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The Recycled Woman

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THE RECYCLED WOMAN

Even before I joined the convent I was a stickler for detail. Now, over the wall and on my own, I still suffer from the strategies that kept me there. I find it hard to believe that authority figures are not God, their faintest wishes beamed at me in radar warnings. I should have lived in a Swinging Singles pad.

Most of my notions of a world untroubled by Thou-shalt-not's were based on the few adult movies I had sneaked into in the Thirties. Or on the Arabian Nights. Women diving into champagne pools, I told myself, had little to do with *my* life. But the Nights were far enough removed in time and space to make them anything but lovely. Besides, I wasn't sure what touches of my own had established an interior rich with damask and brocade, scarlet and purple velvet. Rugs so thick they tickled your ankles and made you swoon with pleasure once every hour instead of giving you static nylon shocks. I could see myself falling, gracefully as in the St. Mary's Academy pageant, where I was one of twelve Vestal Virgins in the Roman episode. We did a torch dance with real flashlights, placed in metal cones. Red and orange cellophane flames shot patterns onto the darkened stage. I was the last to swing my torch in a wide arc before balancing on one knee to light the Sacred Fire. After that I had to sink to the floor without thumping to make room for the Dance of the Hours.

In the Arabian Nights, nobody would have to worry about awkward noises, insulated as they were with cloth of gold. You could fall all the way from the spangled chandelier with no thought of breaking your collarbone.

If you were opposed to falling, you could wear a diamond in your navel and a ring of rubies just below the knee. You could drape yourself over the circular divan, looking like a painted odalisque, very high class.

Of course I knew that *I* couldn't afford such luxury, but I might find an attic forsaken by a student artist whose genius matched the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He would have had huge conceptions but too little money to carry them out, and after living for weeks on

cold potatoes so he could buy brushes and paint, he would have poured out all his undeniable loves on the cold walls and plaster ceilings of this studio-apartment.

If that seemed unlikely, there might be a photographer's den, rich with carefully-lighted nudes. And if the students had grabbed up all the arty digs, I might discover a tastefully sensuous apartment whose absent owner wanted someone careful, preferably an older woman. I would luxuriate in muffled privacy, thick carpets and real bearhides on the King-size beds. I would get up to make my own breakfast in the soft glow of hidden lights and go back to the goosedown quilts for enjoyment when I was ready. I would stay up all night if I chose.

Instead, I found this Spartan ground-floor apartment the other side of the border, heated by an Olympian fireplace on a diet of rationed wood and lit by dim orbs whose principal feature is their refusal to unlight unless you are willing to risk third-degree burns and electric shock by unscrewing the bulbs.

Because of the view, I took the apartment without seeing it, lured by assurances of privacy, a writer's dream, Mrs. Beane said over the long-distance phone. The Beanes had planned a Mexican trip, and I would be the guardian of the hearth. Once I had seen the view, the disadvantages seemed slight: twenty-three miles from campus; access by way of a nearly-vertical drive, the turn possible only from the left; ugly, uncomfortable furniture. The only honest representation on the wall was a map of the peninsula. I scarcely noticed the Indian brave's Appeal to the Great Spirit or the framed pastel hounds dedicated to scents no more serious than Evening in Paris.

My landlady, citing a husband who can do anything, is stuck with the story that there isn't enough power to turn the lights off. My own interest attaches to switches installed at every convenient location although you have to climb straight to the light source to snuff it out. Stumbling through jungles of cut pampas grass and elephantine armchairs, I imagine flopping on my bed to aim a six-shooter at the offensive globe. Instead, I meekly climb the nightly chair, my barked shins less frightening than the impulse to bite the hand that feeds me.

And it *does* feed me: beets whiskered as the kelp that makes them grow; cabbage heads larger than my own; brussels sprouts mud-bathed in rich rains and requiring hours of patient washing; pole beans that go on like the lights-forever. Leeks, sliced thin to bake, buttered, in the oven I use each evening with a growing sense of guilt, aware that Mrs. Beane cooks two days' meals at a time to hoard

energy, soaks her laundry in the sink and agitates it in a machine that works only on spin. (This by way of telling me why I must take *my* washing to the laundromat.) Mrs. Beane doesn't really feed her laundry to the broken-down washer, but stands by while her all-powerful husband coaxes it through its one working cycle. Then she hangs the cloths on outside lines, flung on pulleys across the gully.

