

FICTION NOVEMBER 28, 2011 ISSUE

LEAVING MAVERLEY

By Alice Munro

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In the old days when there was a movie theatre in every town there was one in this town, too, in Maverley, and it was called the Capital, as such theatres often were. Morgan Holly was the owner and the projectionist. He didn't like dealing with the public—he preferred to sit in his upstairs cubbyhole managing the story on the screen—so naturally he was annoyed when the girl who took the tickets told him that she was going to have to quit, because she was having a baby. He might have expected this—she had been married for half a year, and in those days you were supposed to get out of the public eye before you began to show—but he so disliked change and the idea of people having private lives that he was taken by surprise.



Illustration by Jean-françois Martin

Fortunately, she came up with somebody who might replace her. A girl who lived on her street had mentioned that she would like to have an evening job. She was not able to work in the daytime, because she had to help her mother look after the younger children. She was smart enough to manage, though shy.

Morgan said that that was fine—he didn't hire a ticket-taker to gab with the customers.

So the girl came. Her name was Leah, and Morgan's first and last question for her was to ask what kind of name that was. She said that it was out of the Bible. He noticed then that she did not have any makeup on and that her hair was slicked unbecomingly tight to her head and held there with bobby pins. He had a moment's worry about whether she was really sixteen and could legally hold a job, but close up he saw that it was likely the truth. He told her that she would need to work one show, starting at eight o'clock, on week nights and two shows, starting at seven, on Saturday nights. After closing, she would be responsible for counting the take and locking it away.

There was only one problem. She said that she would be able to walk herself home on week nights but it would not be allowed on Saturday nights and her father could not come for her then, because he himself had a night job at the mill.

Morgan said that he did not know what there was to be scared of in a place like this, and was about to tell her to get lost, when he remembered the night policeman who often broke his rounds to watch a little of the movie. Perhaps he could be charged with getting Leah home.

She said that she would ask her father.

Her father agreed, but he had to be satisfied on other accounts. Leah was not to look at the screen or listen to any of the dialogue. The religion that the family belonged to did not allow it. Morgan said that he did not hire his ticket-takers to give them a free peek at the show. As for the dialogue, he lied and said that the theatre was soundproofed.

Ray Elliot, the night policeman, had taken the job so that he would be able to help his wife manage for at least some part of the daytime. He could get by with about five hours' sleep in the morning and then a nap in the late afternoon. Often, the nap did not materialize, because of some chore that had to be done or just because he and his wife—her name was Isabel—got to talking. They had no children and could get talking anytime about anything. He brought her the news of the town, which often made her laugh, and she told him about the books she was reading.

Ray had joined up for the war as soon as he was eighteen. He chose the Air Force, which promised, as was said, the most adventure and the quickest death. He had been a mid-upper gunner—a position that Isabel could never get straight in her head—and he had survived. Close to the end of the war, he'd been transferred to a new crew, and within a couple of weeks his old crew, the men he'd flown with so many times, were shot down and lost. He came home with a vague idea that he had to do something meaningful with the life that had so inexplicably been left to him, but he didn't know what.

First, he had to finish high school. In the town where he had grown up, a special school had been set up for veterans who were doing just that and hoping to go on to college, courtesy of the grateful citizens. The teacher of English Language and Literature was Isabel. She was thirty years old and married. Her husband, too, was a veteran, who considerably outranked the students in her English class. She was planning to put in this one year of teaching out of general patriotism, and then she was going to retire and start a family. She discussed this openly with her students, who said, just out of her earshot, that some guys got all the luck.

Ray disliked hearing that kind of talk, and the reason was that he had fallen in love with her. And she with him, which seemed infinitely more surprising. It was preposterous to everybody except themselves. There was a divorce—a scandal to her well-connected family and a shock to her husband, who had wanted to marry her since they were children. Ray had an easier time of it than she did, because he had little family to speak of, and those he did have announced that they supposed they wouldn't be good enough for him now that he was marrying so high up, and they would just stay out of

his way in the future. If they expected any denial or reassurance in response to this, they did not get it. O.K. with him was what he more or less said. Time to make a fresh start. Isabel said that she could go on teaching until Ray had finished college and got established in whatever it was that he wanted to do.

