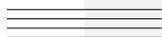


U G L Y



M A R Y G O R D O N

The company was sending me to Monroe for six weeks. Of course, professionally it was a good thing, a sign of their regard, their trust, and that was a relief. Because I was always afraid that one day – and it might be soon – they’d realize that I didn’t belong. That my place at Verdance, a company that manufactured herbal remedies, was really stolen and its relinquishment might be demanded, and with perfect justice, at any moment. My background was neither in science nor in business. I’ve never had any idea whether what they called “the product,” or “the products,” or sometimes, fore-swearing articles altogether, “product” really worked, or if I’m involved in the sale of snake oil. I take on faith the CFO’s assertion that we – by “we” I mean the company of course – are making a handsome profit.

My background was in literature, and my time spent attending to niceties of language made me unhappy every time I had to say the sentence “I work for Verdance in Human Resources.” What was a human resource? I couldn’t rid myself of the idea that the phrase had about it a tincture of slavery. And Verdance . . . a ridiculous name that the founders took a boyish pride in . . . “It’s

like Verd . . . from verdure, you know everything green, but we add a dance to it, so we make our business a dance.”

I have left English literature behind me. It’s been five years since I told everyone I was quitting. I stopped just short of finishing my Ph.D. The problem was my dissertation. I’d set my heart on a topic but I couldn’t find anyone willing to be my adviser. I wanted to focus on three poems about roses, Thomas Carew’s, Edmund Waller’s, and William Blake’s, using the poems to examine larger questions – questions of time, desire, beauty, death – and see how the image of the rose could illustrate the cultural differences these questions raised.

I was told that my topic was both too small and too large. Three short poems, but three large historical periods. The Renaissance people wouldn’t venture into the part of the seventeenth century that moved into the eighteenth, and the Romantics felt they had no access to the earlier periods.

And in the end, after months of fruitless arguing with intransigent professors, I began to feel it wasn’t worth it. Where would I end up, if I finished my dissertation? An underpaid peon at a third-rate institution God knew where, fighting with other over-qualified, underpaid cohorts for the scraps left on the table of the dying liberal arts? Which, I had begun to fear, would no longer be economically viable at the end of a decade. Fifteen years, I reckoned, at the very best.

I gave it up, with a little sadness, but not without a riven heart. Sometimes, coming in and out of sleep, lines of the poems still come to me. “Ask me no more where Jove bestows / When June is past, the lovely rose . . . Go lovely rose / Tell her that wastes her time and me, / That now she knows, / When I resemble her to thee, / How sweet and fair she seems to be . . . O Rose thou art sick. The invisible worm, / That flies in the night / in the howling storm.”

I began working for Verdance as a “technical writer,” translating scientific or New Age scientific jargon into readable prose. But I got bored with that quite early on, and I was glad that they transferred me to Human Resources because I was told I had “really good people skills.” What they meant was that I was good at calming some people down and revving others up. That I could

settle office conflicts somehow, I don't really know how, better than anyone else in the department, and that when some workers had to be warned that they weren't "quite up to scratch," I seemed to be able to encourage them without making them seem overwhelmed.

They had sent me to Monroe because of what they called a "productivity lag." What they meant, in English, was that the Monroe branch wasn't making as much money as the others, their orders weren't up to the three other locations: Scottsdale, Arizona; Ashland, North Carolina; and what they liked to call "our mother ship," in Danbury, Connecticut, where I worked, commuting every day to my apartment in the city. When I got back from Monroe I'd be moving from the Lower East Side to a place on West End and 89th; it would save me at least forty-five minutes a day in travel. I'd be moving in with Hugh. We were talking seriously about marriage now; we'd been talking about it in a desultory, slackish way for almost two years, the way you might talk about buying a refrigerator with an icemaker in the door, something you'd quite like but didn't really require.

The higher ups – Jason, Josh, and Jonathan – were reluctant to say what they really believed: that the productivity lag was a result of their generosity, their flexibility, their willingness to allow people long parental leaves and the option of working from home. "The problem is, it's a kind of demographic bottleneck," Jonathan said, or it might have been Jason. "For some reason they all started reproducing at the same time, and so there's just not enough product being handled. We need someone to go out there, not exactly lower the boom, but you know give them kind of a reality check."

"You mean you want me to tell them Santa Claus is dead?"

"Something like that," Josh said. He was the one with the sense of humor.

"No, nothing like that," Jonathan said. "It's just . . . we need to readjust."

"In this market, they should be more amenable to adjustments in the workplace," said Jason, who was the most wedded to management jargon.

"It's not going to be nice," I said.

“It would be better if you had kids yourself. I mean, the weird thing is, almost nobody here *has* kids . . . what is it in the Midwest? I guess there’s nothing to do in the cold winters but fuck. Haven’t they heard of birth control? The only one here with kids is Brianna, and let’s face it, that would be a nightmare in the people skills department.”

