

5 Mrs. Chandler stood alone near the window in a tailored suit, almost in front of the
neon sign that said in small, red letters PRIME MEATS. She seemed to be looking at
onions, she had one in her hand. There was no one else in the store. Vera Pini sat by
the cash register in her white smock, staring at the passing cars. Outside it was
cloudy and the wind was blowing. Traffic was going by in an almost continuous flow.
10 “We have some good Brie today,” Vera remarked without moving. “We just got it
in.”

“Is it really good?”

“Very good.”

15 “All right, I’ll take some.” Mrs. Chandler was a steady customer. She didn’t go to the
supermarket at the edge of town. She was one of the best customers. Had been. She
didn’t buy that much anymore.

On the plate glass the first drops of rain appeared. “Look at that. It’s started,” Vera
said.

20 Mrs. Chandler turned her head. She watched the cars go by. It seemed as if it were
years ago. For some reason she found herself thinking of the many times she had
driven out herself or taken the train, coming into the country, stepping down onto
the long, bare platform in the darkness, her husband or a child there to meet her. It
was warm. The trees were huge and black. Hello, darling. Hello, Mummy, was it a
nice trip?

25 The small neon sign was very bright in the grayness, there was the cemetery across
the street and her own car, a foreign one, kept very clean, parked near the door,
facing in the wrong direction. She always did that. She was a woman who lived a
certain life. She knew how to give dinner parties, take care of dogs, enter
restaurants. She had her way of answering invitations, of dressing, of being herself.
Incomparable habits, you might call them. She was a woman who had read books,
30 played golf, gone to weddings, whose legs were good, who had weathered storms, a
fine woman whom no one now wanted.

The door opened and one of the farmers came in. He was wearing rubber boots. “Hi,
Vera,” he said.

She glanced at him. "Why aren't you out shooting?"

"Too wet," he said. He was old and didn't waste words. "The water's a foot high in a lot of places."

"My husband's out."

- 5 "Wish you'd told me sooner," the old man said slyly. He had a face that had almost been obliterated by the weather. It had faded like an old stamp.

10 It was shooting weather, rainy and blurred. The season had started. All day there had been the infrequent sound of guns and about noon a flight of six geese, in disorder, passed over the house. She had been sitting in the kitchen and heard their foolish, loud cries. She saw them through the window. They were very low, just above the trees.

15 The house was amid fields. From the upstairs, distant barns and fences could be seen. It was a beautiful house, for years she had felt it was unique. The garden was tended, the wood stacked, the screens in good repair. It was the same inside, everything well selected, the soft, white sofas, the rugs and chairs, the Swedish glasses that were so pleasant to hold, the lamps. The house is my soul, she used to say.

She remembered the morning the goose was on the lawn, a big one with his long black neck and white chinstrap, standing there not fifteen feet away. She had hurried to the stairs. "Brookie," she whispered.

- 20 "What?"

"Come down here. Be quiet."

They went to the window and then on to another, looking out breathlessly.

"What's he doing so near the house?"

"I don't know."

- 25 "He's big, isn't he?"

"Very."

"But not as big as Dancer."

"Dancer can't fly."

All gone now, pony, goose, boy. She remembered that night they came home from dinner at the Werners' where there had been a young woman, very pure featured, who had abandoned her marriage to study architecture. Rob Chandler had said nothing, he had merely listened, distracted, as if to a familiar kind of news. At
5 midnight in the kitchen, hardly having closed the door, he simply announced it. He had turned away from her and was facing the table.

"What?" she said.

He started to repeat it but she interrupted.

"What are you saying?" she said numbly.

10 He had met someone else.

"You've what?"

She kept the house. She went just one last time to the apartment on Eighty-second Street with its large windows from which, cheek pressed to glass, you could see the entrance steps of the Met. A year later he remarried. For a while she veered off
15 course. She sat at night in the empty living room, almost helpless, not bothering to eat, not bothering to do anything, stroking her dog's head and talking to him, curled on the couch at two in the morning still in her clothes. A fatal weariness had set in, but then she pulled herself together, began going to church and putting on lipstick again.

20 Now as she returned to her house from the market, there were great, leaden clouds marbled with light, moving above the trees. The wind was gusting. There was a car in the driveway as she turned in. For just a moment she was alarmed and then she recognized it. A figure came toward her.

"Hi, Bill," she said.

25 "I'll give you a hand." He took the biggest bag of groceries from the car and followed her into the kitchen.

"Just put it down on the table," she said. "That's it. Thanks. How've you been?"

