Coping Stones

by Ann Beattie

Cahill—Dr. Cahill to those who knew him in his small town in Maine—had decided that his screened porch should be relocated. Wouldn't it be better to winterize the current porch, adding a door at the far end which would lead to a new, smaller porch, perpendicular to the original? That way, he could walk out of the kitchen in the winter with his cup of freshly brewed coffee and his vitamin drink (those mornings when he went to the trouble to make it) and enjoy the late-blooming flowers on an enclosed, heated porch. In the summer, he could set up a makeshift desk—probably just the card table—and not have to worry that rain would ruin his paperwork. There was so much paperwork! His wife, Barbara, used to manage most of it, but she'd been dead for more than eight years, and, except for what his accountant did and the occasional question he asked his tenant, Matt, he dealt with it all himself now, and not a bit of it had anything to do with medicine.

Matt lived in Cahill's renovated barn. Thirty-two years old, he had already suffered a divorce (at twenty-four) and the death of his second wife, who'd been knocked out of her kayak by a low-hanging branch and drowned, in Canada. Several times during the past year, Cahill had noticed Matt coming home with a woman, but he'd also noticed that the woman—or women—almost always left the same night. Once, he had been lured into playing a game of croquet with Matt and a woman named Leora, but usually he avoided contact when Matt had company; he felt that Matt became sour and withdrawn when women were around, as if he were still suffering through adolescence. But Matt—Matt was his preoccupation. Cahill had the sense to extend fewer dinner invitations to his tenant and friend than he wanted to, because the man needed his freedom. If Barbara were alive, and if Matt's wife had not died, Matt would no doubt have been living somewhere else, and Cahill would have had more interesting things to think about. It was just that his world had shrunk since he'd retired.

Right now, Cahill was talking to a man Matt had nicknamed You Know What I Mean, a tall, perpetually windblown-looking carpenter whom Cahill had recently advised to have what he felt sure was a skin cancer removed from the side of his nose. His real name was Roadie Petruski, and, as Roadie tried to smooth down his electrified hair, Cahill listened to his beliefs concerning pressure-treated wood: “You know yourself, Doc, these things leach into the environment. Before you know it, your lungs are Swiss cheese, you know what I mean? This genetically engineered corn, the Europeans don't want nothing to do with it. But us? We always got optimism. You probably read about rat kidneys shutting down when they was fed the stuff? I read it in one of those doctor's-office magazines—meaning no disrespect. My advice is always to seal up pressure-treated boards with the best sealant available, and even then you don't want to walk on it without shoes, you know what I mean?”

“Whatever you think best in terms of flooring, Roadie,” Cahill said.

“Not up to me! Always up to the customer!”

“Well, I certainly agree with what you've informed me of, so let us proceed as you suggest.”

“That's the thing, Doc. That's the direction you want to go.”

In the distance, a cardinal twittered on a tree branch. If Cahill had had his binoculars, he would have raised them—he loved cardinals—but they were on the back porch. The same back porch that was going to be transformed into a heated room off the kitchen. Matt must be at home, Cahill thought: he could faintly hear Mick Jagger singing. The bird, too, must have heard the music, because it swooped away, dipping down for just a second to check out the goings on on the porch.

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A man he and Matt had dubbed You Got No Choice had visited a few days earlier. He'd come from town hall to inform Cahill that a wall on his property was in need of maintenance, and that, as the owner of the property on which the wall stood, surrounding a four-headstone cemetery dating back to the eighteen-hundreds, Cahill

was responsible for repairs; he had no choice. There had been a lot of freezing during the winter, the man explained, and spring had been unusually wet. Such things accelerated deterioration. Cahill was told that he must keep “vegetation” six feet from the wall in all directions (he had no choice) and that no mortar could be used in rebuilding it. “I took a look just now, Doc, and from what I can tell it's pretty much just a matter of replacing some of them coping stones along the top,” the man said, moving one hand up and down to indicate peaks and gulleys. “And—just to remind you—it's all gotta be done by hand.” He handed Cahill a Post-it note with “URGNT fx g-yard wall 7/16” written on it in pencil, and then nodded while backing away, as though he were taking leave of the Queen of England. If Cahill hadn't known better, he would have thought he was being made fun of. The man climbed into his truck and drove away, music blaring. Tchaikovsky's notes bit the air like muriatic acid.

Following the encounter, Cahill proceeded directly to Matt's, where he knocked and entered to find him starting a new painting of a fruit bowl. Matt's still-lifes were distinguished by the unconventional objects he included—plastic rhinos, a single beaded earring, a Princess Di figurine lying on its side. Cahill was gratified not to see a beer bottle on Matt's table. The daytime drinking was new, and not a good sign. The painting class—of course it was harmless, and no doubt interesting, but did he imagine that solitary painting was a way of rejoining the world? In his opinion, Matt had got entirely too large a payment from his wife's life-insurance company. Cahill had a millionaire living in his barn and functioning variously as his repairman, class clown, snow-removal guy, and sometime chauffeur. But he liked Matt, relied on him. The cliché would probably be that Matt was the son he never had, but then his daughter, Joyce, was enough like a son: in spite of his dire warnings, for years she'd taken steroids and lifted weights. The year her mother died, she had come East and chopped down the dead trees on his property and sawed and stacked them for firewood. She had size-11 feet encased in men's work boots, and a tattoo on her arm of

the nation's flag, below which lurked a spiny lizard with a tongue unfurled to capture an insect. It seemed likely that Matt had a nickname for Joyce, too, but he'd had the good manners to keep quiet about it.

