

The Last Speaker of the Language

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All *right*. Here we go.

Darlyn teeters high on a swayback wooden ladder she has dragged in from her mother's garage. From here she can reach around blindly on top of the kitchen cabinets. She has struck pay dirt—a tidy arrangement of small, flat bottles. She doesn't have to look to know they will all be pints of 5 O'Clock vodka.

She backs down the ladder, finds a grocery bag, goes back up and tosses in every bottle she can reach. Then she moves the ladder further along the way and clears out the bottles above those cabinets. She pours the liquor down the drain in the sink. 5 O'Clock is not for the amateur drinker. When she has the presence of mind, Darlyn's mother filters it through a Brita, then mixes it with lime juice and ice and ginger ale, her version of a Suffering Bastard. After a while, though, she drops the lime and the niceties and in the end skips even the glass.

All this poking around her mother's hiding places and finding a few handles of 5 O'Clock in the bottom of the laundry basket and tidying up a little but not dealing with a huge meal-moth situation in the pantry takes maybe an hour, but when she is done her mother is still passed out on the floor of the bathroom. Darlyn needs to use the toilet, which her mother is sort of propped against, like a bad doll. She takes her by an arm and a leg, and pulls her sideways by her sweatshirt over a ways toward the wall, lifts her head onto a folded towel. Then, while she is sitting on the toilet, she sinks into the special sorrow of peeing while your mother is out cold on the floor next to you. There are probably heavy drinking cultures, she thinks—maybe in rural eastern Europe—where they have a specific word for this emotion.

She leaves Jackie where she lies. She will ask Russ to go over later, when their mother will be more wakeable. He can put her through a home-style Valium detox they use to avoid the punishments of the emergency room. Jackie has a ton of Valium, also pain pills—jumbo scrips from a collection of sketchy doctors around the city. In the pursuit of euphoria and numbness, she is a busy and resourceful person. At one point, she even had money to fund her downfall, a surprise inheritance from an aunt, almost all of it gone in just a few years to the 5 O’Clock company, and in the early, flush days of her roll, to the Stolichnaya family. Also to phone scammers who preyed on her until Darlyn got her mother’s number changed, twice. Now Jackie drinks without her phone friends and their tantalizing investments. If she wants bad company, she has to go out for it.

Darlyn does not have enough money to support her mother. This is a problem that weighs on her, what will happen when Jackie runs out. And so she makes these futile gestures toward getting her to sober up, maybe even get a job. Jackie is only in her late sixties. Early on she was a bookkeeper, but of course that’s a computerized business now. Done in offices where no one chain-smokes.

Lake is making dinner. At seven she was queen of the Easy-Bake Oven. At ten she is queen of the microwave. When she turns twelve, she will get to use the stove without supervision. Darlyn sees from the empty cartons on the counter that tonight it’s going to be Señora Garcia’s Enchiladas and Rice. Lake is sliding the contents of two black plastic trays onto actual plates, then sprinkling chopped cilantro over the small, dark, oily masses, so it won’t be obvious that dinner is an off-brand frozen entrée. Then she uses her frosting funnel to squeeze a swirl of sour cream onto the rims of the plates. Lake watches a lot of Food Network programming and is big into side dollops and drizzles and sometimes, like tonight, decorative foams.

“Wow, this looks so good,” Darlyn says and hopes she sounds sincere.

Lake is the name her daughter chose for herself last year. She wasn’t happy with Mary. Darlyn’s thinking was to give her the plainest name possible. She herself has suffered her whole life with one that makes anyone using it sound like they’re calling over a truck-stop waitress. It just never occurred to her that she was allowed to change it. So, good for Mary. Good for Lake.

They sit across the breakfast bar from each other.

“Mmm, this green—”

“Lemon-avocado foam,” Lake says in a grave way accompanied by a small frown of concentration, then tastes some, judging.

“Listen. We’re pulling the plug on the phone tonight. Your Uncle Russ is helping me with Grandma, and at some point in the middle of the night he’s going to throw up his hands and call here for help. I have to open the store tomorrow so I have no time for your grandmother’s monkey business. I need solid sleep.”

“Is she going to be all right?” For no reason Darlyn can see, Lake is crazy about her grandmother.

“Oh, I can’t imagine that, but I don’t want you ruining your childhood worrying about her.”

“Can I cook this weekend?”

