next place to live.

"We'll unpack my storage space," he said. "I have things."

"Yes, my love," she said. "I have things too."

"You have a duffel bag. You have clothing. You have a saltshaker shaped like a duck with a chipped beak."

She cackled a very European cackle, pride and delight in her ownership of the lusterware duck, whose name was Trudy. "The sole exhibit in the museum. When I am dead, people will know nothing about me." This was a professional opinion: she was a museum consultant. In Normandy she was helping set up an exhibition in a stone cottage that had been owned by a Jewish family deported during the war. In Paris, it had been the atelier of a minor artist who'd been the longtime lover of a major poetess; in Denmark, a workhouse museum. Her speciality was the air of recent evacuation: you knew something terrible had happened to the occupants, but you hoped it might still be undone. She set contemporary spectacles on desktops and snuggled appropriate shoes under beds and did not overdust. Too much cleanliness made a place dead. In Rome she arranged an exhibit of the commonplace belongings of Ezra Pound: chewed pencils, drinking glasses, celluloid dice, dog-eared books. Only the brochure suggested a connection to greatness. At the Hans Christian Andersen House in Odense, where they were mere tourists, she lingered in admiration over Andersen's upper plate and the length of rope that he traveled with in his suitcase in case of hotel fire. "You can tell more from dentures than from years of diaries," she'd said then. "Dentures do not lie." But she herself threw everything out. She did not want anyone to exhibit even the smallest bit of her.

Now Stony said, solemnly, "I never want to drink out of Ikea glasses again. Or sleep on Ikea sheets. Or—and this one is serious—cook with Ikea pans. Your husband owns really expensive pans. How about that?"

"I am impressed, and you are bourgeois."

"Year lease," he said.

"I am terrified," said Pamela, smiling with her beautiful angular

un-American teeth, and then, "Perhaps we will afford to have a baby."

She was still, as he would think of it later, casually alive. In two months she would be, according to the doctors, *miraculously* alive, and, later still, alive in a nearly unmodifiable twilight state. Or too modifiable: *technically* alive. Now she walked around the barn in her bra, which was as usual a little too small, and her underpants, as usual a little too big, though she was small-breasted and big-bottomed. Her red-framed glasses sat on her face at a tilt. "My ears are not plumb," she always said. It was one of the reasons they belonged together: they were flea-market people, put together out of odd parts. She limped. Even her name was pronounced with a limp, the accent on the second syllable. For a full month after they met he'd thought her name was Camilla, and he never managed to say it aloud without lining it up in his head beforehand—paMILLa, paMILLa—the way he had to collect German words for sentences ahead of time and then properly distribute the verbs. In fact he did that with English sentences too, when speaking to Pamela, when she was alive.

He e-mailed the woman who'd listed the house—she was not the owner, she was working for the owners—and after a month of wrangling (she never sent the promised pictures; he was third in line, behind a gaggle of students and a clutch of summer people; if they rented for the summer they could make a lot more money), managed to talk her out of a yearlong lease, starting June 1.

The limp, it turned out, was the legacy of a stroke Pamela'd had in her early twenties that she'd never told him about. She had another one in the barn two weeks before they were supposed to move; she hit her head on the metal counter as she fell. Stony's French was good enough only to ask the doctors how bad things were, but not to understand the answer. Pamela spoke the foreign languages; he cooked dinner, she proclaimed it delicious. In the hospital her tongue was fat in her mouth and she was fed through a tube. Someone had put her glasses on her face so that she would look more herself. A nurse came in hourly to straighten them. They did this as though her glasses were the masterpiece and all of Pamela the gallery wall—palms flat and gentle, leery of gravity. He sat in a molded green chair and dozed. One night he woke to the final nurse, who was straightening the glasses and then the bed

sheets. She turned to Stony. The last little bit of French he possessed drained out through the basin of his stomach.

"No?" he said.

This nurse was a small brown rabbit. Even her lips were brown. She wobbled on her feet as though deciding whether it would be better if the mad husband caught and ate her now or there should be a chase. Then she shrugged.