But the plan had to change. She was not well. At first, they thought it was nerves. The upheaval. The foolish fuss.

Then the pains came. Pain whenever she took a deep breath. Pain under the breastbone and in her left shoulder. She ignored it. She joked about God punishing her for her amorous adventure and said that he, God, was wasting his time when she didn't even believe in him.

She had something called pericarditis. It was serious and she had ignored it to her peril. It was something she would not be cured of but could manage, with difficulty. She could never teach again. Any infection would be dangerous, and where is infection more rampant than in a schoolroom? It was Ray now who had to support her, and he took a job as a policeman in this small town called Maverley, just over the Grey-Bruce border. He didn't mind the work and she didn't mind, after a while, her semi-seclusion.

There was one thing they didn't talk about. Each of them wondered whether the other minded not being able to have children. It occurred to Ray that that disappointment might have something to do with Isabel's wanting to hear all about the girl he had to walk home on Saturday nights.

"That is deplorable," she said when she heard about the ban on movies, and she was even more upset when he told her that the girl had been kept out of high school to help at home.

"And you say she's intelligent."

Ray did not remember having said that. He had said that she was weirdly shy, so that during their walks he had to rack his brains for a subject of conversation. Some questions he thought of wouldn't do. Such as, What is your favorite subject at school? That would have had to go into the past tense and it would not matter now whether she'd liked anything. Or, What did she want to do when she was grown up? She was grown up now, for all intents and purposes, and she had her work cut out for her, whether she wanted it or not. Also the question of whether she liked this town, and did she miss wherever it was that she used to live—pointless. And they had already gone through, without elaboration, the names and ages of the younger children in her family. When he inquired after a dog or a cat, she reported that she didn't have any.

She did come up with a question for him eventually. She asked what it was that people had been laughing about in the movie that night.

He didn't think he should remind her that she wasn't supposed to have heard anything. But he could not remember what might have been funny. So he said that it must have been some stupid thing—you could never tell what would make the audience laugh. He said that he didn't get too involved in the movies, seeing them as he did, in bits and pieces.

He seldom followed the plots.

“Plots,” she said.

He had to tell her what that meant—that there were stories being told. And from that time on there was no problem making conversation. Nor did he need to warn her that it might not be wise to repeat any of it at home. She understood. He was called upon not to tell any specific story—which he could hardly have done anyway—but to explain that the stories were often about crooks and innocent people and that the crooks generally managed well enough at first by committing their crimes and hoodwinking people singing in night clubs (which were like dance halls) or sometimes, God knows why, singing on mountaintops or in some other unlikely outdoor scenery, holding up the action. Sometimes the movies were in color. With magnificent costumes if the story was set in the past. Dressed-up actors making a big show of killing one another. Glycerin tears running down ladies’ cheeks. Jungle animals brought in from zoos, probably, and teased to act ferocious. People getting up from being murdered in various ways the moment the camera was off them. Alive and well, though you had just seen them shot or on the executioner’s block with their heads rolling in a basket.

“You should take it easy,” Isabel said. “You could give her nightmares.”

Ray said he’d be surprised. And certainly the girl had an air of figuring things out, rather than being alarmed or confused. For instance, she never asked what the executioner’s block was or seemed surprised at the thought of heads on it. There was something in her, he told Isabel, something that made her want to absorb whatever you said to her, instead of just being thrilled or mystified by it. Some way in which he thought she had already shut herself off from her family. Not to be contemptuous of them, or unkind. She was just rock-bottom thoughtful.

But then he said what made him sorrier than he knew why.

“She hasn’t got much to look forward to, one way or the other.”

“Well, we could snatch her away,” Isabel said.

Then he warned her. Be serious.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Shortly before Christmas (though the cold had not really set in yet), Morgan came to the police station around midnight one night in the middle of the week to say that Leah was missing.