Cahill examined Matt's odd painting and pronounced it “coming along.” He grumbled briefly about the visit from You Got No Choice, which provoked—as Cahill knew it would—negative generalizations about the self-righteousness of New Englanders.

On his way back to the house, Cahill went to inspect the graveyard. He had not noticed that the wall there was in need of repair, nor had he thought that anyone would tell him that fixing it was his responsibility. In the plot lay two children, one aged three, the other eleven months, the cuts in their stones mostly filled with moss. Their mother had died at twenty-three, the father at seventy-one—a good age to have attained. No headstone indicated another marriage. Pink and white phlox grew nearby, and sometimes—rarely, but sometimes—Cahill would cut a few stalks and put them in one of his late wife's crystal vases to commemorate her domesticity.

That afternoon, Napoleon, the neighbor's basset hound, paid a visit and was rewarded—though Cahill knew it was wrong—with one saltine. Cahill flipped through a copy of *Science News* and, finally, an hour or so later, walked the basset hound to the road, picking him up for the dangerous crossing, then down four houses, where he saw that Breezy's car was gone and the back gate unlatched. He led the dog into the back yard and firmly shut the gate.

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A week or so after You Got No Choice stopped by, a letter arrived from Code Enforcement informing “Property Owner Cahill” that he was in violation of an assemblage of hyphenated numbers. He was so angry that he could hardly focus on what it said. You Got No Choice had told him that he had thirty days in which to make repairs. Nevertheless, after he made a cup of tea and stopped fuming, he put on his work clothes and stalked into the yard. He took his tool kit with him, though he didn't know why; it seemed the sort of job best done with one's hands. He saw that his tool kit

contained work gloves, so he put them on and set about replacing the rocks that had fallen. Some were missing, but where had they gone? Matt must have moved them to mow and stacked them somewhere. But he'd already interrupted Matt once that morning, so he decided to find the few rocks he needed elsewhere. He took off the gloves and dropped them back in the tool kit. As he did, a wasp came out of nowhere, like a stealth bomber, and stung him. He yanked his hand sideways in pain, wincing and squeezing his wrist. In the house, he made a paste of baking soda and water in a teacup and smeared it on, then swallowed an antihistamine, just in case.

When the Benadryl kicked in, he went upstairs to lie down, and he was surprised when he woke up hours later. He went into the bathroom and undressed, turned on the shower, and stepped in, grasping the shower bar. What would his wife have said of this latest mishap? That he had somehow invited the wasp? Barbara had had many good qualities, but charity toward him when he was hurt was not among them. He thought that perhaps it had frightened her, to know that he was human. She had said many times, only half-jokingly, that she'd married a man she thought could take good care of her.

He dried off with his favorite towel, threw it over the shower door, and went downstairs, where he made another cup of tea. His wrist was tender but no longer painful. Napoleon was standing silently at the porch door. The dog was going to be killed crossing Route 91. Didn't Breezy care? He opened the door, and the basset hound bounded in, something clamped in his teeth. It was a dead chipmunk. Napoleon dropped it, with its bitten bloody neck, at Cahill's feet and looked up expectantly.

“Maybe the doctor could work it in around five o'clock,” Cahill said, staring down at the creature. “But the doctor is a very busy man, you know.”

The dog knew none of these words. Cahill relented. “Good boy,” he said to the dog, who wagged his tail furiously and nosed the chipmunk, then looked up for further approval. This would have set his wife screaming. Cahill patted the dog's head, keeping it from the

dead thing, then picked the chipmunk up by its tail and dropped it in the trash. This meant that he would have to take the trash out immediately, but no matter. He washed his hands. All those years of careful washing, using the brush, scrubbing under nonexistent fingernails—oh, his precious hands. Now a minuscule rim of fingernail protruded on a few of his fingers, and this brought him a certain sense of pride. He'd never tell anyone anything so ridiculous, but there it was: he liked having fingernails. “We are two very impressive gentlemen, aren't we?” he said to the dog. The interrogative always made the dog's tail wag frantically. “But maybe it's time to be getting home—what do you say?” He looked at the list of phone numbers taped to his refrigerator, then welled up with sudden anger: he'd call Breezy, and she could walk over and get her dog this time. Enough of the escort service. He dialled her number. Above the phone was hung a copy of an etching he had always loved, and had kept above his desk in the private part of his office: “Abraham's Sacrifice,” by Michelangelo, the angel's hands so exquisitely, so lightly placed. “Breezy?” he said, when he heard her voice. “I've got Napoleon over here and I think it's time for him to come home, if you'd be so kind.”

“I am so sorry. Did he run away again?” Breezy asked. “Ever since I started taking classes up in Orono, there's no keeping him in the yard. But the other thing is, he just loves you. It's hard to keep him behind the fence.”

“I noticed that. He's going to be hit by a car, Breezy, and you're never going to forgive yourself. You've got to do something about that gate latch.”

He looked at the dog, sniffing the trash can. It was too tall for him to get his snout in.

“Absolutely,” she said. “I'm going to speak to Ed at the hardware store about how to fix the latch. Tomorrow.”