He was wearing a white shirt and a sport coat, expensive at one time. The kitchen seemed cold. Far off was the faint pop of guns.

30 "Come in," she said. "It's chilly out here."

"I just came by to see if you had anything that needed to be taken care of before the cold weather set in."

"Oh, I see. Well," she said, "there's the upstairs bathroom. Is that going to be trouble again?"

5 "The pipes?"

"They're not going to break again this year?"

"Didn't we stuff some insulation in there?" he said. There was a slight, elegant slur in his speech, back along the edge of his tongue. He had always had it. "It's on the north side, is the trouble."

10 "Yes," she said. She was searching vaguely for a cigarette. "Why do you suppose they put it there?"

"Well, that's where it's always been," he said.

15 He was forty but looked younger. There was something hard and hopeless about him, something that was preserving his youth. All summer on the golf course, sometimes into December. Even there he seemed indifferent, dark hair blowing—even among companions, as if he were killing time. There were a lot of stories about him. He was a fallen idol. His father had a real estate agency in a cottage on the highway. Lots, farms, acreage. They were an old family in these parts. There was a lane named after them.

20 "There's a bad faucet. Do you want to take a look at that?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"It drips," she said. "I'll show you."

She led the way upstairs. "There," she said, pointing toward the bathroom. "You can hear it."

25 He casually turned the water on and off a few times and felt under the tap. He was doing it at arm's length with a slight, careless movement of the wrist. She could see him from the bedroom. He seemed to be examining other things on the counter.

She turned on a light and sat down. It was nearly dusk and the room immediately became cozy. The walls were papered in a blue pattern and the rug was a soft white.

30 The polished stone of the hearth gave a sense of order. Outside, the fields were

disappearing. It was a serene hour, one she shrank from. Sometimes, looking toward the ocean, she thought of her son, although that had happened in the sound and long ago. She no longer found she returned to it every day. They said it got better after a time but that it never really went away. As with so many other things, they were
5 right. He had been the youngest and very spirited though a little frail. She prayed for him every Sunday in church. She prayed just a simple thing: O Lord, don't overlook him, he's very small. ... Only a little boy, she would sometimes add. The sight of anything dead, a bird scattered in the road, the stiff legs of a rabbit, even a dead snake, upset her.

10 "I think it's a washer," he said. "I'll try and bring one over sometime."

"Good," she said. "Will it be another month?"

"You know Marian and I are back together again. Did you know that?"

"Oh, I see." She gave a slight, involuntary sigh. She felt strange. "I, uh..." What weakness, she thought later. "When did it happen?"

15 "A few weeks ago."

After a bit she stood up. "Shall we go downstairs?"

She could see their reflections passing the stairway window. She could see her apricot-colored shirt go by. The wind was still blowing. A bare branch was scraping the side of the house. She often heard that at night.

20 "Do you have time for a drink?" she asked.

"I'd better not."

She poured some Scotch and went into the kitchen to get some ice from the refrigerator and add a little water. "I suppose I won't see you for a while."

25 It hadn't been that much. Some dinners at the Lanai, some improbable nights. It was just the feeling of being with someone you liked, someone easy and incongruous. "I..." She tried to find something to say.

"You wish it hadn't happened."

"Something like that."

He nodded. He was standing there. His face had become a little pale, the pale of winter.

“And you?” she said.

5 “Oh, hell.” She had never heard him complain. Only about certain people. “I’m just a caretaker. She’s my wife. What are you going to do, come up to her sometime and tell her everything?”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“I hope not,” he said.

10 When the door closed she did not turn. She heard the car start outside and saw the reflection of the headlights. She stood in front of the mirror and looked at her face coldly. Forty-six. It was there in her neck and beneath her eyes. She would never be any younger. She should have pleaded, she thought. She should have told him all she was feeling, all that suddenly choked her heart. The summer with its hope and long days was gone. She had the urge to follow him, to drive past his house. The lights
15 would be on. She would see someone through the windows.

That night she heard the branches tapping against the house and the window frames rattle. She sat alone and thought of the geese, she could hear them out there. It had gotten cold. The wind was blowing their feathers. They lived a long time, ten or fifteen years, they said. The one they had seen on the lawn might still be alive, settled
20 back into the fields with the others, in from the ocean where they went to be safe, the survivors of bloody ambushes. Somewhere in the wet grass, she imagined, lay one of them, dark sodden breast, graceful neck still extended, great wings striving to beat, bloody sounds coming from the holes in its beak. She went around and turned on lights. The rain was coming down, the sea was crashing, a comrade lay dead in the
25 whirling darkness.