She had sold the tickets as usual and closed the window and put the money where it was supposed to go and set off for home, so far as he knew. He himself had shut things up when the show was done, but when he got outside this woman he didn’t know had appeared, asking what had become of Leah. This was the mother—Leah’s mother. The father was

still at his job at the mill, and Morgan had suggested that the girl might have taken it into her head to go and see him at work. The mother didn't seem to know what he was talking about, so he said that they could go to the mill and see if the girl was there, and she—the mother—cried and begged him not to do any such thing. So Morgan gave her a ride home, thinking that the girl might have turned up by now, but no luck, and then he thought he had better go and inform Ray.

He didn't relish the thought of having to break the news to the father.

Ray said that they should go to the mill at once—there was a slim chance she might be there. But of course when they located the father he hadn't seen anything of her, and he got into a rage about his wife's going out like that when she did not have permission to leave the house.

Ray asked about friends and was not surprised to learn that Leah didn't have any. Then he let Morgan go home and went himself to the house, where the mother was very much in the distracted state that Morgan had described. The children were still up, or some of them were, and they, too, proved to be speechless. They trembled either from fright and their misgivings about the stranger in the house or from the cold, which Ray noticed was definitely on the rise, even indoors. Maybe the father had rules about the heat as well.

Leah had been wearing her winter coat—he got that much out of them. He knew the baggy brown checked garment and thought that it would keep her warm for a while, at least. Between the time that Morgan had first shown up and now, snow had begun to fall fairly heavily.

When his shift was over, Ray went home and told Isabel what had happened. Then he went out again and she didn't try to stop him.

An hour later, he was back with no results, and the news that the roads were likely to be closed for the first big snowstorm of the winter.

By morning, that was in fact the case; the town was boxed in for the first time that year and the main street was the only one that the snowplows tried to keep open. Nearly all the stores were closed, and in the part of town where Leah's family lived the power had gone out and there was nothing that could be done about it, with the wind arching and bowing the trees until it looked as if they were trying to sweep the ground.

The day-shift policeman had an idea that had not occurred to Ray. He was a member of the United Church and he was aware—or his wife was aware—that Leah did ironing every week for the minister's wife. He and Ray went to the parsonage to see if anybody there knew anything that could account for the girl's disappearance, but there was no information to be had, and after that brief stirring of hope the trail seemed even more hopeless than before.

Ray was a little surprised that the girl had taken on another job and not mentioned it. Even though, compared with the

theatre, it hardly seemed like much of a foray into the world.

He tried to sleep in the afternoon and did manage an hour or so. Isabel attempted to get a conversation going at supper but nothing lasted. Ray's talk kept circling back to the visit to the minister, and how the wife had been helpful and concerned, as much as she could be, but how he—the minister—had not exactly behaved as you might think a minister should. He had answered the door impatiently, as if he had been interrupted while writing his sermon or something. He'd called to his wife and when she came she'd had to remind him who the girl was. Remember the girl who comes to help out with the ironing? Leah? Then he'd said that he hoped there would be some news soon, while trying to inch the door shut against the wind.

"Well, what else could he have done?" Isabel said. "Prayed?"

Ray thought that it wouldn't have hurt.

"It would just have embarrassed everybody and exposed the futility," Isabel said. Then she added that he was probably a very up-to-date minister who went in more for the symbolic.

Some sort of search had to be carried out, never mind the weather. Back sheds and an old horse barn unused for years had to be pried open and ransacked in case she had taken shelter there. Nothing came to light. The local radio station was alerted and broadcast a description.

If Leah had been hitchhiking, Ray thought, she might have been picked up before the storm got started, which could be good or bad.

The broadcast said that she was a little under average height—Ray would have said a little over—and that she had straight medium-brown hair. He would have said very dark brown, close to black.

Her father did not take part in the search; nor did any of her brothers. Of course, the boys were younger than she was and would never have got out of the house without the father's consent anyway. When Ray went around to the house on foot and made it through to the door, it was hardly opened, and the father didn't waste any time telling him that the girl was most likely a runaway. Her punishment was out of his hands and in God's now. There was no invitation to Ray to come in and thaw himself out. Perhaps there was still no heat in the house.

The storm did die down, around the middle of the next day. The snowplows got out and cleared the town streets. The county plows took over the highway. The drivers were told to keep their eyes open for a body frozen in the drifts.