When someone dies it is intolerable to be shrugged at. He went back to the barn to pack. First his suitcase, an enormous green nylon item with fretful, overworked zippers. Then Pamela's, that beige strap-covered duffel bag that looked like a midcentury truss. He had to leave France as soon as possible. He stuffed the bag with the undersized bras and oversized pants, her favorite pair of creased black patent-leather loafers, an assortment of embroidered handkerchiefs. He needed a suitcase and a computer bag and then any number of plastic bags to move from place to place, he collected souvenirs like vaccinations, but all of Pamela's belongings fit in her bag. When he failed to find the duck, he remembered the words of the lovely Buddhist landlady in Edinburgh, when he'd apologized for breaking a bowl: "We have a saying—it was already broken." Even now he wasn't sure if *we* meant Buddhists or Scots. He would leave a note for the landlady concerning the duck, but of course the loss of the duck could not break his heart.

The weight of the bag was like the stones in a suicide's pocket. Stony e-mailed his future boss, the kindly archivist, asked if he could straighten things out with the real estate agent—he would come, he would definitely come, but in the fall. *My wife has died,* he wrote, in rotten intelligible English. He'd wept already, and for hours, but suddenly he understood that the real thing was coming for him soon, a period of time free of wry laughter or distraction. The bag he put in the closet for the French landlady to deal with. The ashes from the mortuary came in an urn, complete with a certificate that explained what he was to show to customs officials. These he took with him to England, where he went for the summer, to drink.

The Not Owner of the house was a small, slightly creased, ponytailed blond woman in a baseball cap and a gleaming black exercise suit that suggested somewhere a husband dressed in the exact

same outfit. She waved at him from the front porch. For the past month she'd sent him cheerful e-mails about getting the lovely house ready for him, all of which came down to this: What did he need? What did he own?

Books, art, cooking equipment. And a collection of eccentric but unuseful tables. That was it. He'd chosen this house because it was not a sabbatical rental: even before—a word he now pronounced as a spondee, like BC—he'd longed to be reunited with his books, art, dishes, the doctor's table, the old diner table, the various card catalogs, the side table made from an old cheese crate. He didn't want to live inside someone else's life, and sabbatical houses were always like that. You felt like a teenager who'd been given too much responsibility. Your parents were there frowning at you in the very arrangement of the furniture.

The house wasn't Victorian, as he'd for some reason assumed, but an ordinary wood-framed house painted toothpaste blue. Amazing, how death made petty disappointments into operatic insults.

"Hello!" The woman whooshed across toward him. "I'm Carly. You're here. At last! It seems like ages since we started talking about you and this house!"

The porch was psoriatic and decorated with a series of lawn chairs.

"I'm glad you found summer people," said Stony.

Carly nodded. "Yes. The last guy moved out this morning."

"Ah," said Stony, though they'd discussed this via e-mail over the last week. It was his ingratiating way, as a lifelong renter, to suggest unnecessary, helpful things, and he had said he'd arrive on the fourth instead of the third so she'd have more time to arrange for cleaners.

"Fireplace," she said. "Cable's still hooked up. Maybe you'll be lucky and they won't notice." A round-jawed teenager sat on a leather settee with a hand-held video game, frowning at the screen like a Roman emperor impatient with the finickiness of his lions. "It's a nice room. These old houses have such character. This one—do you believe it?—it's a Sears, Roebuck kit. You picked it out of the catalog and it was delivered and assembled."

He could hear Pamela's voice: this is not an old house. The barn in Normandy was eighteenth century, the apartment in Rome even

older. The walls were lined with homemade bookshelves, filled with paperback books: Ionesco, the full complement of Roths.

"Fireplace work?"

"There was a squirrel incident," said Carly vaguely. She swished into the dining room. "Dining room. The lease, I'm sure you'll remember, asks you to keep the corner cupboard locked."

The cupboard in question looked filled with eyecups and egg cups and mustache cups. In the corner, a broken Styrofoam cooler had been neatly aligned beneath a three-legged chair; a white melamine desk had papers stuck in its jaw. Kmart furniture, he thought. Well, he'd have the movers take it down to the basement.