“They're open till nine tonight,” he said.

“Morty, you do not hint subtly!” she exclaimed. “I'm overwhelmed tonight, if you must know, with Father having misplaced his glasses

and his teeth, and he's got a terrible cold, so he's in a foul mood. The practical nurse didn't show up today, either."

"A lot of part-timers in that profession," he said. "Doesn't make for reliability."

"Well, Morty, that may be true, but what alternative do I have? If dear Barbara were still alive, I could at least get a hug."

Breezy had been his wife's best friend. She had received endless sympathy from Barbara—especially concerning her father's move into her house. Breezy was one of the reasons that Barbara had wanted to spend what turned out to be the last winter of her life in Maine.

After they hung up, Breezy did not appear for so long that he suspected she might not be coming at all. The dog lay curled next to him in the living room, as Cahill read a book called "How Buildings Learn," his feet stretched out on the footstool. Finally, she arrived.

"Morty, I hope I didn't cause you pain by mentioning Barbara," she blurted, instead of saying hello. The dog rose and shook himself, ambling toward her. She bent and stroked his side. "You ran away again," she said. "Did Napoleon run away again?"

"Exile to Elba next time," Cahill said.

"I've been to the hardware store. Ed was off tonight, but I left a note saying I came in and that it was an emergency. We are going to solve this problem, aren't we?" she said in baby talk to the dog. Then she turned to Cahill. "Morty, I feel sometimes that when I say something you aren't . . . I don't know . . . that you don't approve of what I'm saying. I don't want a gold star for going to the hardware store, but I did go there as you suggested."

"I'm afraid the dog is going to be hit by a car, Breezy," he said, with the firm sympathy of a doctor giving a bad diagnosis. He heard his voice pitched a bit too low, and softened. "Just a long day," he said, standing. Breezy—she'd got her nickname because she loved to talk—was clearly hoping to be asked to stay for a cup of tea. But it had been a bad day—the officious letter, the wasp—and he realized that he'd had nothing to eat since breakfast. He patted Breezy's shoulder as if she were a patient he was steering gently out the

door. At the front stoop, she turned to face him and said, “I know you miss her very much, Morty. I do, too, every day of my life,” and then she was gone, down the steps, curving with the path into the night, Napoleon—so named because the dog did not like to chew on bones, though he liked to tear the bones apart (the sole original thing he'd ever known Breezy's father to come up with)—trotting along on his leash without a backward glance.

Cahill went into the kitchen and took a potpie from the freezer, placed it on a cookie sheet, and set the oven for four-fifty. Though the oven had not reached the correct temperature, he put his dinner in anyway. Then came another knock at the front door: most certainly Breezy, back for some reason.

Cahill went to the door and opened it. A young woman was standing there.

“Dr. Cahill?” she said. “Excuse me for knocking so late. I'm Audrey Comstock. I live in Portsmouth.”

“Yes?” he said.

“May I come in? I'm a friend of Matt's.”

“Enter,” he said, gesturing toward the living room. She walked in and looked around. She did not sit, nor did he motion toward a chair. Patients were that way: some would remain standing forever if you did not formally offer them a seat. “What can I do for you?” he said.

“Get him to marry me,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“He doesn't think he can leave here. You,” she amended. “Leave you.”

“I know nothing about this,” he said.

“We've been seeing each other for more than a year. We met at a painting group in Portsmouth. At Christmas, he all but proposed.”

“Oh?” he said. At Christmas, Matt had prepared a goose and cooked parsnips from the root cellar. They had eaten the meal with some Stonewall Kitchen condiment—a sort of jelly with garlic. Was he to believe that all that time Matt had been in love but had never mentioned the person's name? Of course, anything was possible. A patient having a physical would say that nothing was bothering him,

and only when he'd taken off his shirt would Cahill see that he was broken out in shingles, or had cut himself badly and wasn't properly healing.

“I'm not sure why you're here,” he said. She was an unpleasant-looking woman—in her early twenties, he thought. Her beak of a nose, crammed too tightly between her small eyes, made it difficult to look at her with a neutral expression.

She said, “I wanted to tell you that you wouldn't be losing a son; you'd be gaining a daughter.”

“My child is grown and gone,” he said. “I am looking for neither.”

She looked at him blankly for a moment. “He doesn't feel like he can leave,” she said again.

“I assure you he can,” Cahill said.

“We have our art work in common,” she said, as if he'd asked for further explanation.

He looked at her.

“Matt and me,” she said finally.

“This matter is entirely between you and Matt,” he said. “You don't have to persuade me of anything.”

“He respects you. You're like a father figure to him. It's just that he doesn't think he can leave you.”

“You've said that many times,” Cahill said. “I've explained that he can leave.”

“He loves me,” she said. “He said he'd take care of me.”

“Well,” he said, “perhaps you can work things out. When people are meant to be together, such things have been known to happen.”

“You're trying to get rid of me,” she said in a trembling voice. “You don't think I'm good enough.”

“Please do me the favor of not attempting to read my mind,” he said. “I was about to eat a late dinner when you knocked, and now it's time to do that, if you'll excuse me.”

She stamped her foot. The woman was ridiculous; he would have to get a peephole and not let such people in.

“Can I see?” she said plaintively.

