

MUCH PEACE

Clare Beams

While her daughter Mandy was turning her dented white car onto their street, pulling into their driveway, unloading her suitcase from her car and bumping it up their stairs—while she was arriving, as unforeseen as most calamities—Barbara was obliviously walking the dog. She had waited until sunset to take him out, as she always did, having learned in her two years of living in Florida that daylight hours were best air-conditioned. Though the sun was now only an orange smear at the horizon, the air was still warm and wet. The humid smell of the golf course, which was the smell of fertilizer and over-watered grass, ripe to the point of rotting, carried toward her on a little ruffle of breeze. The sixteenth hole was just over there, behind the Andrews' house.

Her bichon frise found some juicy tidbit at the foot of the Andrews' mailbox, probably goose shit, and began to chew on it with his mouth open, smacking. "Wilfred!" Barbara said. Wilfred looked up at her guiltily from under the white puff of fur that fell over his wet nervous eyes. She had given her three grown children sensible names; the dog was something of an indulgence. When she and Jack had gotten him she'd bought a book of baby names and hunted through their meanings until she was satisfied. *Wilfred* meant "much peace." "There you go," she told him, seeing that he'd stopped chewing. "You didn't want to eat that anyway. Come on—time to do your business."

Wilfred resumed his moist snuffling in the grass. Eventually he settled on a spot and bent himself over in an awkward hunch, his little white back all bowed up; he strained, whining. His eyes, which were on Barbara's face, were reproachful. You are making me do this, those eyes seemed to say. "Come on now, Wilfred," she said, gently and encouragingly, even though it wasn't her fault that the dog rubbed himself raw on the spiny Florida grasses, which were really very pretty once you got used to them, so that the naked skin under his tail was always red and weepy. He also had chronic nervous diarrhea and a panicky way of barking if he was left alone for more than five minutes in their fenced-in backyard. Their

green stretch of lawn did not fool Wilfred—he seemed to know that like the golf course and the whole neighborhood, really, the yard was cleverly-disguised swamp, and that at any moment something big could rise right up out of it and eat him. It was as if Florida itself didn't agree with Wilfred, though he'd never lived anywhere else. They'd bought him at a breeder's in the next town over, three days after their move.

Barbara gave Wilfred's leash a tug to turn him around and started them both moving, back toward home—though that word, *home*, still made her think of a different house, many miles away from this one. *Home* for her still was, and always would be the house in Michigan where she and Jack had raised their children. Of course, even if a person only gets one real home in a lifetime, there's still a right time to leave it. The last few years in Michigan she'd felt as though the emotions she experienced there were mostly residual, seeping out from the walls to be rebreathed and relived, though they were decades-old and past acting on usefully. That was why she had looked at Jack over their Michigan breakfast table on a cold dark January morning a couple of years ago and told him that her bones were getting too old for winter.

He'd given her his considering look for a minute over the top of his newspaper. Then he'd swallowed his mouthful of coffee. "Well," he'd said. "Well, I've been thinking it's a good time to get out, anyway. As good as any."

That had floored her. "Really?" she'd said.

He'd squinted at her, amused. "Yes, really. Why?"

"I just never thought it would be this easy to get you to retire." She had, in fact, thought that it would be a process violent enough to leave scars. Jack had built his own business, ArborMed, up from a two-room outfit in their first house, to a corporation that occupied an entire office building downtown. Everything they had now he had made himself. She had thought she would have to fight to get him to leave it.

But Jack had laughed at her. "Barb, they're just medical instruments," he said. And she had loved that so much that she'd leaned across the table and kissed him.

They're just medical instruments. Even now, walking down the road with all the decisions behind her, remembering that made her smile. Wilfred trotted next to her, happy to be going home, the rough little pads of his feet rasping against the red concrete. It had been the best

thing they had ever done, coming here. Even though she complained about the heat—because that was what you did here, just as complaining about the cold was what you did in Ann Arbor—it made her feel younger, somehow. The Florida air, heavy and wet as it always was, seemed to have rehydrated her, regrown her. She felt pretty good most of the time. Her legs, as she walked now, were almost as springy as her spongy white tennis shoes. And she knew she didn't look bad, either. She pictured herself, walking down this road with her dog. A nice woman in late middle-age, trim—her waist was still a neat seam where she tucked her shirt into her shorts, no bulges—and tan, with healthy blonde hair that was clearly dyed but that spoke to a certain vivacity. Happy and not old, that was how she pictured herself looking. No one would guess, just seeing her, that she was sixty-four.