“I could try to reproduce in the next two weeks,” I said.

I could see Jonathan looking hopeful for a moment. Then he laughed. “I get it,” he said.

“If you can make this happen, there’s a big bonus in it for you, Laura,” Josh said. “And with the new place you’re moving into, I’m sure you can use the extra cash.”

I wanted to say no, but I didn’t have a leg to stand on. It would only be six weeks. “How big a bonus?” I asked.

“It depends on how successful you are. But let’s just say, even if you do a shitty job, you’ll be well rewarded.”

I’d never been to the Midwest; I was one of those New Yorkers that made a reality of the Steinberg cartoon. The fact is, I’d never wanted to go. And certainly, Monroe wasn’t a place that Hugh would ever think of going. I could hardly even believe Missouri was a real place. It was one of those states, like Wyoming, that seemed improbable. I knew it was called the “Show Me State.” Its capital was St. Louis. I liked *Meet Me in St. Louis*. But I wasn’t going anywhere near St. Louis. Monroe was four hours from St. Louis . . . and I was pretty sure I wouldn’t get there more than once, if ever.

Hugh didn’t want me to go, but the prospect of the bonus pleased him mightily; he really wanted to spend money on good furniture. We spent our evenings trawling sites for contemporary Italian couches, the way some couples might have trawled porn sites looking for some specialty that would appeal to both their appetites – the woman wanting bondage, the man wanting her to dress like a French maid. I admitted that my taste in furniture was far less developed than Hugh’s; he is, after all, an architect, and it was a fairly recent thing that I had enough money to even consider anything more demanding than Ikea. I found the things that he particularly admired rather off-putting . . . they didn’t seem like they really belonged in a house; I thought they’d be better in a space capsule. One couch that Hugh was particularly taken by – it

was by an Italian designer and it cost \$8,000 – was the color of tomato juice and shaped like some sort of bean, only it didn't look the slightest bit organic. I thought if you opened it up you'd find a surveillance system, microphones, speakers, lots of wires . . . I said I found it slightly inhuman. Hugh pointed to the description in the Web site that said it was “ironic.” When I read it more closely I told him that the word was *iconic*, not *ironic*, and I guess that was why he was willing to give it up. Everything else he liked was so charcoal and black, so low to the ground, that I couldn't imagine taking a nap on it, or – finally the argument that swayed him – making love on it with any kind of confidence. But I promised Hugh that we could use whatever money I made on a bonus to buy some wonderful furniture, something that excited us both.

I might not have had the most cultivated taste in interior design, but the place the company had arranged for me to live, Brookside Corporate Housing, lowered my spirits dramatically when I opened the door. It was obvious what whoever had designed it had in mind: it was meant to offend no one and to absorb the greatest possible abuse. The linoleum was gray, the living room carpeting was gray and smelt of something that was clearly meant to cover something up – and of course I was busily wondering what that something might have been. The couch was upholstered in a gray-blue tweed; the armchairs matched. The coffee table was supposed to look wooden, but it was clearly not made of wood. I remembered something called “particle board,” and I didn't want to imagine what the particles might be.

I spent as little time there as possible. I had breakfast at a café that sold *The New York Times*; if I asked for an extra shot, the cappuccino was almost up to New York standards. I lingered longer than I should have, because I dreaded going to work every morning. I didn't like the job I'd been sent to do, and I didn't quite know how to do it.

The third morning, after my coffee, I noticed an antiques store next to the café. Wanting to kill time before the inevitable arrival at the office, I stood in front of the window. I wasn't someone who'd spent time in antiques shops, but my eye fell on a vase that stood on a bare wooden table. It was a deep rose color, and its surface was almost iridescent, entirely unornamented; nothing got in the way of its allowance of a play of lights. The shape was

classical: almost an urn. It occurred to me that I might feel better about Brookside Corporate Housing if I had one nice thing of my own there. The anonymity of the place was nearly total – except for my clothes and toiletries I'd brought nothing with me, not even books: I'd downloaded everything I wanted to read on my Kindle.

I heard the tinkle of a bell and noticed that the shopkeeper had opened the door. She wasn't a good advertisement for the beautiful things in her window; I try not to judge people on their looks – it's a skill I've cultivated in Human Resources – but I had rarely seen someone who seemed to take so little care with her appearance. I could see right away that nature had not been kind; she had the kind of oily hair that would never look clean, and although I guessed she was in her fifties, her face was covered with an acne that would have anguished a teenager. Perhaps it had anguished her, and she had understood that there was nothing much she could do to make herself look good, and she had given it up. But she could have done something better than the clothes she had selected: orange running shorts, an orange tank top, orange knee socks and sneakers. Whatever her dermatological misfortune was, it affected the skin on her arms and legs, which was mottled and unsmooth.

"Take the plunge, why don't you?" she said. I was surprised at her voice; it was low and velvety and the accent was cultivated, Eastern, upper class.