Cahill stared at her. “See what?” he said.

“Just once, can I find out if somebody's trying to get rid of me or if you're really eating dinner?”

He almost expressed his surprise, but checked his reaction. He levelled his eyes on her, wondering whether she wasn't shamed by her own childishness. Of course, such people rarely were. “By all means,” he said. “The kitchen door is right there.”

Surely she would not really go in, but no—of course she would. Like an obese patient advised to diet who would proceed immediately to the nearest vending machine for a candy bar. There she went, to view his potpie. She would be seeing that, and the landslide of mostly unread newspapers that needed to be thrown out, a few days' worth of dirty dishes in the sink. He had not yet carried out the trash, so perhaps even the dead chipmunk had begun to smell.

“That's all you're eating?” she said, returning to the room. In a gentler tone of voice, she said, “I could cook for you. Make extra when I cook for Matt and me.”

“I assume Matt doesn't know you're here?” he said.

She shrugged. “I can't find him,” she said. “I thought maybe he was here.”

He gestured toward the front door. “When you find him, you can discuss with him these generous impulses,” he said. “I wish you good night.”

She started to say something. He could almost sense the second when she decided against it and turned to leave. He followed her out the door and stood on the stoop. No lights were on in the barn. The stars shone brightly, and there was a faint, wind-chime-tinged breeze. Breezy's house was the only one he could see that was lit. Matt's car was not in the driveway. Audrey waved sadly, overacting, the poor child cast out into the night. He did not return the wave.

Damn the woman! There was nothing he liked less than getting caught up in other people's soap operas. He wrote a quick note on the pad by the phone and walked over to stick it to Matt's front door. “Met your friend Audrey,” the note said. “Stop by when you get back.”

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The next morning, when he answered his front door he saw not Matt but Deirdre Rambell, who worked as a secretary at town hall and had heard about what she called, with hushed sincerity, the situation. “Deirdre, it's a few rocks that I've already put back,” he said. “The town is making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“Oh, it's the Historical Society, you know. The volunteers go around checking, and they really care. For my own part, I've always felt the dead have souls that cannot be at peace when they sense any lack of respect.”

“Souls sense respect?” he said. He realized with slight embarrassment that although he was wearing chinos, he still had on his pajama top.

“Indeed they do,” she said.

“Then let me inform you, Deirdre, that at this point I have replaced all but a couple of the six or seven stones necessary to give the souls their deserved respect. Let me also ask you this: Do you happen to really know or care anything about the people buried on this property? About their lives, I mean—as people, rather than as souls?”

Nothing in his tone registered with her. “Aren't they Moultons?” she said. “Fine people, among the first settlers.”

“Onward!” she exclaimed when she finally drove away.

Yes, he thought, that sort of woman always feels that she's making progress.

You Got No Choice appeared next, apologizing for what he called the “slipup” at town hall. “That lamebrained letter was embarrassing,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I just found out, Doc, and came right over to apologize.”

“You, and the rest of the town, will be relieved to know that, as infirm as I am, the wall has been repaired, and now all is well with the world.”

“Excellent, Doc!” He tugged the brim of his cap.

“You wouldn't have seen Matt's van anywhere around town, would you?” Cahill said. “I haven't seen him in a while.”

“Are you kidding?” You Got No Choice said.

“Kidding?”

“You don't know?”

“Know what?” Cahill said.

“Up in Warren,” he said warily, as if Cahill might be having him on. “It's been all over the papers.”

You Got No Choice saw the answer in Cahill's expression. “Doc—they got him on some molesting-a-minor thing, or something. I didn't want to bring up a sore subject. I know he was like a son to you. You get rounded up by the cops, you got no choice—you go where the Man says you go, right? Don't mean you're guilty.”

Cahill put his hand out to brace himself on the doorframe. His mind was racing, but it moved neither backward nor forward. It raced like a car on a lift, with someone inside gunning the engine.

“Sorry to drop a bomb on you. Articles have been in the paper every day, as far's I know.”

“It's impossible,” Cahill said, having recovered enough to speak, though he could hardly hear his own voice.

“Say what?”

“Why wouldn't he have called me? Why wouldn't police have come to the barn, why—”

“There you go,” You Got No Choice said. “Fishy, huh? You got a point; it's odd if they haven't made no search.”

Cahill almost tripped on the rug in the entryway on his way back into the house. He walked toward the kitchen and the pile of papers, which he wanted to look through immediately, and not at all. “Real life,” as his wife would have said. He sank into a kitchen chair and brushed the newspapers onto the floor, putting his head in his hands. The phone rang, and he got up and walked numbly toward it. Matt? Calling to say what? “This is Joyce,” his daughter said.

“Joyce, my dear, this is not a time I can talk,” he said, but another voice intruded. “And this is Tara,” a younger, more high-pitched voice sing-alonged, and he realized he'd been talking to a recording. He heard chimes, and the first unmistakable notes of the wedding march. His daughter's voice said, “We're sending this recording on

the happiest day of our lives to announce that at one o' clock July 20, 2005, we were joined together in a commitment ceremony, blessed by Mother Goddess Devi, and we are now officially Joyce”—the squeaky voice broke in—“and Tara.” “Forever!” the voices shouted in unison. Next, he recognized the familiar strident voice of his daughter: “Don't be put out that you weren't invited,” she said. “Our ceremony consisted of only Mother Devi, Tara's brother who lives next door—who did a bee-yoo-tee-ful Sufi dance—and our little girl Fluffy Sunshine, with a collar of bells and white pansies.” Tara broke in: “When you get this message, we'll be in the air to Hawaii.” “Peace and love to you, and may you recognize the happiness we have experienced today,” his daughter said. Bells clanged merrily; over their ringing, he heard them giggling, voices overlapping: “*Inshallah*. G-g-g-goodbye, folks!”