"Kitchen's this way."

The kitchen reminded him of his 1970s childhood, and the awful taste of tongue depressors at the back of the throat. It looked as though someone had taken a potting shed and turned it inside out. A pattern of faux shingles crowned the honey-colored cupboards; the countertop Formica was patterned like a hospital gown. A round, fluorescent light fixture lit up a collection of dead bugs. High above everything, a terra-cotta sun smiled down from the shingles with no sense of irony, or shame, whatsoever.

The smell of Febreze came down the stairs, wound around the smell of old cigarettes and something chemical, and worse.

"Four bedrooms," said Carly.

She led him up the stairs into one of the front rooms, furnished with a double mattress on a brown wooden platform. It looked like the sort of thing you'd store a kidnapped teenage girl underneath. The café curtains on the windows were badly water-stained and lightly cigarette-burned.

"Listen!" said Carly. "It's a busy street, but you can't even hear it! Bedclothes in the closets. I need to get going," she said. "Tae kwon do. Settle in and let me know if there's anything else I can do for you, all right?"

He had not stood so close to a woman all summer, at least not while sober. He wanted to finger her ponytail and then yank on it like a schoolyard bully.

"Can I see the artist's studio?" he asked.

"Forgot!" she said. "Come along."

They walked through the scrubby backyard to a half-converted garage.

"Lock sticks," said Carly, jiggling a door with a rice-paper cataract over its window. "Looks dark in here till you turn on the lights."

The art studio was to have been Pamela's: she was a sometime jeweler and painter. Stony did not know whether it made things better or worse that this space was the most depressing room he'd ever seen. The old blinds seemed stitched together from moth wings. A picture of Picasso, clipped from a newspaper, danced on a bulletin board to a smell of mildew that was nearly audible. Along one wall a busted door rested on sawhorses, and across the top a series of shapes huddled together as though for warmth. Pots, vases, bowls, all clearly part of the same family, the bluish gray of expensive cats. He expected them to turn and blink at him.

"My father was a potter," said Carly.

It took him a moment. "Ah! Your parents own this place?"

"My mom," said Carly. "She's an ob-gyn. Retired. She's in New York now. You can't go anywhere in this town without meeting kids my mother delivered. She's like an institution. There's a wheel, if you're interested. Think it still works. Potter's."

"No, thank you."

She sighed and snapped off the light. They went back to the house. "All right, pumpkin," she said, and the teenager stood up and revealed herself to be a girl, not a boy, with a few sharp, painful-looking pimples high on her cheeks, a long nose, and a smile that suggested that not everything was right with her. She shambled over to her tiny mother and the two of them stood with their arms around each other.

Was she awkward, just? Autistic? Carly reached up and curled a piece of hair behind her daughter's ear. It was possible, thought Stony, that all American teenagers might appear damaged to him these days, the way that all signs in front of fast-food restaurants—MAPLE CHEDDAR COMING SOON! MCRIB IS BACK—struck him as mysterious and threatening.

"You okay?" Carly asked.

The girl nodded and cuddled closer. The air in the Sears, Roebuck house—yes, he remembered now, that was something he would normally be intrigued by, a house built from a kit—felt tender and sad. My wife has died, he thought. He wondered whether Carly might say something. Wasn't now the time? *By the way, I'm*

sorry. I'm so sorry, what happened to you. He had that thought sometimes these days. It wasn't grief, which he could be subsumed in at any moment, which like water bent all straight lines and spun whatever navigational tools he owned into nonsense—but a rational, detached thought: wasn't that awful, what happened to me, one, two, three months ago? That was a terrible thing for a person to go through.

Carly said, "Tae kwon do. Call if you need me."