“I’m working Saturday while you and your Uncle Russ are at *Wicked*. But Sunday I’m all yours. What’re you going to make?”

“Arctic char with a crust of crushed macadamia nuts and ancho chilies.”

“Wow.”

“You’ll take me to Trader Joe’s for my ingredients?”

“Sure.” Because the child she wound up with is Lake, single parenthood is turning out to be the easiest part of Darlyn’s life.

At 2:24 a.m., the phone starts ringing. Darlyn forgot to pull the plug.

“Fuck.” She gets up, yanks the cord from the wall, then falls back into bed.

“That’s going right into your locker,” she tells Brad Wiggins first thing Friday morning in reference to his glitter T-shirt. She hands him an orange Home Depot polo. “You got the word about pushing the Butterscotch Heather stain-resistant nylon? We’ve got a big overstock situation. Big.”

“The thing is, it’s really a total violation of my professional ethics to put that crap carpet in a client’s home.”

“You don’t have clients. *We* have customers. This is Home Depot, not the Mart. You’re just a beginning gay guy, not a cutting-edge Manhattan decorator.” She can say stuff like this, being technically queer herself.

Her cell has been ringing in her pocket since she got to work. It’s Russ. When she can duck into the break room, she calls him back.

“How was she when you got there?”

“Well, that’s the thing. That’s why I’ve been calling you *seven hundred* times. She wasn’t home when I got there and I still haven’t been able to find her.”

“You went to Umpire’s?”

“And Corey’s.”

Darlyn fishes around for an idea on her mother's whereabouts, but comes up blank. "We'll just have to wait until she calls. And hope she hasn't gotten hold of a new credit card."

"Looking particularly minxy today, D."

This is Norm Homer, head of Décor and Darlyn's immediate supervisor. ("Hey dude," Brad Wiggins likes to say, when Norm is not around, "get a real last name.")

What is minxy even? He appears to have no awareness at all of workplace sexual harassment. Although he is in his fifties, Norm still lives with his parents. For the employee picnic last summer, his big idea—for the five seconds until it got shot down—was a kissing booth to raise money for a cure for something. Darlyn and the cashiers were supposed to take turns, charging five dollars a kiss. So what is she going to do, report him and get him fired so he can sit home with his parents, bewildered? Plus she doesn't want to raise a ruckus. She is lucky to have this job. Her two closest friends plus her brother have all lost theirs. They are totally demoralized. They are in a private prison, the lock-down of failure.

The woman in the shower with Darlyn is married. The shower is in the bathroom of Room 17 at the Diplomat Motel up on Lincoln. No one in the diplomatic service of any country has ever stayed there.

Darlyn is too in love with this woman. Christy, this is the woman's name. She holds no place in Darlyn's life, and Darlyn holds no place in hers. Christy is never going to leave her husband. What she and Darlyn have is totally compartmentalized. This particular compartment is an hour and fifteen minutes between Darlyn leaving work and having to pick up Lake at swim practice. This hugely circumscribed affair is the reason she thinks of herself at the moment as only technically queer. She would like to be a lot queerer, but that's not happening.

"You know what I imagine as I go to sleep?" Christy is very soapy at the moment, kissing along Darlyn's hairline, the top of her ear. She always kisses Darlyn in such a gentle, specific way, as though she can't believe how lucky she is to be able to do this, to have Darlyn. "I imagine us on vacation in Spain. It's sunny and hot in the street outside, but we're in a room with shutters and it's cool as can be. We're in bed planning where to go for dinner, what we're going to wear."

Darlyn doesn't say anything. Her own fantasy is that they go grocery shopping together. As unlikely as the vacation in Spain.

Her attraction to Christy isn't just about the sex, or even just about love. It's also about life being so much bigger than Darlyn previously thought, a big-ness just out of reach.

It's almost Lake's bedtime and she is perched at the front of her chair, deep into whatever's happening on the desktop screen, moving the mouse around as fast as a real one. She smells of chlorine. Sometimes Darlyn worries that the municipal pool is half chlorine, half toddler pee.

"What're you doing?"

"Playing Palomino."

In Palomino Playland, horse avatars have adventures in an imaginary land of mountains and forests, as opposed to a bungalow neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago. The Palomino site is designed to appeal to preteen girls. Darlyn worries that her daughter is the only ten-year-old playing. That all the other horses—Wind Warrior and Light Beam and especially Old Red—are, behind the internet scrim, pedophiles in crusty sweats. She has laid down the law: no meeting up with anyone Lake meets online. Darlyn's fears of the Web are huge.