He put his head in his hands again, pushing his fingertips against his eyelids until he felt pain.

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He went to the barn in the dark, shining the flashlight in front of him. It had rained, and tiny frogs leaped across the dirt road like tiddlywinks. In front of him grew the rhododendrons that Matt had been so delighted to have found in some nursery's compost heap: two of them, with electric-lavender flowers, grown large beside the door. The ink on Cahill's Post-it note had run into one black smear. He knocked, though it was obvious that the place was deserted. He had read enough in the paper to make him sick.

An oversized T-shirt was draped over an oak ladder-back chair. Matt had glued the chair's leg for him some months back, and somehow it had remained in the barn. On the kitchen table were a few shiny copper pennies, and a “Little Mermaid” key ring. Cahill felt revulsion. He was also afraid that the police might zoom in on the barn and find him there, snooping. He understood sadly and too late about the toys that Matt had taken pride in rescuing from the dump. They were to lure children, of course. The tag-sale Barbies on the bathroom shelf, stripped of clothes and bracketing the can of shaving cream, the bathroom glass, and the electric razor that Cahill

had given Matt for his birthday—he saw the dolls as the bait they were. How could he have been so obtuse?

He sat in his old chair and surveyed the room. It resonated with silence. This had once been his wife's dance studio, the place where she practiced—only for the love of it; she'd been too old to seriously dance ballet. This had been her private place, where she watched tapes of Nureyev dancing and no doubt imagined herself being lifted high by his strong hands; where she wore tights and one of Cahill's old white shirts long beyond the time when she would have appeared coquettish in such attire. But now he had to accept the fact that the barn had been desecrated, inhabited for years by a person he'd misjudged, toward whom his wife would have felt the greatest contempt. A slight smell of sweat hung in the air—at least, the kitchen had that odor. He got up and opened the refrigerator—not expecting a Jeffrey Dahmer banquet but checking nonetheless. A bottle of cheap champagne lay on its side, and a couple of packs of moldy cheese, unsealed. Yellow celery lay in a brownish puddle in the drawer. The opened cans he didn't peer into. He took out the one can of Coke, pulled back the top, and drank it, hoping it would settle his stomach. It was not exactly reassuring that the police hadn't come. Hadn't they made Matt tell them where he lived? He saw an old calendar held with a magnet to the side of the refrigerator: Shirley Temple as a child, sniffing a yellow daisy. Oh, the banality of it. The sad predictability of people's intense yet ultimately unoriginal desires. “You're so superior?” his wife used to chide. Well, yes, he was. At least to some. He took another sip and put the can aside. Well: there were no lollipops. No pictures of little girls naked on the computer, because Matt did not own a computer. A back-to-basics child molester.

It might be, Cahill thought, that the space itself was cursed. There was the time, during its reconstruction, when the carpenter—a strong-bodied, red-haired woman named Elsie—had flirted with him, the strap of her sweaty tank top fallen from one shoulder, and he had questioned her with his eyes, and she had answered in the affirmative. He had moved toward her and gently slipped down the

other strap, intending only a kiss to such peach-perfect breasts, when, with the timing of a bad movie, Deirdre Rambell had walked into the barn, carrying the sandwiches and drinks his wife had sent out on a tray. It was funny now—or, if not funny, he still took pleasure in having shocked Deirdre, that holier-than-thou woman. There had been no chance in the world that she would ever report what she'd seen to Barbara. He could still hear the glasses rattling on the tray.

He called the police from Matt's phone—a rotary dial, another of Matt's Salvation Army finds. That was what Cahill thought Matt had been doing: going here and there, collecting trivia as a way of getting over his wife's death. The policeman who answered on the eighth ring—eighth!—seemed none too interested in what he was saying until he raised his voice. “That child molester you've got up there in Warren,” he said. “You might want to come over to his house and check through it. This is his landlord calling.” Already, he had retreated from the notion of friendship. “I can't understand why you haven't been here before now,” he added. The Coke rose up his throat, the acid rush subsiding sickly. He looked at a pencil sketch of trees in an open sketchbook on the counter. A rather lovely little depiction. Well, he thought, nobody does what they do all the time. Another person came on the phone and took down his name and address. When the police appeared, about fifteen minutes later—local police first—he found out three things: that Matt had given an address in Syracuse, though he claimed he'd been living out of his van; and that there *was* an address in Syracuse—the address of his second wife, who was not dead at all. The third thing he found out, but not until they were leaving, was that Matt had got into an altercation with a man in the holding cell and had been stabbed with a homemade shiv.

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A few weeks later, Cahill received a note from You Got No Choice, whom he now resolved to think of, more charitably, as Bill: “My boss is breathing down my neck and even though these are rough times and you have my heartfelt condolences, Doc, the wall around the

grave still hasn't been fixed to come up to code. I'd be glad to drop by this weekend and have at it with some stone." It was nice of Bill to offer to pitch in, but the letter only strengthened Cahill's resolve to fix the wall himself.