An empty package of something called Teddy Lasker. A half-filled soda bottle. Q-tips strewn on the bathroom floor. Mrs. Butterworth's, sticky, ruined, a crime victim. Cigarette butts in one window well. Three condom wrappers behind the platform bed. Rubber bands in every drawer and braceleting every doorknob—why were old rubber bands so upsetting? The walls upstairs bristled with pushpins and the ghosts of pushpins and the square-shouldered shadows of missing posters. Someone had emptied several boxes of mothballs into the bedclothes that were stacked in the closets, and had thrown dirty bedclothes on top, and the idea of sorting through clean and dirty made him want to weep. The bathmat looked made of various flavors of old chewing gum. Grubby pencils lolled on desktops and in coffee mugs and snuggled along the baseboards. The dining room tablecloth had been painted with scrambled egg and then scorched. The walls upstairs were bare and filthy, the walls downstairs covered in old art. The bookshelves were full. On the edges in front of the books were coffee rings and—there was no other word for it—detritus: part of a broken key ring, more pencils, half-packs of cards. He had relatives like this. When he was a kid he loved their houses because of how nothing ever changed, how it could be 1974 outside and 1936 inside, and then he got a little older and realized that it was the same Vicks VapoRub on the bedside table, noticed how once a greeting card was stuck on a dresser mirror it would never be moved, understood that the jars of pennies did not represent possibility, as he'd imagined, but only jars and only pennies.

The landlords had filled the house with all their worst belongings and said, *This will be fine for other people.* A huge snarled antique rocker sat under an Indian print; the TV cart was fake wood and slightly broken. The art on the walls—posters, silk-screened can-

vases—had been faded by the sun, but that possibly was an improvement.

The kitchen was objectively awful. Old bottles of oil with the merest skim at the bottom crowded the counters. Half-filled boxes of a particularly cheap brand of biscuit mix had been sealed shut with packing tape. The space beneath the sink was filled, back to front, with mostly empty plastic jugs for cleaning fluids. After he opened the kitchen garbage can and a cloud of flies flew out, he called Carly from his newly purchased cell phone. Her voice was cracked with disappointment.

"Well, I can come back and pick up the garbage—"

"The house," said Stony, "is dirty. It's dirty. You need to get cleaners."

"I don't think Mom will go for that. She paid someone to clean in May—"

Pamela would have said, *Walk out.* Sue for the rent and the deposit. That is, he guessed she would. Then he was furious that he was conjuring up her voice to address this issue.

"The point," he said, "is not that it was clean in May. It's not clean now. It's a dirty house, and we need to straighten this out."

"I have things I have to do," said Carly. "I'll come over later."

Then the movers arrived, two men who looked like middle-aged yoga instructors. The boss exuded a strange calm that seemed possibly like the veneer over great rage. He whistled at the state of the house, and Stony wanted to hug him.

"Don't lose your cool," said the mover. "Hire cleaners. Take it out of the rent."

They unloaded all of Stony's old things: boxes of books, boxes of dishes, all the things he needed for his new life as a bourgeois widower. He really lived here. He felt pinned down by the weight of his belongings and then decided it was not a terrible feeling. From the depths of his e-mail program he dug up an e-mail from Carly that cc'd Sally Lasker, to whom he'd written the rent check. If he sat on the radiator at the back of the room and leaned, he could catch just a scrap of a wireless connection, and so he sat, and leaned, and wrote what seemed to him a firm but sympathetic e-mail to Sally Lasker, detailing everything but her unfortunate taste in art.

Sally wrote back:

We cleaned the house in May, top to bottom. It took me a long time to dust the books, I did it myself. I cleaned the coffee rings off the bookcase. We laundered all the bedclothes. I'm sorry that the house is not what you expected. I'm sorry that the summer people have caused so much damage. That can't have been pleasant for you. But it seems that you are asking a great deal for a nine-month rental. We lived modestly all our lives, I'm afraid, and perhaps this is not what you pictured from Europe. I do feel as though we have bent over backward for you so far.

He went over this in a confused rage. What difference did it make that the house was clean in May? That there had been coffee rings before where coffee rings were now? He'd turned forty over the summer and it reminded him of turning eighteen. *I am not a child!* he wanted to yell. *I do not sleep on homemade furniture! I do not hide filthy walls with posters and Indian hangings!*

What did she mean, bent over backward?

He stalked into the sweet little Maine town and had two beers in a sports bar, then stalked back. All the while he wrote to Sally in his head, and told her he was glad she'd found summer renters who'd made up the rent and maybe she had not heard what exactly had delayed his arrival.