The day after that, the mail truck came through and there was a letter. It was addressed not to anyone in Leah's family but to the minister and his wife. It was from Leah, to report that she had got married. The bridegroom was the minister's son, who was a saxophone player in a jazz band. He had added the words "Surprise Surprise" at the bottom of the page. Or so it was reported, though Isabel asked how anybody could know that, unless they were in the habit of

steaming envelopes open at the post office.

The sax player hadn't lived in this town when he was a child. His father had been posted elsewhere then. And he had visited very rarely. Most people could not even have told you what he looked like. He never attended church. He had brought a woman home a couple of years ago. Very made-up and dressy. It was said that she was his wife, but apparently she hadn't been.

How often had the girl been in the minister's house, doing the ironing, when the sax player was there? Some people had worked it out. It would have been one time only. This was what Ray heard at the police station, where gossip could flourish as well as it did among women.

Isabel thought it was a great story. And not the elopers' fault. They had not ordered the snowstorm, after all.

It turned out that she herself had some slight knowledge of the sax player. She had run into him at the post office once, when he happened to be home and she was having one of her spells of being well enough to go out. She had sent away for a record but it hadn't come. He had asked her what it was and she had told him. Something she could not remember now. He'd told her then about his own involvement with a different kind of music. Something had already made her sure that he wasn't a local. The way he leaned into her and the way he smelled strongly of Juicy Fruit gum. He didn't mention the parsonage, but somebody else told her of the connection, after he had wished her goodbye and good luck.

Just a little bit flirtatious, or sure of his welcome. Some nonsense about letting him come and listen to the record if it ever arrived. She hoped she was meant to take that as a joke.

She teased Ray, wondering if it was on account of his descriptions of the wide world via the movies that the girl had got the idea.

Ray did not reveal and could hardly believe the desolation he had felt during the time when the girl was missing. He was, of course, greatly relieved when he found out what had happened.

Still, she was gone. In a not entirely unusual or unhopeful way, she was gone. Absurdly, he felt offended. As if she could have shown some inkling, at least, that there was another part of her life.

Her parents and all the other children were soon gone as well, and it seemed that nobody knew where.

The minister and his wife did not leave town when he retired.

They were able to keep the same house and it was often still referred to as the parsonage, although it was not really that anymore. The new minister's young wife had taken issue with some features of the place, and the church authorities, rather than fix it up, had decided to build a new house so that she could not complain anymore. The old parsonage was then sold cheaply to the old minister. It had room for the musician son and his wife when they came to visit with their

children.

There were two, their names appearing in the newspaper when they were born. A boy and then a girl. They came occasionally to visit, usually with Leah only; the father was busy with his dances or whatever. Neither Ray nor Isabel had run into them at those times.

Isabel was better; she was almost normal. She cooked so well that they both put on weight and she had to stop, or at least do the fancier things less often. She got together with some other women in the town to read and discuss Great Books. A few had not understood what this would really be like and dropped out, but aside from them it was a startling success. Isabel laughed about the fuss there would be in Heaven as they tackled poor old Dante.

Then there was some fainting or near-fainting, but she would not go to the doctor till Ray got angry with her and she claimed it was his temper that had made her sick. She apologized and they made up, but her heart took such a plunge that they had to hire a woman who was called a practical nurse to stay with her when Ray could not be there. Fortunately, there was some money—hers from an inheritance and his from a slight raise, which materialized even though, by choice, he kept on with the night shift.

One summer morning, on his way home, he checked at the post office to see if the mail was ready. Sometimes they had got it sorted by this time; sometimes they hadn't. This morning they hadn't.

And now on the sidewalk, coming toward him in the bright early light of the day, was Leah. She was pushing a stroller, with a little girl about two years old inside it, kicking her legs against the metal footrest. Another child was taking things more soberly, holding on to his mother's skirt. Or to what was really a long orangey pair of trousers. She was wearing with them a loose white top, something like an undervest. Her hair had more shine than it used to have, and her smile, which he had never actually seen before, seemed positively to shower him with delight.

She could almost have been one of Isabel's new friends, who were mostly either younger or recently arrived in this town, though there were a few older, once more cautious residents, who had been swept up in this bright new era, their former viewpoints dismissed and their language altered, straining to be crisp and crude.