Which he set out to do, after eating a grilled-cheese sandwich for lunch. Protein and carbohydrates were good together, midday. Bad eating had contributed to his wife's untimely death; she'd been diabetic and sometimes wouldn't eat anything for an entire day, calling him a nag. She "felt sick," yes, but it was a vicious circle: feel sick, don't eat; don't eat, feel sick.

He walked to the side of the house where the soil was mixed with chips of old brick and rocks. Nothing much would grow in the shady area, but it was a good place to harvest rocks. He piled them into a discarded one-gallon plastic flowerpot. After some digging, he had what he hoped was enough, and set off with the pot pressed to his ribs, his other hand grasping the handle of his toolbox. Hi ho, hi ho. He wondered if Matt would expect him to get in touch. Hear his side of things. Offer help—if not as a doctor, then as a friend? Whatever Matt expected, Cahill could not bring himself to make an attempt to contact him—at least, not at this point in time.

The barn wasn't roped off, though he supposed it wasn't really a crime scene. So many men had come in unmarked cars lately: anybody could have been rummaging around inside, after a while. What was he supposed to do, run out every time he saw another car and ask to see identification?

Cahill turned to see Napoleon bounding across the lawn, foolish ears flapping like luffing sails. The dog tipped sideways as he came close, rudderless with friendliness. "Come to see the old man?" he said. In answer, Napoleon snapped at a bug. "Cross the busy road for the billionth time, tempting fate?" He rubbed the dog beneath his ears. "Let's let her come after you if and when she gets lonely, yeah," Cahill said, continuing to scratch. While he stacked rocks, he kept an eye on the dog, who was nosing at the edge of the woods.

The wall repair took longer than he'd anticipated, and he had to get the shovel and dig up one quite large stone from beside the

porch, but finally he stood back and admired his handiwork. “There you go, Bill, my friend,” he said aloud, saluting the air. “Your job done, my job done.” He cleaned some fallen leaves and bits of stick out of the area, stepping carefully around the wall. What had they died of, these four? In those days, people could die from an infected tooth. Dying young was to be expected: young, then, had another meaning.

By the time his daughter had graduated from high school, he hadn't loved her or his wife for some time. His fingertips scratching beneath Napoleon's ears now communicated more sincerity than all the kisses he'd planted formally on the cheeks of his wife and daughter. His wife knew that he'd done things automatically, without feeling. “Reading your rhymes like they make order of things,” she'd sneered, as, in her last days, he sat beside her bed reading poems by Yeats, or D. H. Lawrence, poems that rarely rhymed. It was clear where his daughter got her mocking ability. She'd pattern-stepped into bitterness, too. She'd complained about being named for a man (James Joyce), especially for a man whose own daughter had ended up a madwoman. But what ultra-feminine name had she wished they'd given her, what other rose would have gone better with her scuffed work boots and her black-framed glasses? He had no wand of malice; age alone had turned his wife into a failed ballerina, while genetic signals had resulted in her diabetes. He had determined nothing about his daughter's future by naming her Joyce; it was her own doing that made her what she was. He'd provided well for them, even after he'd stopped loving them. You could will yourself to stop (as he'd done upon hearing the revelations about Matt), or you could stop slowly, point the blades of your skates inward, so to speak, so that coming to a halt was done gracefully, sometimes unnoticed by you or by others. He thought of some lines from Byron:

. . . I seek no sympathies, nor need;
The thorns which I have reap'd are of the tree
I planted: they have torn me, and I bleed:
I should have known what fruit would spring from such a seed.

There it was! The thorns and bloodshed were a bit of a cliché, but look at the poet's real passion. To know something about oneself—that was what caused that pleasurable ache which put one in another state entirely. Too much time was lost trying to figure out other people.

There had been nights in recent years when he had sat awake, a tumbler in his hand filled with chilly Perrier (as a young man, he would have had a glass of brandy), reading to Matt. What did it mean that someone who appreciated poetry also appreciated, sexually, children? Oh, he supposed he knew that humans were "complicated," that they clung to exteriors, that they instinctively turned away from the illustrations in "Gray's Anatomy," which offered factual information about their inner selves; why did people have no interest in the real coherence of their inner workings, the rhythms of the muscles, the—all right—poetry of the vascular system? He knew that these were the thoughts of a peculiar old man, marginalized and dismissed for years, acerbically pronounced upon by his daughter. Guileless children told the truth? They did, but not so well as poets.

On his way back to the house, he picked up the day's mail. He found in the pile a newsletter from the A.A.R.P., a packet of coupons, a letter from a local charity, and—he almost dropped the flyer—a grainy photocopied picture: "MISSING PERSON," it read, and gave her age as sixteen. Last seen in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He remembered Audrey standing at his door. But could this be the same girl, if she was only sixteen? He held the page farther away, squinting. Audrey's eyes followed him as if he held a hologram. He wandered into the living room, debating whether to call the police yet again. Audrey's having been a friend of Matt's, her visit . . . all of it would be of interest to them. It was his obligation to call—he really should—but for the moment he thought that, actually, no one had done much for him lately, except to hassle him about rebuilding a pointless wall around a graveyard. It also occurred to him that he

did not want to be the one to put another nail in Matt's coffin, so to speak: Matt's friendship with the disturbed teen-age girl could not possibly help his cause, whatever had or had not gone on between the two of them. Cahill decided that he could use a shower and a nap.