When he found the wireless again, there was a new e-mail:

Hire the cleaners. Take the total out of the rent. I am sorry, and I hope this is the end of the problems. If you want to store anything precious, put it in the studio, not the basement. The basement floods.

So he couldn't even send his righteous e-mail.

That night he boxed up Sally's kitchen and took it to the basement, pulled the art from the walls and put it in the dank studio. He couldn't decide on what was a more hostile act, packing the filthy bathmat or throwing it away. Packing it, he decided, and so he packed it. He tumbled the mothball-filled bedclothes into garbage bags. He moved out the platform bed and slept on the futon sofa and went the next day to the nearby mall to buy his very own bed. The following Monday the cleaners came, looking like a *Girls in Prison* movie (missing teeth, tattoos, denim shorts, cleavage), and declared without prodding that the house was disgusting, and he felt a small surge of actual happiness: yes, disgusting, it was, anyone could see it. He was amazed at how hard they worked. They cleaned out every cupboard. They hauled all those bottles to the curb. He tipped them extravagantly. One of the cleaners left her number on several pieces of paper around the house—PERSONAL HOUSECLEANING CALL JACKIE $75—and the owner of the cleaning service called the next day to say that she'd heard one of the girls was offering to clean privately, was that true, it wasn't allowed, and Stony accidentally said yes, and was heartbroken, that the perfect transaction of cleaning had been ruined. Then he called back and said he'd misunderstood, she hadn't. Everything had been perfect.

That night he wrote Sally an e-mail explaining where everything was: kitchen goods boxed in basement, linens and art in the studio.

He painted the upstairs walls and hung his own art. He boxed up some of the books. Slowly he moved half the furniture to the studio and replaced it with things bought at auction. The kindly archivist, his boss, came by the house.

"My God!" he said. "This place! You've made it look great. You know, I tried to get you out of the lease last May, but Sally wouldn't go for it. I tried to find you someplace nicer. But you've made it nice. Good for you."

At work he cataloged the underground collection, those beautiful daft objects of passion, pamphlets and buttons, broadsides. What would the founders of these publications make of him? What pleasure, to describe things that had been invented to defy description—but maybe he shouldn't have. The inventors never imagined these things lasting forever, filling phase boxes, the phase boxes filling shelves. He was a cartographer, mapping the unmappable, putting catalog numbers and provenance where once had been only waves and the profiles of sea serpents. Surely some people grieved for those sea serpents.

He didn't care. He kept at it, constructing his little monument to impermanence.

By March he was dating a sociology lecturer named Eileen, a no-nonsense young woman who made comforting, stodgy casseroles and gave him back rubs. He realized he would never know what his actual feelings for her were. She was not a girlfriend; she was a side effect of everything in the world that was Not Pamela. The house too. Every now and then he thought, out of the blue, But what did that woman mean, she bent over backward for me? And all day

long, like a telegraph, he received the following message: *My wife has died, my wife has died, my wife has died.* Quieter than it had been; he could work over it now. He could act as though he were not an insane person with one single thought.

In April he got a tattoo at a downtown parlor where the students got theirs, a piece of paper wafting as though windswept over his bicep with a single word in black script: *Ephemera.*

Then it was May. His lease was over. Time to move again.

Through some spiritual perversity, he'd become fond of the house: its Sears, Roebuck feng shui, its square squatness, the way it got light all day long. Sally sent him e-mails, dithering over move-out dates, and for a full week threatened to renew the lease for a year. Would he be interested? He consulted his heart and was astounded to discover that yes, he would. Finally she decided she would move back to the house on June first to get it ready to sell. Did he want to buy it? No, ma'am. Well then: May thirtieth.