She stepped into the store to let me in. I followed; how could I not? It would have been horribly rude, and besides, I really was interested in the vase.

Inhibiting my entrance was a large, elderly, and overweight golden retriever; a few feet behind him, making himself comfortable on a ratty-looking divan, was an equally ancient chocolate Lab. I thought it probably wasn't a good marketing ploy; probably people wanting fine things didn't want to be stepping over dogs and knowing they'd have to take a clothes brush to whatever they were wearing after they got back home.

She turned on the lights and I saw that what she had was of a very high quality. There didn't seem to be a pattern to the placement; easy chairs were next to desks and dining tables situated themselves too close to china cabinets. I tried to call up and make

sense of some words I had never used but that I thought might be of use here: hutch, tallboy, armoire, étagère. The room was large and dim, and the rows of tables receding into the foggy distance gave the impression of a forest just at nightfall; some sense of adventure beckoned, but there could, as well, be the chance of doom.

"I was interested in that pink vase in the window," I said.

"Lusterware," she said. "German immigrants specialized in it. Early twentieth century." She hopped into the window with an agility that surprised me. She put the vase in my hand. I was enchanted by the way the light played differently on the surface indoors.

"Luster," she said. "Isn't it a great word, *luster*." It's a particular kind of light, not exactly a shine, something slightly thicker.

"It is a wonderful word," I said.

She ran to the computer and typed something out with a remarkable speed, printed it out and handed the page to me.

Lusterware. *Pottery* or *porcelain* with a *metallic glaze* that gives the effect of *iridescence*, produced by *metallic oxides* in an *overglaze* finish, which is given a second firing at a lower temperature in a "*muffle kiln*," *reduction kiln*, which excludes oxygen.

"How much?" I asked.

"Twenty dollars."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm always sure. It's what I do. It's my business. What's yours?"

I told her part of my reason for being in Monroe. "I live in a pretty awful place; I just wanted to have one beautiful thing to look at."

"One beautiful thing," she said. "Everybody should have one beautiful thing."

I was feeling that I much preferred being with this strange woman than going to the office.

"Lois," she said. "I'm Lois."

"Laura," I said.

"Laura," she repeated, nodding. "It's a good name. It's a sensible name. So many names now aren't sensible."

"I know what you mean," I said. "I'm so glad I wasn't named Tiffany or Ashley."

"Or Brittany. Spelt Britni."

I realized that I hadn't laughed since I'd left New York.

"You have wonderful things here," I said.

"Take a look around." The room with its rows of tables seemed like a forest, this place, the demesne of chairs, seemed like the overcrowded province of some resentful, fussy aunts. I began to find it difficult to breathe; I could feel my lungs constricting. And then, with no notice, my lungs felt rich and light, and a ridiculous line of poetry came to me. "My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky."

It wasn't, of course, a rainbow. It was a small, graceful chair, upholstered in a light green. Its arms were curved and elegant, and I saw that there was a pattern of leaves carved into the wooden jointure of the back and cushion. So many of the chairs Hugh and I had looked at were either engulfing or unwelcoming. I was curious to see if this lovely thing was comfortable.

Immediately I knew that I would have to make it mine. It fit me so well; it was neither too hard nor too soft; I wouldn't fall asleep when I was reading, but I wouldn't have to shift around to make myself comfortable. But before that moment, I had had no idea of buying a chair; I could perfectly well sit in the anonymous but comfortable furniture in corporate arms, and it would be a problem to move it when I would be leaving in what would be, after all, a matter of weeks.

Lois came into the room and joined me.

"That's a real beauty," she said. "A real beauty. 1870s. Maybe 1880s. I'd be glad if she was yours."

She jumped up and grabbed me by the hand. Hand in hand (her hand, as I imagined, was sweaty and clammy, and I didn't like my proximity to it), but at last she dropped my hand as she made her way to, and I could see her running to, the computer. She typed something out and ran back, the old dog following her more quickly than I thought he could. She handed me what she'd just printed out.

Description

American Victorian Eastlake upholstered cherry arm-chair. Aesthetic influence, having a padded, arched back flanked by carved, scrolled stiles, supported on a wide rail cut-out with a large carved sunflower nested beneath a

serpentine-shaped, scrolled vine terminating with opposing anthemions, fitted with two rail arms, padded between arched ends respectively; embellished with Greek key above a short beehive, turned support and scrolled acanthus, and atrapezoidal padded seat with a teeded front rail supported on blocked double ogee molded legs, fitted with small wooden castors and flared rear legs which are continuous from the stiles.

Dating is from the 1880s to the 1890s. The back and seat are each covered with a pale green damask fabric pattern with a field of small palmate leaves accompanied by scrolled tendrils. The finish is in good overall condition with a warm, dark reddish-brown finish having a few minor scratches, but which is probably original. The upholstery on the seat needs to have the prints retied. Measures 35" tall and 25" across the arms.