Here was their house. Barbara always liked coming up on it this way; its big white pillars pleased her. Only then did her eyes find Mandy's car in the driveway, streaked with red-brown mud. It struck a wrong note within her. Mandy was here, Mandy who was supposed to be in Virginia working some new office job, who hadn't said a word about coming. Wilfred hit the end of his leash and looked back at Barbara in puzzlement, then began to whine impatiently; he always got a treat at the end of their walks, and didn't appreciate the delay. He was pulling so hard that his collar choked him. His breathing made a desperate whistling sound.

"All right, Wilfred," Barbara said. "All right." She took a deep breath herself and smiled down at her dog. That was what you did when your daughter came home: you smiled. "Shall we go deliver our greetings?" She started her feet moving again.

"Hello!" she called, inside the entryway. Her voice echoed musically down the hall. She bent and unhooked Wilfred's leash, and he scampered off toward the kitchen and his treats, the sound of his nails against the marble floor like a handful of ball bearings dropped and scattering. He didn't notice that Barbara wasn't following him.

"Back here, Barb!" Jack called from the living room.

Mandy was lying on the couch—draped across it, really, like something boneless, like a piece of cloth. She smiled one of her loose, bored smiles at Barbara and stood. "Hi Mom," she said. She crossed the room

and allowed herself to be hugged by her mother. She'd gotten even thinner.

"Mandy drove down for a surprise visit," Jack said. He smiled at them both and cleared his throat.

"Well, wonderful. Wonderful," Barbara said. Mandy stepped back and sat down again on the couch, and Barbara sat down beside her. "It's so good to see you, honey. We didn't know you were coming!"

"That's what makes it a surprise, right?" Mandy laughed. "I like the house. You guys did a nice job with everything."

Wilfred appeared in the doorway of the room, having realized that Barbara was not coming to give him his treat. When he saw Mandy he gave a surprised, friendly yip. He had never met her before; Mandy had been unable to make it to Florida for Christmas this past year. Barbara understood, now that Mandy was in her living room, that in fact she had somehow never pictured her daughter actually coming to this house. Wilfred trotted over to Mandy and sniffed the skin of her calves, delicately. She pulled them away, tucked them up under her on the couch.

"Yuck, Mom," she said. "He's like a little white rat or something."

"Oh, I don't know. It's a small breed—he's not supposed to be any bigger." Barbara reached down and scooped Wilfred up into her lap, burying her fingers in his wiry white curls. "So," she said, to change the subject, but it was only once she started the sentence that she realized she had nowhere to go with it. Her daughter waited with pale, pointed eyebrows while the word hung in the air, longer than it should have. "How was the drive?" It was the only thing she could think of.

"Not bad, I guess," Mandy said. She shrugged. "Long. You guys live so far away from everyone now. I mean, I get moving to Florida, I guess, but what's wrong with Orlando? Why'd you want to live all the way out in the boonies?"

"Well, it is pretty neat out here though, isn't it?" Jack said. *Neat*, an old woman's word. His hands were pinching at the knees of his pants the way they did when he was nervous. He met Barbara's eyes across the room and gave her an ashamed sort of grimace.

At times Barbara caught herself almost wondering what their life would have been like, hers and Jack's life, if they'd stopped after two children. After just Jan and Ben. She never allowed herself to think that

thought through to the end, of course—she stopped herself, each time she stopped herself.

“I got you a present,” Mandy said. “At the gift shop in the hotel where I stayed last night, in North Carolina, I think it was.”

She waved an arm toward the coffee table, where a farmer doll sat in denim coveralls, grinning at them evilly through his yarn beard. “How sweet, honey,” Barbara said.