Although I must patronize the laundromat three miles away, I am free to borrow Mrs. Beane's antique vacuum cleaner and her floor polisher as often as I wish. I look uneasily at the rubber-tiled floor of an institutional design I have lived with in five different convents. It reminds me of the thrice-weekly massage that kept the surface underfoot a continuous hazard. Back there I used to think levitation was the answer, but in this heavy air I will have to find another way of rising.

Mrs. Beane makes toast on top of the stove because her toaster sputtered out with the lesser galaxies some years ago, and the toaster-oven she admires costs an enormous amount—thirty-five dollars or so. Meanwhile, the versatile husband, a 77-year-old retired electrical worker, simply denies whatever he can't manage.

"There are no flashing amber lights," he says in response to my question about advance warning signals near stoplights on the thoroughfare from north to south of the island. And for him, there obviously are none. Two months later, his vision suddenly expands in keeping with his godlike role. He remarks as if we had just opened the subject, "Oh, *those* amber lights . . ."

I discover that I have neglected to bring the heat-diffusion ring for by glass stove-top percolator. After combing the town for one and being told that I must buy a coffee pot to get the star-shaped wire, I consider the risk of putting the pot directly on the burner. As I am wondering aloud in my landlady's presence, she urges me to ask her husband. It must be hard to deal with all these mortal petitions. His advice: "Put it on the flame, and if it breaks, you'll know you can't do it." His eye winks dangerously, but by now I know it is just a nervous tic.

Already it is time for the Beanes to move their furniture for the winter. Every spring in their quarters upstairs, Mrs. Beane arranges the living room sofa and chairs so that their occupants can look out, like so many small-town hotel ghosts, at the placid faces of the sea. Just as promptly after the first heavy rains in November, she reverses

their direction to avoid the fog-bound, angry scowl of sea and sky in favor of the more eloquent fire.

The shed is piled high with bark and driftwood. Garden vegetables pulled up and sifted for seed, yield their dry remains to the compost heap. The house, under two coats of lemon-yellow paint, flashes through Canadian maples and untidy fir. In the cellar, wine ferments on schedule and beer bubbles in its dark bottles. Everything is in order.

The Beanes make me feel like a misplaced person. Here, where a fiat is a shower drain instead of a car, my Latin background and my weakness for oracles make me think the landlord gauges the water I use each day. "Fiat," the subjunctive "Let it be done," has the force of "Turn it off!" It interferes with the luxury of my morning shower. I find it hard to believe in the scarcity of water with so much of it outside the window where I sit in my red, high-backed chair gazing at the channel. When I tour the island I am surrounded by it, and if I manage to lose sight of water in some dense stand of trees the skies open and it falls on me. Even so, newspaper articles warn that the outlying towns will need ten years to collect money enough to bring Victoria Pipelines to the Saanich Peninsula.

On my third day in the apartment, Mrs. Beane knocks at the door. She is wrapped in a faded beach towel and wearing sneakers. She invites me for a salt water dip. "It's good for you," she says, "you can't study all the time."

When I am ready we look as though we should trade bodies or bathing suits. Mrs. Beane's brown skin is leathery and freckled. Under the bleached towel, her weathered suit may once have been purple or orange. My suit is a modest blue, one-piece, and this is the second time I've had it on. My legs, breasts and shoulders are white and foolish.

The shock of the water makes me furious. Mrs. Beane looks at my goose bumps as I come shivering into the sun, determined to wear my suit only for burning on the boathouse dock. After that, Mrs. Beane swims alone.

Our next social event is a walk along the beach. I talk mostly about how slippery the rocks are, and when we emerge, as if by chance, in a retired military backyard, she introduces me to the Major and his British wife. We are obliged to stay for tea, ritually prepared, and nearly as weak as our conversation. On the way home Mrs. Beane

confides that the neighbor has asked, "What's your new tenant like?" From then on I become wary of placing myself on display.