"I don't know what your background is, but have you heard of John Ruskin?" Lois said.

"Of course," I said. "I'm a failed English Ph.D." For some reason, I told her about my dissertation. She didn't seem interested.

"Well the people who made these chairs were American disciples of Ruskin and Morris." They didn't do a lot, but what they did was fine. "She's a real beauty," Lois said. "I'd be happy if she was yours."

"How much?" I asked, my heart beating stupidly fast.

"Three hundred. But we'll have to take it to a friend of mine for a little repair."

"But I'm only here six weeks."

"He'll do whatever I tell him. If we take it over, he'll do it while you wait."

"OK, Lois, I really love it."

It occurred to me that maybe she wanted me to bargain with her. But I had no impulse. I wanted to take her home. I was already calling it "her." But after all, I knew that She was mine.

"We'll take this other chair with us, it needs to be resprung, and oh God, so much, it needs so much."

I guess I was lonelier than I thought because I accepted her invitation with what I hoped wasn't a too obvious eagerness.

“Help me hump this one into the car,” she said, pointing to a chair she’d placed near the door. This one was small – Lois said it was called a slipper chair – perfect for a rather reserved, perhaps easily intimidated wife of a judge or surgeon sometime between 1925 and 1960. The upholstery was a pale pink brocade, but the seat and the back looked like someone had taken a box cutter to them with a particularly brutal hand.

We drove for ten miles or so, and Lois spoke to me as if we had known each other for years, referring to people by their first names only, so I had no idea who she was talking about. I gathered they were relatives, and so I tried to assuage her worries about their health, their financial well-being, their fragile spirits – even though I had no idea of the real circumstances. But she took no comfort from anything I said, rejecting any hopeful note as simply out of the question. When she wasn’t speaking, she was whistling through her teeth something that I thought dated from the First World War. “Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie,” “Daisy Daisy,” “Down by the Old Mill Stream.”

She drove to the back entrance of a warehouse and beeped her horn in what must have been a coded pattern because in a minute a bald man in overalls with a reddish toothbrush mustache came out of the metal door, accompanied by a Springer spaniel.

The dog jumped on Lois, and she bent down so he could lick her face. From the pocket of her shirt she took three small dog biscuits, for which the dog seemed grateful, but not surprised: it was clearly a part of their routine.

“Hey, Rusty,” Lois said. I wasn’t sure if she was talking to the man or the dog, although the dog was white with tannish spots, so I was betting on the man.

And in fact it was he who responded. “Well aren’t you a sight for sore eyes. What have you brought me from your treasure trove?”

She opened the back of the station wagon and lifted the chair into the driveway.

“You just don’t understand how people can abuse a lovely thing like this,” he said.

“They didn’t deserve to have it. Ever. Not for one minute.”

I’d heard people speak that way about children or animals that had been badly treated, but I’d never heard the words applied to furniture. I understood, but for Lois and Rusty the chair was, if not a living thing, then something with a life.

She didn't bother to introduce me, and I saw no way to introduce myself, so I just followed behind her, and looked over her shoulder as she and Rusty looked through swatches, bringing a few to the chair then stepping back from it until they finally both agreed on one that was very like the original.

"That's it, that's it," Lois said.

"No question about it. We're on the money this time, girlie," he said.

They high-fived each other. It had been a long time since I'd seen two people so happy.

The place smelled wonderfully of new wood and hot glue and steamy fabric. My eye traveled to the part of the warehouse where people were cutting and sewing and nailing and gluing with the peaceful, rapt expression that comes over someone when he's doing something he knows he's good at, that he believes is of real use.

That night, after Lois had dropped me off and I ate my lentil salad in front of the TV, it occurred to me that neither of them had said a word about money. Not a single word.

No one at the Monroe headquarters of Verdance seemed to have the slightest interest in seeing me outside of work. It wasn't that they weren't friendly; they were excessively friendly. But they probably sensed that my presence there wouldn't be good for any of them, and besides, they all seemed to have small children. Which was the problem, of course, the reason I was there. I understood that they were busy and tired, I understood why none of them had so much as invited me for a coffee. I didn't mind being alone so much, not really; I was enjoying being able to read at night and watch BBC mysteries on my laptop. But I was delighted when Lois called and asked if I'd be interested in a wonderful set of Spode dishes that she needed to get rid of and would give me at "a ridiculous price, just because I like you. And the pattern is called 'old rose' and I remember what you said about that dissertation of yours that you never wrote."

I certainly knew that she was odd, and that the offer for the dishes was odd. I knew it was odd, that everything about it was odd. Why would she think I wanted a set of china? And didn't she know that people didn't just tell people that they liked them, and

that they were giving them a good deal because of that? Or if they did say that, that the other person wouldn't believe them, not either part of the sentence, either that the salesperson liked them or that the deal was really good? But there was something uncanny about Lois – she might have been a figure in a children's tale, the trickster, the woman coming from nowhere who knows everything and knows just what everyone should do.