He had been feeling disappointed not to find any new magazines at the post office. Not that it mattered so much to Isabel now. She used to live for her magazines, which were all serious and thought-provoking but with witty cartoons that she laughed at. Even the ads for furs and jewels had made her laugh, and he hoped, still, that they would revive her. Now, at least, he'd have something to tell her about. Leah.

Leah greeted him with a new voice and pretended to be amazed that he had recognized her, since she had grown—as she put it—into practically an old lady. She introduced the little girl, who would not look up and kept a rhythm going on the metal footrest, and the boy, who looked into the distance and muttered. She teased the boy because he would not let go of her clothes.

“We’re across the street now, honeybunch.”

His name was David and the girl’s was Shelley. Ray had not remembered those names from the paper. He had an idea that both were fashionable.

She said that they were staying with her in-laws.

Not visiting them. Staying with them. He didn’t think of that till later and it might have meant nothing.

“We’re just on our way to the post office.”

He told her that he was coming from there, but they weren’t through with the sorting yet.

“Oh, too bad. We thought there might be a letter from Daddy, didn’t we, David?”

The little boy had hold of her clothing again.

“Wait till they get them sorted,” she said. “Maybe there’ll be one then.”

There was a feeling that she didn’t quite want to part with Ray yet, and Ray did not want it, either, but it was hard to think of anything else to say.

“I’m on my way to the drugstore,” he said.

“Oh, are you?”

“I have to pick up a prescription for my wife.”

“Oh, I hope she’s not sick.”

Then he felt as if he had committed a betrayal and said rather shortly, “No. Nothing much.”

She was looking past Ray now, and saying hello in the same delighted voice with which she had greeted him, some moments ago.

Speaking now to the United Church minister, the new, or fairly new, one, whose wife had demanded the up-to-date house.

She asked the two men if they knew each other and they said yes, they did. Both spoke in a tone that indicated *not well*, and that maybe showed some satisfaction that it should be so. Ray noticed that the man was not wearing his dog collar.

“Hasn’t had to haul me in for any infractions yet,” the minister said, perhaps thinking that he should have been jollier. He shook Ray’s hand.

“This is so lucky,” Leah said. “I’ve been wanting to ask you some questions and now here you are.”

“Here I am.”

“I mean about Sunday school,” Leah said. “I’ve been wondering. I’ve got these two little creatures growing up and I’ve been wondering how soon and what’s the procedure and everything.”

“Oh, yes,” the minister said.

Ray could see that he was one of those who didn’t particularly like doing their ministering in public. Didn’t want the subject brought up, as it were, every time they took to the streets. But the minister hid his discomfort as well as he could and there must have been some compensation for him in talking to a girl who looked like Leah.

“We should discuss it,” he said. “Make an appointment anytime.”

Ray was saying that he had to be off.

“Good to run into you,” he said to Leah, and gave a nod to the man of the cloth.

He went on, in possession of two new pieces of information. She was going to be here for some time, if she was trying to make arrangements for Sunday school. And she had not got out of her system all the religion that her upbringing had put into it.

He looked forward to running into her again, but that did not happen.

When he got home, he told Isabel about how the girl had changed, and she said, “It all sounds pretty commonplace, after all.”

She seemed a little testy, perhaps because she had been waiting for him to get her coffee. Her helper was not due till nine o’clock and she was forbidden, after a scalding accident, to try to manage it herself.

It was downhill and several scares for them till Christmastime, and then Ray got a leave of absence. They took off for the city, where certain medical specialists were to be found. Isabel was admitted to the hospital immediately and Ray was able to get into one of the rooms provided for the use of relatives from out of town. Suddenly, he had no responsibilities except to visit Isabel for long hours each day and take note of how she was responding to various treatments. At first, he tried to distract her with lively talk of the past, or observations about the hospital and other patients he got glimpses of. He took walks almost every day, in spite of the weather, and he told her all about those as well. He brought a newspaper with him and read her the news. Finally, she said, “It’s so good of you, darling, but I seem to be past it.”

“Past what?” he countered, but she said, “Oh, please,” and after that he found himself silently reading some book from

the hospital library. She said, “Don’t worry if I close my eyes. I know you’re there.”