On a weekend, the Beanes' daughter, a divorcee, arrives from Vancouver. She invites me for a get-acquainted walk. I avoid any reference to my life as a nun and manage to come off as some sort of recluse with unexplained gaps in knowledge and experience. All the Beanes' tenants have been strange, so I can't hope to be the one exception. After a brisk three-mile loop, she comes in for a glass of wine. She brings the subject round to the downstairs plumbing.

"Mother worries that you're afraid to mention it. She thinks she hears running water."

In no time Father has arrived with his tools to take charge. Once satisfied that leaks are checked, he joins us. Noting the vacant hearth, he asks, "Are you out of wood already?" I conclude that firewood, too, must be rationed, as if we lived in a world eternally at war and had to husband its resources like patrons withdrawing small sums from their life savings. I relinquish my single shield against the dank cold and aching rheumatic joints. I am afraid to turn up the thermostat, set at fifty, remembering the old strict rules against meddling with room temperatures. Superiors often assumed personal charge of regulating the heat or delegated that duty to the sister with the coldest, most ascetic blood.

"It's lovely down here, isn't it?" Mrs. Beane asks. She is wearing a red cardigan that must have fit her fifteen years ago, and slacks with patches on both knees that remind me how her husband hates the garden. "He's the builder and I'm the gardener. I try to get him interested, but he can't tell the weeds from the turnips. We lived down here three years while he finished the upstairs." Her eyes are on my bikini pants drying on the radiator. I used to wash them every night but have lately taken to doing them in the shower.

At a party, the boss's wife tells me how the natives once put bricks in their toilet tanks or flushed them every third time to raise the water level enough to get salmon back to their spawning grounds. Now, that crisis past, I listen to the sound of Mrs. Beane's morning rituals in bathroom and kitchen, faucets snapping back into place as if they were elasticized. I become acutely conscious of my addiction to coffee and of the frivolity of my bladder.

Elsewhere, waste creates another kind of problem. The Beanes do not have a disposal service. Everything organic and raccoon-proof

goes into the compost. Fat and bones find their way there only after being purified in the fire that also reduces paper and twigs. Plastics, so far as I can ascertain, are taboo, and tins, flattened, go into the seawall.

“A hundred years from now, they can try to figure out what kind of civilization this was,” Ted Beane muses, though I mustn’t call him Ted. The day I slipped into that one, Lucy, whom I must not call Lucy, asked sharply, “*Who?*”

At first Mr. Beane believes that I am one of the many public servants squandering his tax dollars. Otherwise, how could I stay at home much of the day when the University has hired me? But as he listens to my typewriter early and late, as he notes the hours I spend engrossed in reading, his passage by my window unmarked, he is less openly critical. He is even considerate enough to make a wide swathe to avoid distracting me. More than once, I look up from a period of concentration to see him standing there at the window, his hands full of mail.

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” he explains, and a wave of affection sweeps over me, turns my customary annoyance into guilt. The old man may be headstrong, but there is something gallant about him that I can’t help admiring. I will have to spend more time with people and not imagine myself a martyr.

Ted clears a space in the woodshed for my car, a necessary space in this humid region, he explains. I have just learned to negotiate the drive and the sharp turnaround without beheading small trees. I can even get by the gallon wine jugs hung from the peach tree to discourage raccoons. After thirty-five minutes I pretend that I am inserting the Nova into the shed with a shoehorn. It works. I am light-headed with triumph. I have not even scraped the paint. I gather my books and discover that the only way out is through the double roof of car and shed. I have missed by three inches, and the car door will not open. It is still possible to back out, and I try. After spinning my wheels on the loose dirt and gravel for several minutes I move enough to hit the three-inch drop from the drive and stall. Ted comes to my rescue: Jehovah as parking attendant. He has difficulties with the idle. He races the motor, abuses the power brakes and power steering. I consider the burden of being God, develop a sudden interest in flora and fauna, think hard about my auto insurance.

The next evening I park in my old place in the grass just off the turnaround. The day after that, Ted knocks at my door to offer his

garage. He will park his Olds in the shed because I use my car more often. Besides, it's likely he will be in Mexico.