Then I wondered if she knew something about me that I didn't know about myself, that I had always wanted a set of matching china, good china, real china, but had never had access to that particular truth.

She indicated a set of dishes displayed in a glass-fronted cabinet, and once again my heart leapt when I saw them. Roses, the pattern was of roses, vivid, but delicate, strong blossoms, a deep pink, and leaves and stems a clear and lucid green. Roses, what I had wanted to write about, what I had given up. Roses that had been put into poetry so that they would last forever, and now roses would be on my table; I would be eating off roses that, like the roses in the poems, would not die. And I could have them, they would be mine. Immediately, the possibility of a whole new life opened for me. Openhearted Thanksgivings, the grieving newly widowed, bipolars whom nobody was sure when to invite, people from exotic foreign countries who'd never had cranberry sauce. My whole family: all the little fissures healed. They weren't major fissures, not anything moral or political or religious – none of us was particularly political or religious, but we simply had different interests. Or maybe it's better to say we just weren't that interested in one another. My brother and his wife and three children all seemed devoted to, if not based on, computers; my sister had moved to Montana and was raising designer dogs – some mix of poodle and something else not so smart, I can never remember exactly what. I don't even know exactly what my parents are interested in. They watch a lot of television. They go on cruises: my mother keeps saying how she'll never get over the Alaskan landscape, but my father said once was enough for him. "You've seen one moose, you've seen them all," he'd said. I think that hurt her.

But I knew we would all be livelier than ever around the table with my wonderful new dishes. Of course I didn't have a table yet,

and I knew this wasn't the kind of pattern Hugh would like, but I could let him buy some kind of postmodern, off-center table and convince him that putting a pattern of rose china on it would be "incredibly ironic."

"Are you sure?" I asked Lois when she offered me the whole set – service for twelve – for \$300.

"I wouldn't have made the offer if I weren't sure."

"But how will I get it back to New York?" I asked. Then I remembered somewhat guiltily that Hugh had agreed to drive out and drive me back to New York in a month. I realized how far that thought was from my mind. I tried to make a joke of it, to myself, really more than Lois. "A month seems like a lifetime away," I said.

"So you'll only be with us another month," she said.

I felt ridiculous that those words made me so sad.

"It will take me quite a bit of time to pack these properly," she said. "Can I bring them by your place tomorrow?"

"Lois, you don't have to do that. I'll be glad to come by and get it."

"No biggie," she said. "I want the excuse to visit the chair."

The apartment was so entirely blank, so impervious to improvement, that it was impossible to have the slightest even reflex anxiety about having a guest.

She set the large box down on my counter. She was wearing her usual outfit of running shorts, T-shirt, knee socks, and sneakers. She told me she ran marathons, but it was so incongruous with everything else about her that I couldn't keep the idea in my head. Everything about her suggested the opposite of healthiness, of health.

"Where do you want me to put these?" she asked, her eyes flicking every surface like the eyes on a Felix the Cat clock I'd had as a child.

I pointed to the closet.

"Sit in the chair," I said. "It will be glad to see you."

She rested her hands on her thighs, leaned back and sighed deeply. She closed her eyes.

"I feel so bad for you," she said.

I couldn't think of any reason for her to feel bad for me. I hadn't told her anything about my life, and besides, I had been unusually unmarked by tragedy.

“Life’s been good to me, Lois,” I said.

“That’s as may be,” she said. “It’s as may be. But I know about you: you care for the look of a thing. And this place is, well, it must be terrible. So unlovely. No one who had anything do to with this place cared for the look of a thing. It must be terrible.”

“Well Lois, I’m only here for another month.”

“But a month of living among unlovely things is like a month of bad food. You’re being poisoned. Seriously poisoned. Thank God you have the chair. When you look at it, well, it’s like drinking spring water after you’ve had nothing but junk food.”

I didn’t know what to say. I felt exposed, and simultaneously understood; at once violated and protected.

“Would you like to move into the basement apartment I own? I sometimes rent it out. It’s downstairs from where I live. Just one big room. A studio. On the lake.”

“Oh, Lois, really it’s too much trouble. Only a few more weeks.”

“Four weeks of poison. Is that something you want to do to yourself?”

“The company’s already paid for this,” I said.

“I wouldn’t charge you,” she said. “I’m going to use it for storage from now on anyway, I’m sick of dealing with tenants. I’d be happy for you and your chair to move in.”

“But I don’t have any furniture,” I said.

“Jeez Louise, what business do you think I’m in?”

“May I think about it Lois?” I said. “Just for a day or two.”

She stood up and slapped her hands on her thighs. She looked at me with a curious patience, and I felt the possibility of a large leisure in which to make my choices.

But in the morning after I woke up and sat on the scratchy tweed couch looking at the parking lot and counting the dents in the wall-to-wall carpeting, I knew that I’d made up my mind.