She had been moved some time ago from Acute Care into a room that held four women who were more or less in the same condition as she was, though one occasionally roused herself to holler at Ray, “Give us a kiss.”

Then one day he came in and found another woman in Isabel’s bed. For a moment, he thought she had died and nobody had told him. But the voluble patient in the kitty-corner bed cried out, “Upstairs.” With some notion of jollity or triumph.

And that was what had happened. Isabel had failed to wake up that morning and had been moved to another floor, where it seemed they stashed the people who had no chance of improving—even less chance than those in the previous room—but were refusing to die.

“You might as well go home,” they told him. They said that they would get in touch if there was any change.

That made sense. For one thing, he had used up all his time in the relatives’ housing. And he had more than used up his time away from the police force in Maverley. All signs said that the right thing to do was to go back there.

Instead, he stayed in the city. He got a job with the hospital maintenance crew, cleaning and clearing and mopping. He found a furnished apartment, with just essentials in it, not far away.

He went home, but only briefly. As soon as he got there, he started making arrangements to sell the house and whatever was in it. He put the real-estate people in charge of that and got out of their way as quickly as he could; he did not want to explain anything to anybody. He did not care about anything that had happened in that place. All those years in the town, all he knew about it, seemed to just slip away from him.

He did hear something while he was there, a kind of scandal involving the United Church minister, who was trying to get his wife to divorce him, on the ground of adultery. Committing adultery with a parishioner was bad enough, but it seemed that the minister, instead of keeping it as quiet as possible and slinking off to get rehabilitated or to serve in some forsaken parish in the hinterlands, had chosen to face the music from the pulpit. He had more than confessed. Everything had been a sham, he said. His mouthing of the Gospels and the commandments he didn’t fully believe in, and most of all his preachings about love and sex, his conventional, timid, and evasive recommendations: a sham. He was now a man set free, free to tell them what a relief it was to celebrate the life of the body along with the life of the spirit. The woman who had done this for him, it seemed, was Leah. Her husband, the musician, Ray was told, had come back to get her sometime before, but she hadn’t wanted to go with him. He’d blamed it on the minister, but he was a drunk—the husband was—so nobody had known whether to believe him or not. His mother must have believed him, though, because she had kicked Leah out and hung on to the children.

As far as Ray was concerned, this was all revolting chatter. Adulteries and drunks and scandals—who was right and who was wrong? Who could care? That girl had grown up to preen and bargain like the rest of them. The waste of time, the

waste of life, by people all scrambling for excitement and paying no attention to anything that mattered.

Of course, when he had been able to talk to Isabel, everything had been different. Not that Isabel would have been looking for answers—rather, that she would have made him feel as if there were more to the subject than he had taken account of. Then she'd have ended up laughing.

He got along well enough at work. They asked him if he wanted to join a bowling team and he thanked them but said he didn't have time. He had plenty of time, actually, but had to spend it with Isabel. Watching for any change, any explanation. Not letting anything slip away.

"Her name is Isabel," he used to remind the nurses if they said, "Now, my lady," or "O.K., missus, over we go."

Then he got used to hearing them speak to her that way. So there were changes, after all. If not in Isabel, he could find them in himself.

For quite a while, he had been going to see her once a day.

Then he made it every other day. Then twice a week.

Four years. He thought it must be close to a record. He asked those who cared for her if that was so and they said, "Well. Getting there." They had a habit of being vague about everything.

He had got over the persistent idea that she was thinking. He was no longer waiting for her to open her eyes. It was just that he could not go off and leave her there alone.

She had changed from a very thin woman not to a child but to an ungainly and ill-assorted collection of bones, with a birdlike crest, ready to die every minute with the erratic shaping of her breath.

There were some large rooms used for rehabilitation and exercise, connected to the hospital. Usually he saw them only when they were empty, all the equipment put away and the lights turned off. But one night as he was leaving he took a different route through the building for some reason and saw a light left on.

And when he went to investigate he saw that somebody was still there. A woman. She was sitting astride one of the blown-up exercise balls, just resting there, or perhaps trying to remember where she was supposed to go next.