"I forgot to tell you. While you were in the basement? Grandma called."

"How'd she sound?" Darlyn hates the answer to this question before she even hears it. Whatever, it will mean calling in for a personal day tomorrow, Saturday, the biggest day of the week at the Depot—the day management especially hates absenteeism—then wasting that day rescuing Jackie.

"She sounded really really happy. She's going to take me to Disney World. She wants you to call. I wrote down the number."

"This is the worst thing about America—" Darlyn tells her brother as she drives down the Skyway into Indiana on Saturday morning. He is wedged into the passenger seat of her old Civic. His thigh overlaps the emergency brake and part of the space Darlyn needs to shift gears. "—that they give fresh, new credit cards to total drunks."

"No, the worst thing about America," Russ says, "is that they don't have a padded cell you can put people like Ma into. For like six months, maybe a year. Until they get their mind right. They got rid of all the padded cells. Big mistake."

"That's it, I bet! It looks like a giant ship!" Lake is excited in the back seat. As though this is a fun family expedition. She is such a wonderful person even at ten that she hasn't once complained that rescuing her grandmother means missing *Wicked*, which she has been delirious about for weeks. Darlyn is not

happy that Lake is along for this little intervention, but she couldn't find a sitter on short notice.

Early on, back when Indiana required gambling to be offshore, the casino *was* a fake ship. The gangplank would be hauled up and the casino would move into the harbor—that is, about a foot from the dock. You couldn't get on when it was “at sea.” You had to wait an hour until it “came back to port.” Now the law is more lenient and the ship disguise pretty much forgotten and gamblers can just come and go as they please.

Jackie isn't in the casino. She is in the hotel, where the management has apparently provided her with a complimentary room. Darlyn finds this out from the flirty woman at the concierge desk, who got her job in spite of a snake tattoo peeking out from under the white cuff of her shirt. Darlyn doesn't flirt back, not even a little. She has plenty enough aching sorrow without going under that cuff.

On the seventh floor of the hotel, she holds Lake's hand while Russ knocks on the door. Which Jackie throws open as though there's a big party inside and she's the hostess. A heavy smell of dead smoke rolls out from inside. Like a battleground the morning after the war. Jackie is wearing an outfit blaring color and shine, with little beaded tassels on the sleeves. She's only a little drunk, a lull in her bender.

“I don't think I've seen this blouse before,” Darlyn tugs at one of the tassels.

“I got it downstairs. They have some really nice shops. Come in everybody. Oh, Mary sweetie, nice of your mother to bring you.”

“Lake,” Lake corrects her.

“Have some fruit, honey.” Like she's Lady Bountiful. Like she's a nutritionist. She waves at a giant basket on the table, exotic fruits nestled in green excelsior, an orchard from another planet. “The fruit comes with the room. And the room is *comped*.”

“Mangosteen,” Lake says, picking something out of the basket, studying it. Then something else. “Dragonfruit.”

Darlyn doesn't like that her mother is now using vocabulary like “comped.” “How did you even get out here?” Darlyn asks.

“I took the gambler bus from Broadway and Lawrence. It's all old Vietnamese guys and me. Listen, I made a lot of money last night.” She opens her purse on the dresser and pulls out four thick, banded packets of hundred-dollar bills. “They want me to come back down and play in the Winner's Circle. It's a special honor.”

“They want their money back is all,” Russ says. “They’d club you to death in the parking lot except it would be bad publicity. So they have to get you to lose it.”

Darlyn only realizes the room is a suite when an old guy in his underwear comes through a doorway off to the side. He’s in a wheelchair.

“Hey everybody,” he says, rubbing his hair with the heel of one hand, waking himself up, dislodging dandruff onto his shoulder. “Anyone up for brunch?”

“This is Billy,” Jackie says. “A new friend.”

“A sleepover friend,” Lake helps her.

“Whoa! This gentleman will be leaving immediately.” Russ grabs the handles on the back of the wheelchair and pushes it into the hallway. “Somebody get him his clothes. We’re done here. We’re all going home, Ma. Darlyn will bring the car around.”

On the way back, they make a pit stop for cheap underwear at the outlet mall, which is only a short ways from the casino ship, both situated in the shadow of a nuclear reactor.

Russ waits in the car with Jackie, who makes a big show of blowing her smoke out the window to keep the in-car environment healthy.