We agreed to meet at the house after I was through with work and she’d closed the shop. I could see the lake after I’d turned off the main commercial street, which was clearly trying to revivify itself by attracting a new, younger clientele: there was a bicycle shop, a yoga studio, a Thai restaurant. Next to the Thai restaurant I was happy to see a plumbing supply store, huge, the size of a firehouse, plain, responsible, like a slightly unimaginative bachelor uncle who had never moved away.

From the outside, the house was undistinguished: two stories, white stucco, small, serious-looking windows trimmed in serious black. I walked down a small flagstone path to the front door; on that side of the house, the house facing the lake, the windows were larger and untrimmed.

Lois came to the door. Her hair was wet from the shower, but it still looked greasy, and her skin was more mottled than usual, probably because of the water's heat. She was wearing her usual shorts, T-shirt and knee socks. This time they were lime green. "This is it," she said, and showed me into a room that was almost breathtaking in its plainness. The walls were white, the floors slate-gray, the cabinets were a plain light pine, the countertop and the three stools beside it matched its wood.

I was simultaneously alarmed and thrilled by the emptiness. I wanted some time to understand what I was feeling so I turned my back on Lois, and focused on the view of the lake.

I had never thought much about lakes. I'm a born and bred New Yorker, you remember, and when people like me thought about a body of water it was only the ocean. You could even take a subway to it. But lakes – they were irrelevant. Maybe they had something to do with motorboats or water skiing, the kind of thing done by people you would never know.

The lake was so close to the door of the apartment that it could have been its front lawn. There were ten paces worth of grass and there it was. Even closer than a lawn, it spread itself like a lap, and as I thought of the word *lap*, meaning something to sit on, to be comforted by, and a gentle sound of water, I felt immediately comforted and accommodated, and I knew that I would stay.

"I'll just bring a few things from the shop for you," Lois said. "It will be all ready for you to move in tomorrow at this time."

She was, as she said, in the furniture business, but the way she "furnished" my apartment was simply perfect. She provided only what I absolutely needed: a simple platform bed whose wood matched the cabinets and counter, a plain pine table with apple-green legs, and a chair of matching apple green. At the center of the empty space, which because of its very emptiness served as an almost theatrical backdrop, we placed my chair, just the right distance from the window so that I could sit, surrounded by nothing, and look at the lake.

Sitting in my chair and looking at the lake became the most important thing in my life. The house faced east, so I didn't get to see sunsets, only sunrises, which might have been disappointing, but it wasn't. Like the dishes Lois had sold me, getting up to see the sunrise suggested to me the real, the very real possibility of an entirely new way of living. I never let myself say a new way of life.

I would wake early, sometimes as early as five, and sit by the window. I watched for the last star . . . the morning star; I watched the moon disappear, and the sky gradually lighten. What I liked best were the moments before the sun was actually visible: the dimness, gradually taking on color, as if it were some porous paper drinking color in: first silver, then gray-blue, then the dramatic pink and yellow. When the full sun struck the lake, it was almost disappointing: a diva showing off, silencing the gentle chorus.

Twice, Lois invited me to the movies to the "film society," where classic films were shown to an audience of which I was the youngest by at least thirty years. We saw *Jules and Jim*, *The Bicycle Thief*, and *Strangers on a Train*. We ate at a pub near the film society; Lois always ordered a hamburger, but left three-quarters of it behind, and nibbled only three or four of her fries. The hamburger always came with lettuce, tomato, and onion, and she always removed it and put it on her plate. I wondered why she didn't tell the waiter to hold the lettuce and tomato, but I didn't like to ask.

And five or six times, I realize now, I stopped by Rusty's shop. It was open till nine. He had said to come any time, and I took him at his word. I'd just drop in, bringing sweets or cheese and crackers, and everyone seemed glad to see me, no one suggested it was odd. It was soothing to be there, with the good smells, and the serene industriousness, and NPR playing in the background, and the dog – whose name I never learned – moving from one warm spot to another, circling to find the perfect spot for his latest naps. I thought that what they were doing was a wonderful way to make a living, and the words "make a living" seemed more literal than metaphoric. The words that came to me were *innocent*, *beneficent*, and I was pleased at the slant rhyme – an atavistic pleasure, but I welcomed the old taste. After a while, I realized that I'd begun fantasizing about apprenticing myself to Rusty, calculating how long I could live on my savings before I needed to earn money

again. I knew that was ridiculous, and I banished the thought whenever it rose up.

I was proud of the way I was living. Having so few objects around me, I became newly interested in the desire to live modestly, which I think also had something to do with the lake, so modest in its largely uninterrupted wideness. The rare swell, the occasional constellation of waterfowl, but mostly just the expanse of calm, even water. A meadow of water, where all creatures might safely graze.