I soon learn that the garage is only a slight improvement on the shed. A concrete floor for traction, but the paved approach does not quite line up with the garage opening. On the left side, sharp rocks belly out from the ledge that leads up to the shed level. On the right is a drop of several feet. Mrs. Beane, wearing a ruffled 20's blouse under her brown shirt, leans on her rake and watches me from under the high-crowned straw hat. To focus on the garage mouth lures to the savage rocks. The same is true for trying to avoid the drop on the right. The driver must angle in, then straighten out sharply enough to leave garage walls intact, along with the tools hung there. It is clear that Ted regards convenience as a temptation to flabbiness. Like the Ancient Rule, he finds asceticism reassuring.

Because of the safety hazards on wheels or afoot, we have an arrangement that calls for their turning on the yard lights shortly before I am expected home from evening classes. I become fairly skilled at juggling umbrella, books, flashlight and door keys, the entrance to my apartment being on the channel-or far side of the house, whereas theirs faces the road. When they hear me flip on the lights in my apartment they turn off the outdoor ones their side of the house. Timing is everything. They listen for the sound of my engine and grow restless when I arrive more than five minutes late for whatever reason.

As a consequence, I feel obliged to let the Beanes know when I am going out for the evening. Mrs. Beane always comments on what I am wearing. "I don't think I've ever seen you in the same outfit twice," she says. "How did you get all of it in the car?" Knowing I must predict my return within thirty minutes at most, keeps me from enjoying the party. I begin to turn down invitations rather than submit to cross-examination and a timetable rigid as the IRS.

I've already learned more than I wanted to about these interviews. Because her husband's deafness is a handicap, Mrs. Beane interrogates prospective tenants. The apartment had been empty, but the local news reports lie heavy on the civic conscience: so many students without housing. They rent the space, not because they need money, but to help out in the shortage. Ordinarily, they wouldn't even consider me—a short-term tenant—but they may take a winter holiday, and someone must look after the house. The young man who

checked out the place for me would like to live here when I leave. His mother says he plans to marry the blond young woman who came with him. I make no comment on this one because I know the marriage is a fiction invented to meet the Beanes' standards of respectability. They would never consent to let their house and name to anyone living in sin.

The last couple to make a home here stayed two years. Mrs. Beane was glad when they moved because they had become a burden. *He* wanted to sleep until noon on Saturdays, and, besides, he was always trying to tell Ted how to build things. Imagine that, a young man—not halfway through his thirties.

"I told Ted he should just go on with his building, but my husband isn't that kind of man," she remarks. "He wouldn't use the saw or the hammer until the bedroom shades were up in the apartment."

I learn to live without my usual alarm and get up with the Beanes and the birds. By the time Ted walks to the beach to collect what the sea has delivered I am in my red enamel chair, meditating at the typewriter. And though I have turned my back on the Indian brave, I am sniffing out a trail with the watercolor hounds.

The water shortage has taught me the difference between duration and intensity. I am having twice as good a shower in half the time on one Sunday morning when I hear somebody trying to kick in the door nobody uses. It is the door near the frosted window, just outside the bathroom, and if I don't do something quick it is going to break down. Maybe the house is on fire. I take some time anyway. The top storey will be the first to go.

I step into a towel and go dripping over the cold floor, open the outside door a crack, and peek out. Mrs. Beane is there, hands full of chard, swinging one foot against the door to call me from the shower. I am tempted to reach out both hands and let the towel drop.

"I knew you were in the shower, but I thought it might be too late if I didn't come now." She lowers the greens thoughtfully to the floor. "Are you going to church this morning?" She knows I go every Sunday, but she wants to know what time. Ted is not a churchgoer. She really misses talking to her friends. Her church is on the way to mine, and it starts half an hour earlier. She will visit with the parishioners afterwards while she waits for me to pick her up.

My hair is still wet when I head for the garage, buttoning my blouse and then my coat as I go. I haven't had coffee, and nausea overcomes me in the car where mothballs from Mrs. Beane's fur coat and hat

leave her vocal and uneaten. I roll down my window and drive with a drowned fury. "We hardly ever bother to dress up out here in the country," she says, "but it's nice to be a lady for a change."