Mandy smiled, and to Barbara it didn't look like a kind smile; it gave her the strange feeling that somehow Mandy and the farmer doll were laughing at her and Jack together. She often caught glimpses of this mockery, before Mandy managed to conceal them. She couldn't help feeling, even after all these years, that she would have been better prepared for the resentment if her daughter hadn't raised such false expectations as a child. Mandy had been an eerily beautiful little girl: tiny and fine-boned, with slippery, white-blond hair and skin as smooth as paper. The kind of little girl that everyone wanted to have sit in their laps even after she was really too old for lap-sitting. And Mandy hadn't minded; she was strangely docile in those days. Everything about her had been soft, even her voice. Maybe it was because they had known she would be their last baby, but Barbara had savored the small-child phase of mothering more with Mandy than she had with either of her other two children. She'd brushed every tangle out of that fine blond hair and tied it up with ribbons that matched the color of Mandy's dresses. She'd bought little patent-leather shoes for Mandy's miniature feet. You couldn't do that sort of thing with boys, and Jan had been too self-sufficient for that much coddling, even when she was small. She'd been too round and coarse to look as pretty as Mandy did in the little dresses, anyway.

Jan had grown into her roundness, though—now it looked hearty. She came twice a year to visit Barbara and Jack with her husband and her little son. They'd all go to the beach, Barbara proud to sit next to her fine happy daughter and watch her pudgy grandson run so fearlessly into the ocean on his small sturdy legs. And Mandy...looking at her now was like looking at a stranger. An unhealthy-looking stranger. She had on a nubby sweater despite the heat, and a shapeless skirt that didn't fit her right, that wouldn't have fit anyone right. Her wrists looked too fragile and narrow to support the weight of her hands, and she had

knobby, little-girl knees that she hadn't had as a little girl and had no business having now, being almost thirty. That flawless, milky skin had been pocked and pitted since adolescence. The once-beautiful blond hair now seemed limp and thin and colorless, clinging to her head and neck like a coating of grease.

Barbara picked up the hideous farmer doll and sat it on the couch. "Thank you for this," she said. Then, taking care to keep her eyes very wide and happy, "So how'd you get the time off work for this, Mandy?"

"I took some vacation days."

"Oh, great."

But Mandy's face had gone sullen. "God. Why is that always the first thing you have to ask me? I just drove all the way down here to see you."

"I didn't mean anything by it, honey. Really, I didn't."

Jack cleared his throat again. "Why don't you tell us a little bit about Virginia, Mandy? You know your mother and I have never been there."

Barbara actually had, once, as a girl on a cross-country road trip to visit second cousins she had never seen before or since, but it didn't seem to be worth it to correct him.

Mandy's face smoothed out. "It's pretty good. I like it there. Really flat—you can see for like *miles*. Not as hot as here, either. I don't get how you guys stand it."

"It is a little toasty, I guess. Good for us old folks, though," Jack said. He chuckled a little.

Mandy smiled dubiously. Then she slapped her hands together and started to stand. "Okay, well anyway," she said, "I thought maybe I'd take a shower before dinner? It was a long drive."

"Of course," Barbara said. "You can go ahead and bring your stuff out to the carriage house, if you want." This was an apartment they'd put in over their garage for when their children visited—believing that a little separation was best for everyone. "You're going to stay the night, too, aren't you? There are clean sheets already on the bed up there."

At the door of the room Mandy stopped, half-turned. "Oh right, and I do have something to ask you guys."

Barbara had to fight the impulse to wearily close her eyes, and an alertness came over Jack's face.

"See, there's this great new apartment I've found that would be bigger

and closer to work—a *lot* closer—right now I’m commuting forty minutes each way, you know. But I can’t quite swing it on my own. Almost, but not quite.”

They watched her.

“It would all be fine except you know my boss just *hates* me and she didn’t give me overtime for all the hours I worked the first month. So I have a little catch-up to do. And in the meantime things would be just a lot easier if I didn’t have to commute so damn far each way. Of course, the landlord is a little bit of a psycho. Which might scare me off if it weren’t *the* perfect place—really the only good one I’ve found.”

“What do you mean, he’s a psycho?” Jack asked.

