

EARLY STAGES

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The object gleams in Harold's hand, a silvery metal cylinder. When he holds it up, he sees a weirdly elongated reflection of his face on its surface. Only the dark frames of his glasses are distinct. The rest of his face is reduced to a pink smear that dissolves into the space around it. The object is light, springy, vaguely familiar, but what is it?

He looks around him for cues. He is standing in the laundry room of his own house, next to the sink. Early morning sunlight flecks the wall, trembling through the leaves outside the window. Behind him, the door to the half bathroom stands ajar. Nina insists on calling it a "powder room." He hears the whir of the bathroom fan. He feels a pleasant ache and a vacancy in his bowels that tells him he's just had his morning sit-down.

That explains it. The thing in his hand is the spring-loaded rod that attaches the toilet-paper roll to the holder. He must've used the last of the paper and come out to get a new roll. The rolls are stacked in the cabinet under the sink. He reaches down and plucks one out, walks back into the bathroom to install it. The fan hasn't completely dispelled the odor of his recent contribution, but he feels an upwelling

of affection for this little room. It's on the ground floor and at the back of the house, private, which is more important than ever, now that Haley and the grandkids have come to live with them.

He sees himself in the oval mirror, shoots of unkempt white hair sprouting from his scalp—Nina calls it his “crazy old man hair.” It makes him smile. Even though the room is hardly more than a stall, Nina has decorated it in her favorite French country style. There's a white wicker cabinet over the toilet and a faded print of *L'Arc de Triomphe* on the opposite wall.

He peers at the monument in the picture. It's only vaguely familiar, although he's had some memorable times in Paris. Once, of course, with Nina and Haley, when Haley was about nine. Once, long before, with Molly, who later became his first wife. The trip with Molly was the most vivid, because she was in such a bad way when they'd hitchhiked from Arles.

They'd reunited in London, after she completed her semester abroad. After months of separation, they'd gone at it like rabbits, screwing their way across Britain and northern France, sleeping under hedges and sometimes in farmers' sheds. They never bathed enough, and that's probably how Molly got the vaginal infection that had her doubled over in pain when they reached Paris.

They'd stayed at a sketchy youth hostel that was crammed with loud young Moroccans. Molly's pain got so bad that Harold went to the hostel manager and asked him to call an ambulance. Instead, they got a black police van. He'd held Molly in his arms, her hot forehead against his neck, as they jounced over the cobblestones on the way to the hospital. Later she'd say that was what it must have been like, riding in a tumbrel to the guillotine.

Across from them sat an indifferent young gendarme, his arms folded. “Elle est très jolie,” he said to Harold, who felt a surge of protective jealousy. “I'll take care of you,” he told Molly, and he did, although it meant spending all the money they'd saved for their trip and having to go back to the States early.

Harold looks at the print and shakes his head. Molly died—how many years ago? Ovarian cancer. It was long after they'd divorced,

but it hit him hard, losing her. She was the first woman he'd loved. They'd helped each other grow up. "Sorry for your loss," he whispers, then glances around as if someone might hear. Not good to be caught talking to himself. It's an embarrassing old man's gaffe, like missing a spot while shaving or forgetting to zip up.

He looks down to check his pants, something to be extra careful about, now that Haley and the kids are around the house all the time. His pants are buttoned, his zipper zipped, but his belt is still unbuckled. He sighs. It's a lifelong routine—pull your pants up, zip, button, buckle. How can you start the sequence and leave it unfinished?

He shuffles into the kitchen. His coffee sits on the counter, cold. Where's Nina's cup? She usually sets out her cup next to his. Blue and white. It's a souvenir of their trip to St. Petersburg.

How long was he in the bathroom? The clock on the microwave says 7:34. She should be up by now. These days, he wakes early, usually around five. What's he been doing? His coffee has milk in it. He must have warmed it in the micro. He reaches for the cup and realizes that he still has the roll of toilet paper and the silver rod in his hand. He puts them down and makes his way to the microwave.

Palomino. Is that the name for the color of coffee with milk? No. A palomino is a horse, a horse with patches of different colors. It's something else. He remembers the story that goes with this color. One of Nina's best friends had been a fledgling actress in New York. She'd had a temp job as an assistant to Ralph Lauren, and when the designer called for coffee with milk, he wanted it just so. Camel—that's it. Camel, like the color of a camel-hair coat.

He puts his camel in the microwave and presses the express button twice. Because he gets up so much earlier than Nina, he used to make a fresh pot of coffee every morning, but it had gotten more and more complicated. First, they'd stuck notes on the various components, the ground coffee, the filters, the pitcher for water. He'd written directions and taped them to the wall, but there were so many mishaps and lapses that Nina took to making the coffee the night before, so he could just help himself to a cup in the morning.

As the microwave whirs, Harold looks out into his backyard. Sun-

light and shadows palomino the lawn. Small birds flit in and out of the bushes. Finches and... Starts with *c*, *chi*. Chinquapins? No. Those are trees. He and Nina have gradually pared down their landscaping, choosing plants that require the least maintenance. Across the fence, he can see his neighbor's elaborate garden. What are those bushes with the big clumps of pink and blue flowers? Narcissus. No, it started with *h*. Hyacinth? No. Something like rain. Hydrangeas! It cheers him to remember the name. Sunlight beams through the window, sparkling on the glasses in the dish rack. It's a day to enjoy, another day to stay alive.