My landlord informs me that I will not need a telephone.

"You'd just get it in and it would be time to take it out," he says. I listen quietly but decide that a stay of nearly four months requires a telephone. I do not know how to explain to the public that I can call out but no one can call in, because Mr. Beane has cleverly hooked up the downstairs phone as an extension of his own without consulting BC Tel. He has even saved the outdated directory from the strange young woman who preceded me.

I consider it unrealistic to expect more than semi-privacy so long as Mrs. Beane's hearing does not "de-teary-ate" to match her husband's. Still, I am twenty-three miles from campus and have classes only three days a week. The same secretary who told me I wouldn't need to buy a park-anywhere sticker for my car ("You can just walk across campus from the lot on the other side of the Ring. I do it every morning.") insists on my putting some figures in the blank marked *Home Phone*. I buy a park-anywhere sticker for \$15, taking care not to mention my investment to the secretary. I have evening classes and hope to avoid the dark walk to a distant car.

As for the phone, I tell myself that in *this* life I do not need permission from the superior to make a phone call. I am, after all, more than fifty years old. The Beanes do not know about my former life. I pay my rent. I am not a teenager, obliged to take phone calls for a five-minute maximum in the Beanes' kitchen. After making arrangements with BC Tel, I inform Mr. Beane that the installation is scheduled for September 7. Then I go about my teaching.

On the seventh I come home to find the work order for my *four-party* line. Yes, the Beanes are one party. Mr. Beane explains that he headed off my arrangements. "There's no use in putting in more lines. . . nothing else available out here." I wonder who determines availability and decide to make an act of faith in the landlord. I assign a new equivalent for the B. C. part of BC Tel, but revise it when I discover that the company is less antiquated than I thought. The four rings are on different frequencies, and if I hear my phone ring, it's for me. I have kept the turquoise Trimline that was already in place and am billed six dollars for color. When I call to protest, the company representative tells me to deduct two dollars. I consider it a moral victory.

With the phone comes the burden of new knowledge. The previous tenant, a very odd woman, kept the phone on the hearth instead of on the telephone table. The homemade table looks as though it's wearing stilts. It is in a corner darker than a booth, with only firelight to read the directory by. I move the table to the bedside for my tensor lamp and keep the phone on the overstuffed chair to muffle its ringing when I am not at home. In that cement enclosure with the barest of rugs to warm the rubber tiles, its volume grows to the size of a civil defense warning.

One morning when Mrs. Beane knocks with my mail, she urges me to accept a postcard invitation to a local art show. The studio belongs to the daughter of a wealthy department store owner. I am used to having Lucy or Ted comment on postmarks, handwriting, senders' names—even suspect them of keeping a file of my correspondents, much as they count the number of times my telephone rings. They speculate on the cost of long-distance when a friend phones them to ask whether I am out of town. *Time* Canada arrives erratically: they may read it first. I begin to notice any delay in their trips from the mailbox to my door, much as I used to resent the hours incoming mail remained on the superior's desk, especially when letters came to me slit open and she referred to the contents before I had a chance to digest them. I mention casually that a friend is coming to visit me and will probably stay overnight.

"The one from Missoula or the one from Iowa?" Mrs. Beane asks. I smile, remembering the spidery handwriting of the man from Iowa, his way of leaving off the return address. I would like to have one reader give my poems the attention she reserves for my postmarks.

On campus, my colleagues are convinced that my timid approach comes from being too isolated. They hint that I need the security of a cloister outside the walls. I decide to be reckless. When my friend arrives I invite her parents to dinner. They ask to bring a relative. The relative has appendages, one of them the young man who lives in sin. I prepare dinner for eight and ask some of the guests to bring dishes and silver.

Among the guests is a hyperactive nine-year-old, the sinner's nephew. Together they defeat all our efforts toward quietude. At ten o'clock I bid my guests a nervous good-night and signal them to safety on that dangerous drive.

The next day, sauntering past Mrs. Beane's lawn chair with my friend, I report cheerily on our trip to the art show.

"I even bought a drawing," I volunteer, "a charcoal nude—very subtle—in a white frame."