“Well, he’s asking for a few months’ rent up front. Plus the security deposit. And then the other problem is that my car stopped working last week and the mechanic fixed it, but he said it’s only temporary, and it needs more major repairs. So I’ll either have to do that or get a new one. I just hate it when everything goes at once like this, you know?”

They nodded, both of them. The old, familiar feeling of failure descended over Barbara. “How much?” she asked.

“Thirty thousand would take care of *all* of it, and then I’d be totally set. I know it’s a lot,” she said, and smiled at them, sadly. Barbara found herself looking closely at that smile, trying to see what she could find underneath it. “I don’t need an answer now. I’m just asking you guys to think about it.” And then she turned and went down the hallway. Wilfred sprang out of Barbara’s lap to follow her.

Barbara told Jack she was going to go finish up folding the laundry. She put Wilfred’s electric fence collar on him and let him out the front door, then went up the stairs to their bedroom.

Back when all the money from Jack’s business had started coming in, the two of them had made a decision: each of the children would have their educations paid for, through college, and that would be it. Neither of them wanted to raise a pack of hangers-on who felt no need to make their own way in the world. There would be some money for the kids when she and Jack died, but that wouldn’t be for a long while, and in the meantime they were going to spend as much of it on themselves as they wanted. They’d always let the children know that this was how things would be. (Barbara had bought a little embroidered pillow at a gift shop

fifteen years ago that said “Go first class—your heirs will!” It was in the carriage house now, on the loveseat in the living room.)

Though they had never given her this much before, Mandy was the only one for whom they had broken the rules. She was the only one who had ever asked them to. She would call from Pennsylvania and tell them she had a new job lined up, but that she needed to pay for the used car she had to have to get to work. Or from Long Island, where a job, like so many of Mandy’s jobs, had mysteriously disintegrated in ways that were never fully explained to them, but which, they were always assured, were not Mandy’s fault. The last time had been maybe two years ago, when Mandy had been moving from one state to another and didn’t have enough to pay the movers. They always sent her the money—two thousand, three thousand. Their plan told them to say no, but not how to, which it turned out was a much trickier thing than they’d anticipated. And Mandy seemed so unfortunate, so abused by bad luck and bad people. Of course the emerging pattern chafed a little—*every* boss of Mandy’s was a tyrant, *every* landlord jacked up her rent—but what were they supposed to do, accuse her of making it all up? What if she wasn’t? She was their daughter; the image of her walking four miles to a bus stop to get to work, or trying to move her own belongings (lifting, hauling tables and sofas and boxes of books herself, thin as she was) made Barbara feel like crying. So they acted quickly, never asked too many questions, wanting it all to be over and done with as soon as possible.

In a strange way, it made Barbara feel better, paying. She was haunted by the sense that she should have been more alert with Mandy, more watchful, should have had her soothing motherly hands ready at the right moment in childhood or adolescence to smooth, smooth the pain away and erase it while there was still a chance it could be erased. Instead, she couldn’t even identify in her memories when the right moment would have been. It even seemed possible to her that she had not only fallen short of healing Mandy but had in fact wounded her in some way, tried to bend her into some life that wouldn’t fit her, and in the process left her too mangled to make her way in the world. She had tried to steer Mandy toward the things that she herself had found to be solid, and she couldn’t see where her crime had been, though she knew that somewhere there must have been one. Having thus failed, and failed so mysteriously, paying felt like the least she could do.

This time felt different, though. The amount was different: thirty thousand would have seemed like an astronomical sum to Barbara and Jack themselves at Mandy's age. And the fact that Mandy was asking in person instead of picking up the phone—that was different, too. The two conditions seemed underhandedly, manipulatively linked. Barbara felt invaded.

She closed the bedroom door behind her and sat down on the bed, next to the telephone. Then she picked it up and dialed Ben's work number. Ben was her best resource when she hadn't heard from Mandy in weeks and didn't know where she was, or when she didn't know what to make of something Mandy had said over the phone. Ben always knew. He and Mandy had been close since they were children; he seemed to understand her better than the rest of them did, or at least to sympathize better, and Mandy confided in him when she bothered to confide in anybody.