This many years after her death, he was still using his wife's Dove soap. Yellowed packages of it were stacked here and there, even in cannisters in the pantry. You discovered people's secret stashes when they died. The little, unknown things filled them in, as if they hadn't had quite enough dimension in life. Or perhaps those discoveries took them farther away, dried-out cigarettes and hidden half-pints reminding you that everyone was little known.

He turned on the fan and curled onto the bed, and when he awoke it was evening, and he was in a cold sweat. Sounds he'd been making had awoken him, and he struggled up so suddenly from a dream that he knocked his arm against the light. It was a dream, it had been a dream, but it had been so shockingly real. He went into the bathroom and splashed water on his face, but the water only intensified his already palpable dread. He all but ran down the stairs and across the lawn to the graveyard. He had dreamed that Audrey was buried there. Just hours earlier he'd seen that the ground was undisturbed, yet he had gone to sleep and smelled the newly dug soil, felt its graininess beneath his fingernails, stared wide-eyed at the fallen gravestones.

His horrific vision—the only one he'd ever had—turned out to have some validity, though it was wrong in the specifics. There was no sign of digging, but there were scratch marks in the soil, and the smallest of the gravestones was leaning toward the ground. But no: the ground had not been dug in. In the center of the plot—he could not stop a wry smile: dead center—was a pile of dog shit, immense in size. A mound of it. Napoleon! Some of Cahill's earlier handiwork had been toppled yet again, and he realized with embarrassment that his efforts had been slapdash.

He went back to the house and found Roadie standing in the hallway inside the screen door, holding his cap in one hand and a clipboard in the other. “Roadie,” Cahill said.

“Yes, sir,” Roadie said, replacing his cap on his head. It said “SHERYL CROW.”

Cahill blurted, “Neighbor's dog just took a huge crap in my back yard. Really annoying.”

“Dog's gotta do what a dog's gotta do,” Roadie said.

“Right,” he said.

Roadie cleared his voice. “Doc, I've talked to two people I respect, who've advised two different approaches to your porch situation. One thinks sliding thermal doors, and, for my personal opinion, it's more money but that's what I'd be inclined to go with.”

“Then that sounds fine with me, Roadie,” Cahill said.

“Approach No. 2, Doc, for full disclosure, this comes from Hank, down at Elbriddle's. He thinks . . .”

He let Roadie drone on. As a younger man, he might have studied the figures longer, asked more questions, but if it was Roadie's opinion that the first option was the best, he was inclined to go along.

“Awful about your friend,” Roadie said suddenly, with no segue. “My wife said, ‘Don't you be bringing that up, it's none of your business, and how do you think the doctor feels? Don't tell me that no-good didn't hoodwink him, because the doctor wouldn't have a tenant but what he thought he was an honorable man—' ”

Roadie stopped, seeing that Cahill was numbed by this sudden outpouring. Roadie cleared his throat again—a nervous habit. He said, “Men like that ain't much liked by other men. Way I've always heard it, you'd get more sympathy from the jailbirds if you killed your mother than if you've fooled with a child. I've got Hannahlee and Junior, as you know. Any pervert touched a hair on their head, I'd be on 'em in one second flat. How do you suppose a guy like that seemed so regular?”

Silence. Finally, Cahill spoke. “Roadie,” he said, “do you think I should undertake such a project at all, given my age? Do you think I'll last the winter to enjoy it?”

Roadie's tongue darted over his lips. “Well, Doc, you'd know the answer better than me. You in bad health?”

“No,” Cahill said.

“Well, I ain't here to build if you think your money should best be used elsewhere, but a closed-in porch with a real one down at the end? That's something I'd spring for if I had the money.”

For Roadie, this was tactful—turning the subject from death to money. Roadie made a fist and pounded a black ant racing across the table. “Something my wife said, she said, ‘Roadie, you go over there and express some human kindness to the doctor. That's a man's done a lot for a lot of people, and, if he had a moment of misjudgment, you tell me who hasn't.' She says, ‘Come to think of it, I guess time's proven me a fool for marrying somebody like you, needs this much instruction before he goes to see somebody who lost his wife and his friend!' ”

“She thinks herself a fool for marrying you?” Cahill said.

“You met Gloria Sue. Turns out she married me thinking I was going to build the Taj Mahal, or something. Where'd she get that? Nothing I ever told her.”

“Do you love her?” Cahill said.

Roadie looked up, surprised. “Well, I don't know,” he said slowly.

“I stopped loving my wife,” Cahill said. “First, I thought I was just overloaded with all her minor annoyances—snoring, refusing to take her diabetes medicine, the way she ignored the phone every time it rang. Half the time it turned out to be her sister.”

Roadie looked sideways, kicking some grass off his boot. “That right?” he said. He took a deep breath. “Well, these plans here, Doc—you want to give me a deposit, I'll run down and get some things Monday morning?”

“No,” Cahill said. He waited for Roadie's face to register surprise, which it did immediately. “But I will,” he said, “because it seems like

closing in the porch is betting against death. Today I feel like that would be a good idea."