Mrs. Beane's response has nothing to do with art. She is disturbed because my guests made too much noise. The child is totally undisciplined. She will never rent to anyone who knows him.

"That boy would be here all the time," she concludes before starting over again. "My husband was so upset he couldn't sleep." She repeats it like a litany.

I announce that we are going for a walk and draw my friend away. Embarrassed as I am at Mrs. Beane's outburst, I am relieved to have my report of the supervision authenticated. I hide the Nude in the closet where I keep my portable Olympia and take her out each evening after the shades are drawn, ignoring subsequent hints about not having showed the picture to the landlady. Now when I enter the apartment the innocent nose of the hound tilts to a sinister wind.

As the season advances I find the prescribed morning exercises more difficult. I have a disc problem and must strengthen my back muscles. I place my folded afghan like a prayer mat on the square of worn rug and sink to the hard cold floor. Rheumatic joints move to the swish of Mrs. Beane's polisher.

All this domestic fervor overhead creates a high gloss in which I see myself reflected as a slattern. I look around at the heaps of paper on every surface. I study the cloudy floor. Rehearse the hazards of those grim machines in corners where tiles have broken with the groundswell and Mr. Beane's do-it-yourself floorplan. What purpose will be served by spreading cement dust over scuff-marks and scatter rugs? Besides, Mrs. Beane is using the polisher. She will vacuum next. And I will get rid of those three sardine tins and the forbidden plastics.

I manage to find the seawall by the simple expedient of walking towards the sea, but the cans elude me. I am reluctant to pursue the matter, so I carry mine in small brown paper bags and drop them off in the various shopping centers, as if I were a conscientious tourist refusing to litter. Or I get rid of one bag with the detergent box in the laundromat, drop another in a campus garbage can or wastebasket—wherever I find a handy receptacle in a week's rounds. The day after I leave one in the white container intended for soft-drink bottles outside the Safeway store, I return to find the lid padlocked in place, the opening barely large enough to accommodate a Coke bottle. Behind the stores in the shopping center, large signs

appear: *For store use only. Illegal to deposit garbage here.*

I take my wine bottles to the recycling center, not for coffee money, because up here, recycling is "a way of life" rather than a commercial venture. My sense of duty, just beginning to ease up, recovers its wartime strength. The department secretary keeps several boxes behind her chair for various kinds of paper: junk mail, old telephone directories ("I will also have your one from home," says her memo, typed on the back of a Used Books circular), discarded envelopes—anything that need not go through an intermediate shredder before reaching the ultimate one. When anybody makes the mistake of using the wastebasket, she assumes a martyred expression and dives for the castaway like a sparrow hawk.

I do well on this one because the convent has taught me to think of wastebaskets as containers that must be always empty. It is so much more godly that way, and I have become a compulsive wastebasket emptier, putting gum wrappers, ash tray leavings and lesser dust devils through a series of paper bags arranged in a trail leading to the alley. The impossibility of getting people outside convents to cooperate with this arrangement demands frequent small compromises.

An employee from the telephone company arrives to check my phone. He makes various adjustments while conducting a cheerful commentary. I put the new directory he gives me on the overstuffed arm beside the turquoise telephone and take the old book to the secretary for recycling.

Next to Watergate and other American political scandals, Mrs. Beane's favorite topic is Americans' conspicuous consumption. The larger the passing sailboat, the more determined she is to identify the American flag, using binoculars if necessary to make sure.

Because *my* consumption has the interest of proximity, she brings back the years I had to ask the superior's permission for every purchase, no matter how small. If the superior said yes, the bursar was supposed to give me the money. Then it was up to me to choose wisely and report back to the superior with an accounting. If she was not too busy she might look at the bra, the girdle or the shoes I'd bought and give me some advice if I hadn't been a careful shopper. No wonder I sagged into limp foundations and fallen arches.

Mrs. Beane is fascinated with the amount of coffee I manage to put away. She passes along everything she can scrape up on the harmful effects of the coffee bean, including a special find on how it raises cholesterol. I have confessed that I must watch mine. This is one topic

on which she does not defer to her husband. She has a nursing degree and even worked in a hospital for a year or two before she married Ted. The day her eyes travel away from our doorway conversation over a bunch of beets, to the seven two-pound cans I use for canisters, she looks like the special prosecutor discovering forty-five new reels of tape.