Harold knows what he'll do when these days run out. He has a plan. He has some painkillers saved up from years before, from his hernia operation. He'll take them out to the screen porch on a sunny afternoon, along with a chilled bottle of white wine. Take them slowly, savor the wine. When he starts feeling drowsy, he'll pull a plastic bag over his head, tape it at the throat, and let it all be over.

Starts with *p*. Paris. Palomino. Percolator. Percoset—that's what the drug is called. Percoset, pinot grigio, and plastique, that's the ticket.

But not yet. Things still aren't that bad.

He hears a clatter in the dining room. His daughter walks in, wearing a fuzzy, peach-colored bathrobe. Haley. Hydrangeas. Chickadees—those are the birds. Chenille—that's the fabric of the bathrobe. He feels buoyed by the memory of so many words.

"Morning, Daddy." A kiss on his cheek. "Sleep well?"

"Very well." He can't really remember how he slept. It must have been well. "Very well, and you?"

"Not so great. Woke up around two thirty, started to think about things, and then it was light before I finally fell asleep again." Haley is carrying a vase of wilted tulips. They're out of season, but Nina loves having cut flowers on the dining table. She's Russian, though they'd met in Nice.

"If you want to please a Russian woman," Nina told him, "give her flowers." He'd stopped at the next flower stall and filled her arms with tulips. "You are crazy!" she laughed. She plucked one flower from the bunch and gave it back to the seller. "You are very nice, but remember this. You must give flowers in odd numbers only. Even

numbers are for funerals. And not yellow, please. Yellow is for sadness.”

Haley steps on the pedal that makes the lid of the garbage pail spring up. She dumps the flowers so unceremoniously that Harold doesn’t have time to count how many there are. The last time Nina’s Russian friends sent flowers to the house, the bouquets were all in even numbers. Sorry for your loss. It made him so angry that Haley could scarcely calm him down. They were sorry people, he said, and it was a stupid tradition.

It strikes him how much Haley looks like her mother, the high cheekbones and solemn gray eyes. He even calls her Nina from time to time. It worries her, he knows. “It’s me, Haley,” she’d said the other day. “You know that, right? It’s me, not Mom.” She touched his cheek. “I know you miss her.”

Now she moves around the kitchen just like Nina, stooping and stretching with a dancer’s grace as she takes glasses and bowls from the dish rack and puts them in the cabinets. She likes everything cleared away before she starts a new task.

“Dad,” she says. “Look, your belt’s unbuckled. You want me to help you with that?” She takes hold of his buckle, but he brushes her hand aside with a gust of anger.

“No—leave it alone!” It irritates him that, after all that thinking about it, he’s still forgotten to buckle up. But there’s also something wrong, very wrong with a daughter touching her father’s unfastened belt. That’s something her mother might do, but not her. In their early years together, Nina had a very seductive way of unfastening his belt.

Haley shrugs, looking hurt. “Sorry. Just don’t forget to do it up, okay?”

His granddaughter races in, breaking the awkwardness between them. Katya, who is...seven. Seven? He’s not sure, doesn’t have time to calculate, because she rushes him and hugs him around the waist. “Grampa! Good morning!” Haley takes his coffee from the microwave and hands it to him. It seems all is well. Copacetic. Not Percosetic.

“What’s this?” Haley asks. She picks up the toilet-paper roll and the rod from the counter.

“I must’ve forgotten. I meant to put that up in the bathroom.”

“No prob. Katie, you know how to put the toilet-paper roll in the holder, right?”

The girl nods. “With the paper end facing out.” That’s the rule in their house, and Harold is charmed that his daughter has passed on this little piece of domestic lore.

She runs out. “Don’t forget your belt, Daddy,” Haley says. She takes out the red-enameled frying pan. “What do you say to scrambled eggs?”

Harold is about to say yes, when Katya comes back, still holding the toilet paper roll. She’s bubbling with suppressed giggles and childish scandal. She presses against her mother and leans up to whisper, but in her excitement, it’s impossible not to hear. “Grampa left something in the potty.”

Harold feels himself reddening from the throat upward. “You know how to flush, Katie,” Haley says. “Now go do it, and then put the toilet paper the way it’s supposed to go.” She flashes him a look that might be pity. “We’ll take care of it, Daddy.”

Harold flees to the living room. It’s usually soothing to be surrounded by Nina’s French country furniture, with its bright florals and artfully distressed paintwork. He sees himself, with hair still uncombed, in the mirror over the fireplace. Above the row of cards still propped on the mantel. Sorry for your loss.

He hears himself wheezing. He’ll just step out to the screen porch for some air.

This forgetting is nothing new. His mother used to say, “You’d forget your own head if it wasn’t attached to your shoulders.” All his life he’s been called absentminded. It meant his mind was somewhere else, so engaged that the ordinary details of life just escaped him. The absent-minded professor, thinking about words.

Sometimes he would forget to eat, but now he’s hungry. “Hungry”—that’s what Haley said when she was just learning to talk. “Hungry and firsty.” “Boofoo” was her name for poop. Funny that he could remember those words when so many others were gone. “Boona” was her word for balloon, those balloons that he and Nina bought her, “boonas” that inevitably slipped from her grasp and floated away.

Harold slumps, suddenly tired. “Seepy”—that was Haley’s word when she was ready for bed.

When he wakes, sitting in the white wicker rocker, the shadows of late afternoon are stretching across the lawn. The ceiling fan circles like an uncompleted thought. He can smell some sweet flower or vine. It starts with an *h*.

There’s a half glass of lemonade on the table beside him and the remains of a turkey and cheese sandwich. Nina must’ve made his lunch. He doesn’t remember eating it. The scent of flowers. Hydrangea? Haley. Something, something.