“I love when we can all get together like this,” she says as Darlyn and Lake climb out and head for the Jockey outlet.

The mall is paved with concrete, featureless except for a tragic, circus-themed Sno-Cone stand and two little bucking-bronco rides by the restrooms. Inside, the stores all have the same smell, what Darlyn thinks of as “Third World Factory.” The salespeople have a shy, unsure look, as though they have been hired from an employee outlet.

“These are cool,” Lake says, holding up some totally unsuitable under-pants.

“You can have those later. When you’re twenty-seven.”

Jackie’s winnings add up to a little over \$40,000; once again a surprise bundle of money has dropped down on her. This time, Darlyn and Russ are taking charge. At home, they sit side by side in front of the computer, looking over CD rates on bank websites. Darlyn spots a new site on the browser’s Favorites menu. Tiddly Winkles. She can’t remember seeing Lake playing this, but how could it not be a molestation hotbed?

“One percent doesn’t seem that great,” Russ says. They have little experience dealing with large chunks of cash. A few years back, before they found

out Jackie was just running through the windfall from her Aunt Toots, before they knew about the bogus brokers, when they still believed Jackie's malarkey about 75% returns or whatever, they thought their mother was an investment genius. Hahahahahahaha.

"The way she spends, this won't last her six months, even factoring in the interest." Darlyn gets depressed just saying these words. Russ tries to help.

"Maybe we should take her back out to the ship. I mean it could be she's just naturally lucky and we could take her out there every few months and build her account back up."

It is thinking like this that has kept Russ from finding success in the real world.

Now he says, "I'm tired of money. It's such a boring problem, worrying about it. I hate money and education and skills. I really hate skills."

"Skill sets," Darlyn says. "I especially hate those."

The two of them, how they put it is they sort of forgot to go to college. It didn't seem necessary at the time. They both got good enough jobs without going to that much trouble. They hadn't factored in a big recession and a whole long line of newer, younger people with degrees, eager to work for a pittance.

Lake puts two bags of buckwheat flour in the cart. She has with her a list of ingredients for supper, also for her big dessert recipe: Caramel-Cashew-Coconut Cobbler topped with pineapple sorbet. She is sure she is going to win the dessert division of America's Top Junior Chefs, also that she will be able to take Darlyn on a vacation to Pittsburgh in March for the finals. Darlyn, who has already spent a number of hours supervising Lake's test-baking of this item, now has an image in place, of using up a week of her vacation to sit on a folding chair between overbearing mothers of other contestants, in the ballroom of the Pittsburgh Sheraton, rooting for a cobbler. She knows it's bad to have a complaint about the world's most wonderful child, but it would have been so great if Lake was interested in, say, tango, or European architecture. She was prepared for a few genetic wild cards, though, having used an anonymous sperm donor (how she thinks of the person with whom she had a two-night stand during the death throes of her heterosexuality).

In the checkout line, Darlyn's phone pings. A text from her mother. **WHERE'S MY MONEY??**

Some girls who hang out at Umpire's have taught Jackie how to text. Apparently she accidentally hit some Spanish option key.

In response to the question: **DELETE THIS THREAD?** Darlyn presses **YES**.

As if it were that easy.

At the bank on Monday, the receptionist jumps a little when she looks up and sees them waiting. A response to Russ; this happens. Darlyn tells the woman they want to buy a CD.

“I’m going to need to see some identification,” the woman says.

This gets Darlyn’s hackles right up. “Why do you need identification when *we’re* giving the money to *you*?”

“I’m still going to need to see some identification.”

Darlyn nods toward the woman’s Jurassic-era beige computer. “Are you hooked up there with Interpol?”

A message is sent, maybe through one of those under-the-counter robbery buzzers. A financial planner guy comes out to see what’s up. He turns out to be a reasonable guy, and within the hour they are done, having invested the \$40,000 in something better than a CD, a “portfolio” of three mutual funds. Jackie will get small, regular dividends.

“And that’s all she’s getting,” Darlyn says. “The money stays in there, growing.”

Russ says, “Right. For when she’s still a drunk, but also non-ambulatory and demented.” Before he was laid off (in truth, probably not having much to do with the recession; apparently he frightened some of the patients), Russ was a certified nursing assistant in a retirement home. He has no illusions about old age. He belongs to a society that will come around when he decides it’s time, put a hood over his head and fill it with helium. Adios.