"Hello?" Ben said, on the first ring, and just hearing his voice—busy, distracted, happy without even knowing it—made Barbara smile.

"Hi, Ben. Sorry to bother you at work."

"No problem, Mom. Not like it's the fate of national security I'm handling here." He was still typing something—she could hear the *clack clack clack* of the keys.

Barbara stood and walked with the phone over to the window, with its green drapes that always reminded her of the ones in *Gone With the Wind*. She fingered them, softly, reveling in their dense, oily weight. It was silly, she knew, but she sometimes daydreamed about how the fresh start she and Jack had made here had given her a new chance to be strong and Scarlet-like, if necessary—to take those curtains right down, should the occasion call for it, and use them to construct a graceful and flawless dress within which to encase herself, impermeable as a coat of armor. She'd thought she could just put the newness on like that and cover up all of the old failures. Jack had suspected some part of her motivations, when she'd picked out those curtains. "Having a Tara moment?" he'd said, and smiled.

"How're things, Mom?" Ben said.

"Not bad," she said, lightly. The decision not to mention Mandy's visit was instinctive and easy. "We got that water heater fixed. Your father threw his back out again playing golf last week."

“Wow. Isn’t that like the third time? Must be some violent golf he’s playing.”

“Yes, well. And Jan tells me they’ve picked a preschool.”

“Yeah, she told me that.”

There it was, her opening. “So how about Mandy?” she asked. “Have you heard from her recently?”

“Last week. I think things are okay,” he said, but she could hear the caution in his voice.

“How’s her new job?”

“Well....” He hesitated.

She dropped the casual tone now. “Ben, tell me, honey. I’m her *mother*.”

“It’s just that maybe she wanted to tell you herself.”

Barbara waited without speaking, letting the pressure of her reproachful silence build. He would cave—he never had been good with people being unhappy with him.

“Mom? Come on, you know how she is. I feel really bad saying anything, you know?”

She gave him nothing.

“If I tell you, will you promise not to say anything to her about it until she tells you herself?”

“Of course, Benny.”

“It sounds like that last job fell through.”

Barbara knew it. She just knew it. *A bigger apartment. Vacation days.* She had always figured that sometimes Mandy stretched things, but, never having tried, she had never actually caught her daughter in the falsehood before. So Mandy had shown up here hoping that if they were grateful enough for her visit they wouldn’t bother to wonder too much about what she was telling them. Barbara’s arms and legs thrummed, as if her body were preparing her to run some great distance. The lie seemed staggeringly huge, and it had rolled off Mandy’s tongue as if it had no weight at all. “She got fired? *Again?* What’d she do this time?”

“This boss of hers sounds like she was just a real asshole, Mom. She kept accusing her of things. I really don’t think it was Mandy’s fault.”

Barbara blew air sharply into the phone. “It never is.”

Ben sighed, more gently than she had. “Mom, it’s just....” He trailed off, searching. “It’s just that things are tough on Mandy. That’s all.”

She found Jack in his darkened den, tilted back in his barcalounger and bathed in the bluish glow of the television, which made the skin of his legs look waxy. His hands rested on the gently rounded mound of his belly. It had been two years since he'd worked a single day, and yet he still looked tired to her. What she had to say to him now would hurt him, but there was no helping it.

"Jack? I just got off the phone with Ben," she said.

He looked up at her, quizzically. "Oh? How is he?"

"He's fine. He told me something about Mandy, though."

He sighed, and she could see that he knew what she was going to say. "She lied to us just now."

"About which part?"

"She lost that job. The one she said she needed the car for, and the new apartment—it's gone." Though she wasn't actually going to cry, she didn't think, she knew she sounded teary. She tried to stop that; it wasn't helpful. "That's why she wants the money."

Jack rubbed his forehead and then raised his eyes to hers. "Okay." Not meaning that it was actually okay, but that he had absorbed it. "So where does that leave us?"

"Well, I've been thinking. I really think we need to give this some serious consideration." The words seemed reassuringly heavy and official, and in saying them her voice sounded calmer. "I'm just wondering whether we're not doing her a disservice, giving into her like this. You know? Teaching her the wrong things. I mean, if we give her that money, how is she ever going to learn?"