It was Leah. He didn't recognize her at first, but then he looked again and it was Leah. He wouldn't have gone in, maybe, if he'd seen who it was, but now he was halfway on his mission to turn off the light. She saw him.

She slid off her perch. She was wearing some sort of purposeful athletic outfit and had gained a fair amount of weight.

“I thought I might run into you sometime,” she said. “How is Isabel?”

It was a bit of a surprise to hear her call Isabel by her first name, or to speak of her at all, as if she’d known her.

He told her briefly how Isabel was. No way to tell it now except briefly.

“Do you talk to her?” she said.

“Not so much anymore.”

“Oh, you should. You shouldn’t give up talking to them.”

How did she come to think she knew so much about everything?

“You’re not surprised to see me, are you? You must have heard?” she said.

He did not know how to answer this.

“Well,” he said.

“It’s been a while since I heard that you were here and all, so I guess I just thought you’d know about me being down here, too.”

He said no.

“I do recreation,” she told him. “I mean for the cancer patients. If they’re up to it, like.”

He said he guessed that was a good idea.

“It’s great. I mean for me, too. I’m pretty much O.K., but sometimes things get to me. I mean particularly at suppertime. That’s when it can start to feel weird.”

She saw that he didn’t know what she was talking about and she was ready—maybe eager—to explain.

“I mean without the kids and all. You didn’t know their father got them?”

“No,” he said.

“Oh, well. It’s because they thought his mother could look after them, really. He’s in A.A. and all, but the judgment wouldn’t have gone like that if it wasn’t for her.”

She snuffled and dashed away tears in an almost disregarding way.

“Don’t be embarrassed—it isn’t as bad as it looks. I just automatically cry. Crying isn’t so bad for you, either, so long as you don’t make a career of it.”

The man in A.A. would be the sax player. But what about the minister and whatever had been going on there?

Just as if he had asked her aloud, she said, “Oh. Then. Carl. That stuff was such a big deal and everything? I should have had my head examined.

“Carl got married again,” she said. “That made him feel better. I mean because he’d sort of got past whatever it was he had on me. It was really kind of funny. He went and married another minister. You know how they let women be ministers now? Well, she’s one. So he’s like the minister’s wife. I think that’s a howl.”

Dry-eyed now, smiling. He knew that there was more coming, but he could not guess what it might be.

“You must have been here quite a while. You got a place of your own?”

“Yes.”

“You cook your own supper and everything?”

He said that that was the case.

“I could do that for you once in a while. Would that be a good idea?”

Her eyes had brightened, holding his.

He said maybe, but to tell the truth there wasn’t room in his place for more than one person to move around at a time.

Then he said that he hadn’t looked in on Isabel for a couple of days, and he must go and do it now.

She nodded just slightly in agreement. She did not appear hurt or discouraged.

“See you around.”

“See you.”

They had been looking all over for him. Isabel was finally gone. They said “gone,” as if she had got up and left. When someone had checked her about an hour ago, she had been the same as ever, and now she was gone.

He had often wondered what difference it would make.

But the emptiness in place of her was astounding.

He looked at the nurse in wonder. She thought he was asking her what he had to do next and she began to tell him. Filling him in. He understood her fine, but was still preoccupied.

He'd thought that it had happened long before with Isabel, but it hadn't. Not until now.

She had existed and now she did not. Not at all, as if not ever. And people hurried around, as if this could be overcome by making arrangements. He, too, obeyed the customs, signing where he was told to sign, arranging—as they said—for the remains.

What an excellent word—"remains." Like something left to dry out in sooty layers in a cupboard.

And before long he found himself outside, pretending that he had as ordinary and good a reason as anybody else to put one foot ahead of the other.

What he carried with him, all he carried with him, was a lack, something like a lack of air, of proper behavior in his lungs, a difficulty that he supposed would go on forever.

The girl he'd been talking to, whom he'd once known—she had spoken of her children. The loss of her children. Getting used to that. A problem at supertime.

An expert at losing, she might be called—himself a novice by comparison. And now he could not remember her name. Had lost her name, though he'd known it well. Losing, lost. A joke on him, if you wanted one.

He was going up his own steps when it came to him.

Leah.

A relief out of all proportion, to remember her. ♦

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