“I’m seeing rolls of Prairie Rust, rolls of Williamsburg Blue going out off the loading dock. What I’m not seeing is Butterscotch Heather.”

Darlyn hates being lectured by Norm. She stares at his MANAGER name tag to avoid eye contact. Eye contact is something she hopes never to have with him.

Her cell starts ringing in the pocket of her Depot apron. The ringtone she has for Christy is Kelly Clarkson singing “The Trouble With Love Is.” This song plays with mind-shredding frequency over the store’s sound system and so the ring goes unnoticed in the ambient din. The system they have is Darlyn opens the phone inside her pocket so Christy knows she’s there. Then Darlyn goes into the deserted area of the stockroom where off-season merchandise is stored. Today she sits between two pallets of anti-freeze.

“Here’s the saddest thing.” Christy is calling from the Bluetooth inside her Lexus. “It was on NPR.” (Christy lives in the NPR-listener, Lexus-driver demographic.) “This woman just died. She was the last speaker of her lan-

guage. Bo. That was the language. The sad part was when the second-to-the-last speaker of Bo died four years before. So for her last four years, this woman had no one in the world she could talk with.”

“I don’t think that’s the saddest thing. I think the saddest thing is me being in love with you.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You’re the only one I can speak Bo with.”

Between their furtive assignations, Darlyn lives her real life with all its little pieces locking into one another, a seemingly complete picture. But this is an illusion. Lift up one of the pieces and you’d be looking into an entire universe tumbling with color and light. Sometimes Darlyn will be at work, or waiting to pick up Lake after swim practice, and a whiff of something Christy-like—floral and potent—will come in through the window, and Darlyn’s heart will be torn suddenly by cruel and giant hands. She dreams vividly, then can’t call up the dreams on waking, but carries through the day their emotional tone, an echo from the blackout chasm of Darlyn’s freefall. She can hear her soft scream as she tumbles down again and again. This is the harrowing/fabulous form in which love has come to her.

“It’s so shiny.” The customer is small, frail, soft-spoken. Her whole manner begs for a little bullying.

“That’s the Stain Sergeant coating. You’ll never have to worry, even about chocolate, or red wine. It’ll all wipe right off.” Darlyn envisions oppressed Chinese workers in Shanghai stirring giant, toxic vats of Stain Sergeant.

“Are you sure this is a neutral shade?”

Darlyn would ordinarily answer this by rote, telling her that butterscotch is the new gray. Today, though, she stops to pour some good into the cosmic karma pool, so maybe she can ladle some out later. Something good like Christy getting out of her lousy marriage.

“You know, on second thought, I think it might be a little too buttery,” she tells the woman, envisioning the huge bolts of Butterscotch Heather gathering dust at the back of the carpet warehouse. She presses on, though. “I’m thinking maybe you’re right about the blue-gray. And skip the Stain Sergeant. You don’t want the shine, and you can always have the blue-gray washed. It’s cotton.”

“I want more.” This, of course, is Darlyn, at the Diplomat, with Christy. This is the first time they have been here in time for the 9 to 11 a.m. Early Bird Special. A long silence has settled on them, but gently, like fog. They don’t really have time for long silences, or lingering moments. Darlyn rushed over here

in the middle of a work morning, something unprecedented in the two years they've been doing this, since the day Christy came slumming into the Depot because it was the only place she could think of where she might get grass-green indoor/outdoor carpeting. Her son is a soccer nut and wanted this for his bedroom. Christy has never asked for this sort of emergency meeting before. Darlyn thinks maybe it's a signal.

"You just think you want more," Christy says. She is kneeling on the floor, the top half of her face-down across the mattress, only her face isn't really down, it's turned toward Darlyn. Most of their conversations take place naked and in positions they can't remember having gotten themselves into—post-sex exhaustion positions. "But if we moved out of this space, into real life, two tons of rubble would come crashing down on us."

"I've already thought about the rubble. I don't care." The silence that follows is so long Darlyn is sure she was wrong about today being different, that the conversation has dead-ended in exactly the same place it always does. She is reaching for her bra, to get dressed and going, when Christy says,

"Well, okay then. Let's do it."

"Just like that?" Something invisible begins to beat against Darlyn's chest with a mallet, a mallet wrapped in a towel, but it still hurts in a sensational way. Sensational. The most exquisite anguish imaginable.