He found an apartment with a bit of ocean view, a grown-up place with brand-new appliances and perfect arctic countertops that reminded him of no place: not the stone barn in Normandy, nor the beamed Roman apartment, nor the thatched cottage near Odense. As he packed up the house he was relieved to see its former grubbiness assert itself, like cleaning an oil painting to find a murkier, uglier oil painting underneath. He noticed the acoustic tiles on the upstairs ceilings and the blackness of the wooden floors. He took up the kilim he'd put down in the living room and replaced the old oriental; he packed his flat-screen TV, a splurge, into a box and found in the basement the old mammoth remoteless TV and the hobbled particleboard cart. He cleaned the house as he'd never cleaned before, because he was penitent and because he suspected Sally would use any opportunity to hold on to his security deposit; he washed walls and the insides of cupboards and baseboards and doorjambs. She had no idea how much work she had ahead of her, he thought. The old rocker was a pig to wrestle back into the house; he covered it with the Indian throw, so she would have someplace to sit, but he left the art off the walls, and he did not restock the kitchen, because that would have made more work for her.

And besides.

Besides, why should he?

Those boxes were time machines: if he even thought about them, all he could remember was the fury with which he packed them. These days he was pretending to be a nice, rational man.

He bought a bunch of daffodils and left them in a pickle jar in the middle of the dining room table with a note that reminded Sally of the location of her kitchenware and bed linen, and signed his name, and added his cell-phone number. Then he went away for the weekend, up the coast, so he could take a few days off from things, boxes, the fossil record of his life.

In the morning, the first cell-phone message was Sally, who wanted to know where her dishcloths were.

The second: bottom of the salad spinner.

The third: her birth certificate. She'd left it in the white desk that had been in the dining room and where was that?

The fourth: What on earth had happened to the spices? Had he put them in a separate box?

The reception in this part of the state was miserable. He clamped the phone over one ear and his hand over the other.

"Sally?" he said.

She said, "Who's this?"

"Stony Badower."

There was silence.

"Your tenant—"

"I know," she said, in a grande dame voice. Then she sighed.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"It's been more daunting moving back in than I'd thought," she said.

"But you're all right."

"I found the dishcloths," she said. "And the desk."

"And the birth certificate?" he asked.

"Yes." More silence.

"Why don't I come over this evening when I get back," he said, "and I can—"

"Yes," she said. "That would be nice."

He'd imagined a woman who looked spun on a potter's wheel, round and glazed and built for neither beauty nor utility. Unbreak-

able till dropped from a height. But the door was answered by a woman as tall as him, five feet ten, in her late sixties, more ironwork than pottery, with the dark hair and sharp nose of her granddaughter. She shook his hand. "Stony, hello." Over a flowered T-shirt she wore the sort of babyish bright blue overalls that Berlin workmen favored, that no American grown-up would submit to (or so he'd have thought). They showed off the alarmingly beautiful small of her back as she retreated to the kitchen. Already she'd dug out some of the old pottery and found a new tablecloth to cover the cigarette-burned oilcloth on the dining room table.

"What I don't understand . . . ," she said.

In each hand as she turned was a piece of a salad spinner: the lid with the cord that spun it like a gyroscope, the basket that turned. Her look described the anguish of the missing plastic bowl with the point at the bottom. His own salad spinner was waiting in a box in the new apartment. It worked by a crank.

"Who packed the kitchen?" she asked.

"I did," he said.

"What I don't understand," she said again, "was that these were in *separate* boxes. And the bottom? Gone."

"Oh," he said.

She gestured to the wooden shelf—Murphy Oil Soaped and bare—by the window. "What about the spices?"

"That's my fault," he said, though before he'd come over he'd Googled *how long keep spices* and was gratified by the answer. He could see them still, sticky, dusty, greenish brown grocery-store spice jars, the squat plastic kind with the red tops. He'd thrown them out with everything else that had been half used. "I got rid of them. They were dirty. Everything in the kitchen was."

She shook her head sadly. "I wiped them all down in May."

"Sally," he said. "Really, I promise, the kitchen was dirty. It was so, so filthy." Was it? He tried to remember, envisioned the garbage can of flies, took heart. "Everything. It's possible that I didn't take time to pick out exactly what was clean and what wasn't, but that was how bad things were."

She sighed. "It's just—I thought I was moving back home."

"Oh," he said. "So—when did you move out?"

"Four years ago. When I retired. Carly grew up here. She didn't tell you? I was always very happy in this house."