"You do?" Roadie said nervously.

Cahill clasped his hands. "Roadie," he said, "how often do men speak frankly? I think some of the things we've just been talking about . . . We've spoken frankly to each other."

Roadie nodded silently.

"One more thing," Cahill said. "I've never been a mystical person, but things change as you age. You'll find that out. Some things—people, even—disappear, then something else comes in to replace them." Cahill paused. "Life is like having a garden, Roadie, because inevitably the time comes when the deer eat everything, or you don't mulch and the soil gets exhausted. Right away, the weeds are in there. So I suppose what I'm getting at is that, well, tending your garden seems to me now like a young man's game. When you don't have the inclination or the energy or the . . . optimism to tend it anymore, the weeds rush in." He looked Roadie square in the eyes. He barely knew what he had said himself. He said, "The moment you stop loving something, the moment you're inattentive, the wrong things and the wrong people take over."

"That's one of the best ways of puttin' it I ever heard," Roadie said. "I'll go back to talk to Gloria Sue, try to tell her what we discussed. There's no way I'm gonna be able to put it like you did, though."

"Express it in your own way," Cahill said. "It seems to me you love her if you're going home to talk to her."

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He went to the beach, a place he'd gone only once or twice, quite early in the season, and unfolded a chair and looked at the water.

He'd never called the police in response to the flyer. He'd never spoken a word to Breezy about what the dog had done in the graveyard. He tried to think philosophically: Audrey and Matt had been involved in whatever way they'd chosen—two losers, in any case, who were no good for each other; the dog was just a dog.

People projected onto dogs, so they found themselves surprised when dogs acted like dogs instead of people.

What did not change? Change was part of the natural process.

Coming to terms with what Matt had done, though, was difficult. It wasn't a matter of Matt's having been like his son, as Audrey had suggested, but, rather, that Matt seemed at times like a source of . . . what? Guidance? Ironic, thinking of what Matt might have guided him toward. But of course parents didn't tell their secrets to their children, just as the children withheld theirs from their parents.

“I didn't do it! I didn't do it!” little Joyce had cried, hand stained red, lipsticked “J”s all over the bathroom mirror, the bath tiles, even the toilet lid.

“You never really got involved,” his wife had said, when she was still able to discuss his shortcomings. “If you don't get involved, you don't have to take responsibility. That was the way you always operated as a parent. As if you were the éminence grise, as if your family was just too much pressure. The aloof doctor.”

The sadness of family life. The erosion of love until only a little rim was left, and that, too, eventually crumbled. *Rationalization:* he had been no worse a father than many. No worse than a mediocre husband. That old saying about not being able to pick your family until you married and had your own . . . People rarely remarked upon the fact that time passed, and you kept picking friends who were closer to you than family members; dogs you'd come to prefer to people. The next “family” in the line of succession could be a goldfish in a bowl, he supposed.

In front of him, a little boy in a wetsuit played with a fishing rod that dangled no lure, casting it all wrong, the way he'd learned to throw a softball. His mother and father sat on a blanket, their attention focussed on each other.

As the sky turned that indescribable silvery tone it often attained in late summer in Maine, Cahill rubbed his face and was surprised that his skin was still hot from the sun. A real Mainer would have worn his baseball cap. He slid a bit lower in his chair, and some time later was startled awake by squawking gulls. The charcoal-gray sky

was flatlining a thin horizontal line of pale pink; the breeze had a bite to it. The couple and their child had gone, a bucket with a broken handle and a pile of shells left behind. He stood and folded the chair, scooping up his shoes with his other hand.

He drove home, appreciating what a pretty town this was, how the residents kept their houses in such good repair. Back home, he stashed the chair in the garage, where the garter snake who'd lived there contentedly for years slithered away behind piles of tied-up newspapers. His wife's plastic planters dangled from a beam, the few dried stems that remained deteriorating into dust. As he started up the walkway, he saw something suddenly dart past a bush at the side of the house, startling him so that he teetered for balance on the edge of the bricks. It was Napoleon, panting, big ears flapping.

“You listen here,” he said to the dog, grabbing his collar. “You desecrated a graveyard, you—” He stopped, automatically rephrasing, in case he might not be understood. “You shit in the graveyard and knocked down the new wall!” he yelled. “You come with me.”

He was dragging the dog across the lawn, though the animal dug down, clawing as if to score music, trying to stop the forward rush. The dog yelped as Cahill dragged him all the way to the wall, which was now even more caved in, though thankfully there was no more shit inside the enclosure. “Bad dog! Bad dog!” he said, jerking the collar. The dog risked further pain to turn his neck to look up at him, and what Cahill saw was fear. Fear and incomprehension. The sad squeaky sound went infinitely sharp, and Cahill realized he'd been intending to push the dog's nose against a pile of shit that was not his. It had been left by a much larger animal. Of course it had. Look at the size of the dog, and look at the pile of shit.

Instantly, he loosened his hold on the collar but stopped short of releasing it entirely, because of course the dog—any sane creature—would immediately run away.

“I'm sorry,” he said, bending and putting his lips close to the dog's head, the smell of grass and dog mixed with a hint of . . . could it be lavender? “I'm sorry,” he said staunchly, as if someone might

overhear. Then, leaning in even closer, he risked letting go of the collar, whispering, “I misunderstood.”