"Learn what?"

"That this isn't how things go, in the world." Her hands wheeled briefly through the air, trying to encompass what she wanted to say. "That you have to take some responsibility. We don't have to tell her that we found out she's lying. I don't think we have to bring up lying at all. We just have to say no."

Jack was still rubbing his forehead, and she suddenly placed the gesture: it was the same movement she'd seen him make across the backs of their children when, as babies, they lay fussing in their cribs. Out in the yard, Wilfred, who had been there too long by himself, began to bark.

"I think you're right," Jack said, finally.

They made a sad little parade going up to the carriage house. Wilfred

frisked around their ankles at first, but as they crossed the big driveway he stayed to sniff at the strip of lawn between the house and the pavement, landscaped with exotic plants that had thick, meaty leaves and names Barbara was still learning. As the two of them began to climb the stairs, Barbara had an urge to pull on Jack's sleeve and turn them both around. They could go back inside and wait for Mandy to come down; they could all have dinner; they could hand over the money, keep on acting as if they still believed in her. Maybe Mandy—so skinny and frustrated, so *disappointed*—had just been afraid of what they'd think of her and hadn't wanted to let them down. Maybe what they were about to do to her was not something that parents should ever do to their children, no matter what their children had done to them. Then Jack knocked gently on the carriage house door, and it was too late.

Mandy opened it with her hair wet and fresh-smelling from her shower, and a sort of caged look came into her eyes when she saw them standing there. "I'm just about set," she said. "Dinner's ready already?"

"Actually, we were just wondering if we could come in for a second," Jack said, as if this weren't a part of their house at all but Mandy's own.

"Sure," Mandy said, and walked splay-toed away from them—she'd been painting her toenails pink and was almost done with the second foot. The air smelled of polish. Her clothes were scattered all over the floor in a way that made it hard to believe she'd been in it for under an hour. She sat on the couch and resumed painting with her foot propped up on the coffee table. "So what's going on?" she asked.

"Well, we wanted to talk to you. We've been thinking about what you asked," Barbara said.

"Yeah? I know it's a lot, I really do." Mandy gave them a pained, understanding look and then dipped the brush into the little pink pot again and brought it back over to her toes. Why was she doing that? Did she not hear them?

"Yes, well, it *is* a lot," Barbara said. "We love you, honey, but it's just too much."

"We want to help you, Mandy," Jack added. "We do. We just don't think this is for the best."

But Mandy still didn't look like a girl who was being taught anything. "Well believe me, I would *never* ask if there was any other way," she said,

and reached for the towel beside her, which Barbara noticed, for the first time, was one of her best white guest towels with the thick fluffy pilling. Now it was streaked an electric pink from the toenail polish Mandy had wiped off, as if some exotic technicolored creature had bled all over it. That would never, ever come out, Barbara knew it. And she thought, suddenly, that there was a limit. A quota on how many chances you could give, how many apologies you could make for a person who was, after all, no longer a child, even if she was *your* child. A person who did not seem to understand about guest towels, or other people's things, or other people, or really the existence of anything at all outside herself. A full bright flower of rage bloomed within Barbara's chest. She liked the feel of it there.

"We're happy to talk with you about what your other options might be," Jack had started, but Barbara cut him off.

"Do you think we're stupid?"

Mandy raised her eyes from her toes to her mother's face. "What?"

"I said, do you think we're stupid. Your father and I. Stupid. That must be what you think."

"Barbara," Jack said, quietly.

"No, Jack. That's what she thinks. A bigger apartment? That's what you need this money for? A car repair? It's not that you lost your job?"

"What?" Mandy said, again, not very loudly. She screwed the cap back onto the nail polish with three precise turns of her wrist. She's not even *scared*, Barbara thought, and that made her madder.