I cooked for myself every night; sometimes I'd make a big soup and have it for a first course several evenings in a row. I spent time at the farmer's market that had just opened for the season, and I bought early asparagus and tender spring onions, and waxy new potatoes; I splurged on artichokes, which I cooked simply, steaming them with just a spoonful of oil and a little salt. I downloaded three versions of the Bach Cello Suites: Casals, Rostropovich, Yo-Yo Ma, and I played them over and over trying to hear the differences; after a while I told myself I could. It made me very happy to listen to classical music on the local NPR on my way to and from work; I called and made a one-time donation; I even believed them when they said it was "awesome." They asked if I would like to make an ongoing contribution; I said I would be leaving the area soon, and saying that, I felt quite sad. One morning I read the label on a container of cut-up cantaloupe I'd bought at the supermarket. "Living up to your life," it said, and with a deep quiet pleasure I told myself I was doing just that.

I was almost embarrassed at my clichéd response to the coming of spring, or I would have been embarrassed if I had mentioned it to anybody, but I never did. Each evening, the increasing minutes of light seemed tremendously valuable, like a legacy I'd been left from an aunt I'd never known existed. I would eat my dinner in front of the window, and watch as the sky sipped in the last silver light. I hoped no one would ask me how I was, because I would have found it hard to explain why I was so happy.

But then it was over, quickly, and for good. As if the power company had just turned off the electricity and suddenly everything went dark. But no, it wasn't like that — it was that suddenly

someone turned the lights up, and I could see that I'd been wandering around in some half-lit twilight state, mistaking things for other things, mistaking myself for another person.

I guess it was the sight of Hugh's headlights in the driveway. He'd come to drive me home, but a week early so we could relax together. He was driving his parents' BMW and the lights seemed unsuitably, even offensively bright. When he turned off the ignition the lights went on inside the car and I could see him flip the visor down and look at himself in the mirror. I could see the pleasure he took in his own reflection – that he was so well put together that he didn't even need to comb his hair – and I was ashamed for both of us.

He was going to stay with me for a week. I was grateful; it would be a great help transporting everything.

Standing in the doorway, I felt a tremendous shyness. I realized it wasn't just shyness. It was reluctance. I didn't want him here, here in my place. My place but, of course, it was really Lois's.

"The view is just spectacular," he said, looking around for a place to leave his jacket. When we embraced, I was surprisingly aroused by his smell and the texture of his beard. It was six o'clock and he usually needed a shave by five.

"What's the décor? Heartland minimalist . . . with a little heartland hideous thrown in," he said, plopping himself down in my beautiful chair.

I didn't like the idea of his sitting in my chair. I knew he'd say something insulting about it. Why hadn't I realized that it was a mistake for me to buy furniture that I knew he wouldn't like? Well, I realized it too late, and little beads of panicked sweat formed at my hairline like seed pearls.

"How'd you come by this monstrosity?" he said.

Monstrosity. Anyone would say he'd gone too far. It might not be his taste, but certainly he could see that it was well made, and, on its own terms, admirable. I don't know, even now, why I didn't defend myself. My chair. My right to my own taste. My right to deviate from the tyranny of high postmodern. And why did I say what I said next, the plain false words of the last-minute betrayer.

"It belongs to my landlady."

"The famous Lois," he said. "Even the name is ugly. I can't wait to clap eyes on her."

My panic intensified. I would not allow Hugh to “clap eyes” on Lois. I would do whatever was necessary to keep them apart.

But that turned out to be impossible. No sooner had I resolved in my mind to keep them apart than there was a knock on the door and Lois’s habitual, “Yoo hoo!”

I wondered later if she deliberately dressed her worst as a test: of me, of Hugh. She’d just come from a run, so not only her face, but her bare legs were blotched. She was wearing lime-green nylon running shorts, a peacock-blue sleeveless T-shirt, exposing her arms, also blotched, and raspberry-colored socks that seemed to have been chosen deliberately to match her running shoes. I was hoping I had just imagined it, but I thought I saw Hugh visibly shudder at the sight of her. And I was convinced she knew I had betrayed the chair, denied my connection to it, passed it off like a bastard child, pretending it was my mother’s, that I had never in fact given birth.

“Welcome to our fair city,” she said, extending her sweaty hand to Hugh.

He didn’t take her hand, but he did, to his credit, offer coffee.

“No thanks. Got to jump into the shower. I reek.”

“I’ll bet you do,” Hugh said, after she’d run out the door, closing it firmly behind her. It was, after all, her property.

He pressed the button of the coffee grinder with what seemed to me an unnecessary force. He slammed the drawer where I kept the silverware; he banged the cups onto the counter. He pulled the stools out, making what I knew was a deliberately unpleasant sound against the slate floor.

“It’s an act of aggression, it couldn’t be anything else,” he said.

“Aggression?” I said, not knowing what he was talking about.

“Looking that ugly. Appearing in the world like that. Forcing people to have to see you in that way, forcing them to have to experience ugliness. It’s like those crazy people with TB who sneeze on people in the subways just so they’ll get infected too.”