"How much coffee did you say you drink?" she asks for the fourth time. When I explain that I don't keep a record, that the tins are just storage places for staples, she looks disappointed. The Beanes—Mrs. Beane anyway—are less interested in the details of my life than in their version of them.

She falters for only a minute. *Somebody* had to drink all that coffee before the tins could be emptied. I hide my thermos under the sink and begin to smuggles groceries in after dark or when the Beanes go up-island for the day. I would like to know the precise moment of *their* return, but they are the owners, the lights all on their side. And they are quick to detect the advantages of my not knowing whence they come or whither they go. Mostly, I hear about these trips after they come home.

"*You* had a man down here," Mrs. Beane says suddenly in the middle of an offering of winter pears. "I heard him!" I feel the flush in my cheeks but I hold my eyes steady. "Your husband?" I ask innocently. Then I remember the telephone test. I can hardly believe her remark. Some matters are too serious for jokes.

A four-day weekend is coming up, and I consider going out of town until the Beanes inform me that they will attend a veterans' reunion in Vancouver. I can't believe my luck. It's the best thing that has happened since they promised to disappear into Mexico. Or it may be a trial run for the Great Mexican Adventure. A test of stewardship, perhaps, like Fidelio's journey, entrusting his wife to a friend. I have been thinking about the medieval romance and I like to make up the parts I don't remember.

I assure Mrs. Beane that I will not be afraid to stay alone. She shows me where they keep the fire extinguisher and leaves an emergency phone number. The morning they drive away, the November rains begin, not the customary ten-minute showers, but the coastal torrents. I slog through rivers of mud to the woodshed and return three times with a wheelbarrow load of wood. I try to take the least distinctive logs in case Ted has them memorized. I pile them in the space outside the bathroom because the only window there is

opaque. Then I telephone all my friends and talk for a long time, my transistor spilling out country western, which the Beanes hate, my feet over the arm of the overstuffed. I glean my own letters from their sheaves of bills and dull house organs. The next morning I steam in the shower for thirty minutes, soaking through the stiffness.

I take the Nude out of the closet for the entire weekend, amused that she covers the Indian over the fireplace. At night I prop her on my dresser while I read in bed by the light of the tensor lamp. It's a long way from the odalisque but I stick out my tongue when the hound shows his teeth and turn his muzzle to the wall.

On the third day a friend stops by for a drink. The sun, out for a few minutes, gilds an orange sailboat, framed in my window. "God!" he explodes, "What's the matter with you anyway? This is a *great* place to live." Sure enough, the Beanes come back half a day early.

"We were thinking about you the whole time," Mrs. Beane says, looking towards the bedroom where the shades are still down. Or the woodshed, which is in the same general direction. Her eyes come back to the fireside, cold ashes and one scrawny log. "How did you like being all alone?"

"I had a man down here," I said.

When I come home for dinner the next day they are waiting for me. The new tenant would like to look at the apartment, but they wouldn't think of going in without first letting me know. I am tired, hungry, and not sure whether I have done the breakfast dishes and put away my nightclothes. But I am tied to my benefactors by a green length of string beans. I acknowledge the introduction to a young Chinese woman who teaches at a neighborhood school. The Beanes withdraw, but I know that anything I say will be monitored from above.

"Mrs. Beane says they're going on a Caribbean cruise," the young woman begins. "I know I'll love having the whole place to myself." I whisk my nylons from a hanger on the fireplace screen and into a drawer.

I open the closet, forgetting about the Nude, but the tenant sees her and accepts my explanation: "This one is mine. I'm just getting ready to pack up for the trip back to the States." She studies the drawing for a long time with a cool eye.

"Is it cold down here?" she asks.

"Well, I think you'll enjoy the fireplace. I usually have a fire in the evening." Let experience teach her. My noble impulses are running

out of fuel.

“The refrigerator is cold,” I say, opening its door to show her all that space. “And you’ll really like the range in the kitchen.”