"It's not that you got fired *again*?" she went on. "It's not that you want some money to just coast by with and sit around painting your toenails with for another year?" Jack closed his eyes. Barbara knew she should stop but couldn't, couldn't even want to. She couldn't remember ever saying anything like this to anyone before. Her voice was bigger than she was, and she loved the dangerous size of it, loved the way it seemed as if she just kept talking like this she'd chew right through everything and be done with it. "You don't just like not working?" she said. Her heart was pounding, flooding her with health. She had never felt so fresh and vital. "You don't just like other people's money better than yours?"

"So how did you find out?" Mandy said.

Barbara remembered her promise of secrecy. "It's not like it's so hard to guess, Mandy."

“But you’re not guessing, you *know*,” Mandy said. “I know you know. Who told you? Did Benny tell you?”

“No,” Barbara said, too quickly.

“What’d you call him for?” Mandy said, and the contempt, the resentment, in those words felt bottomless to Barbara.

“I can call my son whenever I want to.”

Mandy shot a sharp breath into the room and rolled her eyes. Barbara wanted her to say more. If Mandy spoke, Barbara knew she would reveal at last the enormous hatred she had always felt for them. There would be horror in that, but also a strange kind of vindication; she wanted that hatred out where she could see, finally, what it looked like. Blindly, she went on. “You think you’re so much smarter than we are. Oh, you’re so smart. You can just get us to do whatever you want. No need for you to exert yourself! No, you don’t have to do anything at all, because we’ll just do it for you. Isn’t that what you think?”

“Well then,” Mandy said. She stood and looked around for a moment, as if trying to decide what to do. Her face was reddening in a raw, mottled way. Then she picked up her canvas suitcase and began taking clothes off the floor and shoving them into the bag. “Well then.”

“Mandy, honey, what are you doing?” Jack said. His voice cracked.

“What am I doing, Dad?” She whirled on him. “You heard her. Do you think I’m going to stand here and take this? Jesus Christ. What does it matter what I need the money for?” She was talking to Barbara now—screaming—and still stuffing clothes into her bag. “What the fuck does it matter? You’re sitting here with loads of it and nothing to do with it but buy a fucking dog and sit around waiting to *die*. I can *use* it, don’t you get that? I *need* it. What do you need it for? When was the last time you needed anything? What’s your problem?”

“My problem is that you weren’t supposed to come here,” Barbara said, and knew it was the truth. Jack was starting to say her name, trying again to stop her, but she went on. “I was supposed to be done.”

“Well, sorry I messed up your little museum life down here, you and all the other nice happy old folks. Hope you have a nice transition to the beyond.” Pulling on her jeans beneath her bathrobe.

“How can you *say* things like that? I don’t understand you,” Barbara said. “I have never understood you.”

“Fuck, you sure never put yourself out trying.”

“Mandy, you will not speak to your mother that way,” Jack said sharply, but Mandy was zipping up her bag, not listening. “See you, Dad,” she said. She shoved her bare feet into her shoes. Barbara was sure that the toenails were still wet, that her feet would be stuck to the cloth insides of those shoes when she tried to take them off. Then Mandy swung her bag up onto her shoulder and yanked the door open and left it open behind her. The image of her with that bag on her shoulder was like a strange and heartbreaking parody of sending Mandy out their kitchen door on her first day of school. A memory of her with a backpack bigger than she was.” “Wait,” she said to her daughter, but it was too soft, and Mandy’s feet were already pounding down the wooden steps, faster and faster. Wilfred started to bark, a high, thin, piercing sound.

Barbara turned her head to look at Jack and caught sight of a forgotten pink sock poking out from under the couch, looking lonely. Barbara snatched it up and went running out the door.

“Mandy!” she shouted, loud enough, she knew, to be heard. She waved the sock like a pennant. Mandy was already in her car. She slammed the door shut. “Mandy!” Wilfred was barking faster now, and Barbara was suddenly, horribly convinced that he was back there in the driveway, behind the car, which roared to life and shot backwards. She had a vivid mental image of Wilfred there in the driveway, crushed like a piece of rotten fruit, with his eyes still open, maybe, his legs still twitching. The car blocked the space where he would be.

Then the car careened forward at a curve as Mandy drove it onto and down the red-tiled street. And there was Wilfred, standing on the grass, wagging his tail and yipping up at them stupidly, stupidly safe.