Ugly. It was a terrible word, and yet it sounded so inoffensive . . . it was so short and it ended in an *ee* sound, so it appeared not to be too serious, too dangerous. It wasn’t the opposite of *beautiful*, because beauty suggested something eternal, whereas the claims of ugliness were much more modest; ugliness would go away, somehow, would be made to seem irrelevant by the sheer passage of

time. I had first met Lois when I said I wanted one beautiful thing. I hadn't used the word *ugly*, I don't know what word I'd used when I was thinking to myself about the problem with where I lived. When she had come to the place I was staying at corporate housing, the words she used were *unlovely* and *lowering*. But *ugly*? We hadn't said it . . . maybe because it would have coated the inside of our mouths . . . by which I really mean our minds, with a sticky, nasty-smelling paste.

"Hugh, that's really going too far. Lois has no idea of hurting people. She's kind of in her own world, but it's a benign world . . . she does have an aesthetic sense, a real one, but it just doesn't extend to her own appearance."

"Oh, my God, my darling, I must get you away from here. They've infected you with softening of the brain." And he scooped me up – I literally felt scooped, as if he were something metallic and clearly shaped and I was something formless, like flour, or sugar or salt – and threw me down onto the bed.

I shouldn't have let him make love to me, as I shouldn't have said that the chair was Lois's, but as he touched me and traveled over my body with his hands and mouth, I realized how starved I'd been for this kind of attention, the attention of his body – let's call it by its right name, sex – and I gave in, there was nothing in me that wanted not to give in, to hold back. Even as I was giving in, I remembered an aunt of mine who had been widowed young and after a decade remarried. She said to me, "I didn't even realize I'd missed it" – she never gave the "it" a name – "but then when I had it again, it was all very clear. What I'd been deprived of."

Making love to Hugh, I was no longer the person who spent days in Rusty's workshop, or handwashed my new china, or sat in my beautiful chair to watch the sun rise. And lying in his arms, I had no doubt which one was the real me. Perhaps I had been infected with brain softening. Perhaps I had gone flaccid, flabby, and I would return now to the taut, hard, muscular self, shedding the false fat that covered my true skeleton.

The next week was so busy that I hardly had time to think. I had, all these weeks, been working out a plan so that the people who were in the office least could stagger their flex time; and the people who worked at home would have to come into the office at intervals that would ensure their productivity. Everyone would

have to give up a little, but the relinquishments were fair and even: no one, I hoped, could feel ill-done-by or ill-favored. First I presented it to their Human Resources person, who had kept me at a great distance all the weeks I'd been here, almost cowering when she saw me, and disappearing into her office, almost slinking there, when I'd asked her to consult. I could see that she thought my plan was good; for the first time in my presence, her spine straightened, she looked me in the eye. She gave me a high five – something I loathed, something, though, it didn't matter. I had to make a presentation – oh the bullet points, the flow charts – to everybody in the company, and no one challenged me. There was a lot of nodding when I said, "Look, we all have to work together because no one wants the company to go under. If this happens, we're all out of a job." Then I had long private conversations with each of the people most affected. And, to my astonishment, no one suggested that what I offered was unacceptable, problematic, harsh.

I made my report to Jason and Jonathan and Josh, and they were so pleased that if they could have leapt off the computer screen to embrace me, I was sure they would. They offered me what seemed a ridiculously large bonus, and I had no impulse to refuse. What surprised me, driving home, back to my lake abode, was how pleased I was at the thought of all that money. It made me feel lighter, younger . . . I drove faster than I ever had. I was happy to be giving up my Toyota Camry rental; I was looking forward to driving Hugh's parents' BMW.

I hadn't talked to Lois in all the time that Hugh had been there. And I didn't want to. I wanted to leave right away. We had planned to rest up for two days after my last day of work, but I burst into the apartment, told Hugh the news about my bonus, and said, "Let's go. Let's go right now. Let's get out of here. I'll just leave Lois an envelope and avoid all the messy farewells."

"I love you . . . I love you . . . let's get out of Dodge," he said.

There wasn't really much for me to pack up. I had decided I would leave the dishes and the chair. There wouldn't be a place for them in my New York life. Lois would resell them to someone more appropriate, she'd make a little more money, and they could live in a home where they belonged.

Hugh was running the engine. I told him I wanted to check the place one last time.

It was just before seven; the light over the lake was silvery, and the clouds were beginning to be underlit: peach and mango, and a dark gray, like the kind of eye shadow you would only wear in a city, the kind that magazines call smoky. I looked back. There was my chair, framed by the dim emptiness. But it was not my chair, and I wondered if it ever really had been. “You are beautiful,” I said to it. “You are very beautiful. You are fine, you are good, you are full of goodness and I am not. You don’t belong with me. You wouldn’t want to belong to me. You should be grateful that you aren’t mine.”