Afterward, on her way in from the parking lot, she fist-bumps Terri, who runs the hot-dog cart at the Depot's north entrance. Two dollars a dog. She sells about a billion a day. She makes a lot more money than people think.

"What're you so happy about?" Terri opens the metal lid of her cart, letting the steam of mysterious meat and soft bread billow up between them. "You want one? On the house?"

"I'm in love" is Darlyn's reply to the hot-dog offer. The first time she has told anyone. It feels like jumping off a cliff in a hang-glider, something she actually used to do in her twenties, before she had Lake to be responsible for.

Gary the Husband isn't who Darlyn expected. Of course she only has about fifteen minutes for really focused expectation, the minutes since getting a call from Christy, totally flipped out, saying, "I tried to stop him, but—" Darlyn knows Gary runs marathons and so she has formed an image of someone small and thin, like those Kenyan runners, only white and a neurologist. But when he shows up just before midnight, he turns out to be stocky, with a big vein popping in and out along the side of his neck. They stand at the front door. She has told Lake to stay in her room, that she will explain later, but not to be

afraid. And Darlyn finds she's not afraid either, even though right away he gets red and starts shouting. All Darlyn hears is blahblah-fuckingfreak-blahblah-lesbohomewrecker. It doesn't matter what he says. It's all just air coming out of a tire going flat. All she can feel is elation. His standing here means Christy didn't lose her nerve; she told him and hung tough. Their plan is fragile, but it's Friday, a whole day after they made it, and the plan is still alive.

Gary has begun poking his index finger into Darlyn's chest to make his big points. She puts her hand up to stop this, which leaves him poking her palm. Much better. She is only waiting for her brother to show up and apply a little reasonability to the situation. Russ is very good for this purpose. He is actually hopelessly out of shape, but no one tests that fact, given that he could kill you just by falling on you.

"I'm already there," he told her on the phone. And now, over Gary's shoulder she can see Russ getting out of a cab, paying the driver slowly, with coins from his change purse. And then he is behind Gary, tapping him on the shoulder and saying, "I think this conversation has come to an end." Russ knows some judo tricks from his bouncer days. One of his hands wraps over Gary's shoulder, the other pinches a nerve at the base of Gary's thick neck, causing him to wince and lock his teeth. "No more poking or shouting," Russ tells him and Gary's response is something like "Kghhgk."

Sunday is the longest day of this year. Russ is nailing a plywood ramp over the steps to Jackie's side door. Lake is inside making everyone gruyere omelets. Jackie and Billy's presence in the kitchen probably can't be fully counted as supervision, but they *are* adults, sort of. The omelets have to be eaten sequentially as Jackie only has one usable frying pan; the others, veterans of much inebriated cooking, look as though they've been smelted in a forge. When Russ stands up and rubs the small of his back, he's kind of alarmingly flushed with the effort. "Do you think you could talk to her, you know, about no more quickie marriages? I feel one coming on."

Darlyn, who measured and cut the plywood and brought it over, says, "The wheelchair doesn't seem to be an obstacle. It might even be a feature. She says the best part is being able to park right in front of any store. That's the best part." Through the open window she can hear her mother and Billy discussing the almost certain guilt of the latest Tot Mom on Nancy Grace, a show they both keep up with. The rhythms of the conversation have a definite in-the-bag quality.

"I'm going to have to get Lake out of the cocktail lounge pretty soon."

But then any urgency to progress to whatever comes next vanishes, replaced by a delicious stillness. Darlyn sets her omelet plate on the window sill and picks up an open box of nails and smells inside. Like spring, wet and elemental.

“You’re not even listening to me, are you?” Russ says after saying something she didn’t listen to. “You’re not receiving outside information at the moment. You think this romance is going to change your life. But it won’t.”

“Why are you being mean?”

“I’m not. I’m trying to save you from heartbreak when she misses the Lexus or can’t get custody of her kids, when that prickly little husband starts fighting her with all his money, and she just caves.”

“Of course she will. You think I don’t know that?” Darlyn says, then lowers her voice. “It’s just about—even for a day—being this purely happy. Like, happy to be a carbon-based life form.”

Russ doesn’t say anything. Then Darlyn doesn’t say anything. They just stand in the light haze of third-hand cigarette smoke drifting out through the window screen until the silence is suddenly cut with the sparky flap of cards being shuffled and Billy telling Lake, “The idea is to go higher than the dealer without going over twenty-one.”