"No," he said. He'd thought they'd moved ten years ago. Twenty.

"Listen, I have some favors to ask you. If you could help me move some furniture back in."

"Of course," he said.

"There's an armchair in the studio I'd like upstairs. So I have something to sit on. I was looking for my bed, you know. That really shouldn't have been moved."

"I said, I think—"

"It's all right. Amos made it. He made a lot of the furniture here—the shelves, the desks. He was a potter."

"I'm so sorry," he said, because after Pamela died, he'd promised himself that if anyone told him the smallest, saddest story, he would answer, *I'm so sorry*. Meaning, *Yes, that happened*. You couldn't believe the people who believed that not mentioning sadness was a kind of magic that could stave off the very sadness you didn't mention—as though grief were the opposite of Rumpelstiltskin, and materialized only at the sound of its own name.

"That asshole," she said. "*Is a* potter, I should say." She looked around the kitchen. "It's just," she said, "the bareness. I wasn't expecting that."

She turned before his eyes from an iron widow into an abandoned wife.

"I figured you were selling the house," he said.

She scratched the back of her neck. "Yes. Come," she said in the voice of a preschool teacher. "Studio."

It was raining and so she put on a clear raincoat, another childish piece of clothing. She even belted it. They went out the back door that Stony had almost never used. In the rainy dusk, the transparent coat over the blue, she looked alternately like an art deco music box and a suburban sofa wrapped against spills.

The doorknob stuck. She pushed it with her hip. "Can you?" she asked, and he manhandled it open and flicked on the light.

Here it was again: the table covered with pots, Picasso dancing, though now Picasso was covered up to his waist in mold. The smell was terrible. He saw the art he'd brought out nine months before, which he'd stacked carefully but no doubt had been ruined by the damp anyhow. He felt the first flickers of guilt and tried to cover them with a few spadefuls of anger: if it hadn't happened to her things, it would have happened to his.

"Here everything is," she said. She pointed in the corner. "Oh, I love that table. It was my mother's."

"Well, you said not the basement."

"You were here for only nine months," she said. She touched the edge of the desk that the blue pots sat on, then turned and looked at him. "It's a lot to have done, for only nine months."

She was smiling then, beautifully. Raindrops ran down her plastic-covered bosom. She stroked them away and said, "When I walked in, it just felt as though the twenty-five years of our residency here had been erased."

Oh, lady, he wanted to say, you rented me a house, a house, not a museum devoted to you and to Laskeriana and the happiness and failure of your marriage. You charged me market rent, and I paid it so I could *live* somewhere. But he realized he'd gotten everything wrong. She had not left her worst things behind four years ago, but her best things, her beloved things. She'd left the art, hoping it would bring beauty into the lives of the students and summer renters and other wayward subletters, all those people unfortunate enough not to have made a home here yet. She loved the terra-cotta sun that he'd taken down from the kitchen the first day. She loved the bed made for her in the 1970s by that clever, wretched man her husband. She bought herself a cheap salad spinner so her tenants could use this one which worked so well. If Pamela had been with him that day nine months ago, she would have known. She would have seen the pieces of key chain and clucked over the dirty rug and told him the whole story. This was a house abandoned by sadness, not a war or epidemic but the end of a marriage, and kept in place to commemorate both the marriage and its ruin.

"It was such a strange feeling, to see everything gone," she said. "As though ransacked. You know?"

He'd never even called the French landlady to ask about Trudy the lusterware duck, and right now that seemed like the biggest lack in his life, worse than Pamela, whom he knew to be no longer on this earth. He should have carried the duck to America, though he'd scattered Pamela's ashes on the broads in Norfolk. He should have flown to Bremen, where she was from, to startle her mother and sisters, demanded to see her childhood bed, tracked it down if it was gone from whatever thrift store or relative it had been sent

to—Pamela was the one who taught him that a bed on display is never just furniture, it is a spirit portrait of everyone who has ever slept in it, been born in it, had sex in it, died in it. *Look,* she said. *You can see them if you look.* He had done everything wrong.

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry," he said, and then, "It was already broken."