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Ruth's Problem

THE FIRST DAY OF September dawned unusually warm and muggy. It felt like the middle of July, and Ruth could have believed that fall was months away, rather than mere weeks.

She stood in front of her dresser, already uncomfortable in the cotton shorts and top she had worn to bed. A pair of leggings and a T-shirt lay in front of her, tempting her to put them on, but she knew she'd be miserably warm if she did. Instead, she went to her closet and picked out a light cotton dress, the coolest thing she owned that was still suitable for a trip downtown.

She'd had the dress for years and it bore what she considered a very pretty coral and green flowered print. Yet whenever she actually wore the outfit it made her feel demure, even slightly matronly, and today it had the same effect. Maybe it wasn't the print but the gathered cap sleeves that were at fault, she speculated as she did up the buttons, then unfastened the one at the top of the scooped neck. She turned sideways to the mirror and assessed the effect: vital and attractive, as she hoped, or wanton and cheap? A sliver of bra peeking out decided the issue, and Ruth fastened the button again.

While she selected earrings and shoes, her mind ran over the day's agenda. She had several small errands to do and she was going to take herself to lunch. But the main reason for the trip downtown was her regular appointment with her gynecologist, during which she would have to submit to her annual pelvic exam.

Ruth's stomach clenched at the thought and she was gripped by the same qualms she'd had each of the past thirty or so times. Would the doctor find something wrong with her? How much would

it hurt? And, perhaps uppermost, how would she bring herself to open her legs and surrender to such naked scrutiny? Of course, she always survived the experience, and on each occasion the ensuing relief led her to believe she could be more blasé, next time. But anxiety and embarrassment were the more vigorous impulses and by the following year had always choked out her feeble resolve.

She pushed away thoughts of the exam and considered the questions she wanted to ask Dr. Brant. This would be the first time she'd seen him since her menopause had begun, and she hoped he could tell her how to handle the minor problems it had brought. To help remember what she wanted to ask, she'd assigned a question to each finger on one hand. She flexed them in turn as she ran through the list once more in her mind.

As usual, Ruth made an effort to get to her appointment on time, only to find that the doctor was, as usual, running late. Suppressing the urge to complain to the harried receptionist, she took a seat in the waiting room and began leafing through a dog-eared magazine. The articles purred with advice on how women could beautify their homes and themselves or rekindle the flagging interest of their men, topics that were hardly Ruth's cup of tea. Still, she preferred these to the glossy brochures from pharmaceutical firms, the only other reading matter in the room.

After a while she realized she was no longer taking in anything she read. Her eyes moved mechanically over the page, but her mind was on two women sitting nearby. Both were in their mid-thirties, Ruth guessed, and one was telling the other about her mother's struggle with breast cancer.

"They had her in and out of the hospital, back and forth every few weeks. In between she spent so much time at doctors' offices, she started skipping appointments. Said she couldn't see the point of living longer if that was how she'd spend the time. She died in June, six months after she was diagnosed."

Now Ruth could hardly resist staring at the speaker, and to curb her impulse she pinned her unfocused gaze on a painting on the opposite wall. Talk of breast cancer always grabbed her, for she knew that she was vulnerable to it because of both her childlessness and her own mother's death from the disease.

But part of what riveted her attention now was the woman's matter-of-fact manner. She told the story with almost no emotion,

suggesting to Ruth that she'd expended her supply of sorrow long ago. Nor did she sound critical of her mother's decision. Yet the room was full of the unspoken suspicion that her mother might have lived longer if she had continued her treatments.

Easy to say what someone else should do, thought Ruth, recalling her own mother's ordeal. What if it was me? Would I grasp at each straw that offered me hope? Or shun them in favour of a faster but more natural end? But the choices got difficult long before that.

Even now, Ruth was torn between doing all she could to detect the disease early and hiding in ignorant bliss until it announced itself. Would an early diagnosis really help her live longer or just forecast her demise that much sooner? Maybe what it would prolong was her death, not her life. In which case, Ruth preferred not to know.

"When did she find the lump?" the woman's companion was asking.

"Through a mammogram. When she was sixty-two. She'd been having them every year—you know, like you're supposed to. But one time the clinic asked her to be in a study. They picked her from a list, I guess. At least, it wasn't because of anything about her. But she thought it meant something was wrong, that there was something they weren't telling her. It scared her so much, she stayed away for three years. The next time she went back, that's when they found the lump."

A shock seized Ruth's body, mimicking her reaction years before to her own mother's bad news. She sat rigidly, reliving that sad decline: her mother's hopes raised with each new treatment, then crushed as each inevitably failed. The intensity of the memories enveloped Ruth and insulated her from the sound of her name being called. Finally, she noticed the two women staring at her and she looked around.

A slim young woman stood by the reception desk watching Ruth expectantly. She wore an austere white uniform, its stark effect softened only by a silver happy-face pinned above her right breast. Ruth did not remember having seen her before.

"Mrs. Gardner," she said in a firm, loud voice.

Ruth stood up in a rush, knocking her purse to the floor. She scrambled to retrieve it, then started toward the nurse, realized she still carried the magazine, and turned back to drop it on the coffee table. Throughout this the woman waited, crisp and unmoved, her

mouth crooked in a small ambiguous smile. She couldn't have been more than twenty-five, but her manner implied far more confidence than Ruth remembered having at that age. Hurrying along behind the trim white form, Ruth felt large and ungainly.

"And how are we today?" the nurse asked in cheerleader tones after closing the door to the examining room. "Just take off your things and put this on," she continued, without giving Ruth a chance to answer. She held out several folds of thin, green tissue paper.

"I'm not sure I need to undress yet," Ruth protested, looking at the flimsy paper. Even if I were wrapping a gift, she thought, it'd take more layers than that to hide what was underneath. "I have a few questions to ask."

"Aren't you scheduled for a pelvic? And your Pap?"

"I am, but there are some things I want to talk to Dr. Brant about first."

"Well, your chart indicates that he's doing a pelvic, so it would be easier for the doctor if you change now, Mrs. Gardner." The nurse adjusted the paper liner on the examining table. "Just jump up here when you're ready and he'll be with you in a jiffy." And she left with a chorus of squeals from her rubber-soled shoes.

Ruth stared at the closed door, the paper robe still clutched in her hands. The brisk dismissal made her feel like a chastised child, though the nurse was only half her age. A wave of anger flushed Ruth's cheeks and she toyed with the idea of keeping her clothing on anyway. But something about the place snuffed out that small rebellion. Besides, her anger was quickly growing into a full-fledged hot flash. If she undressed quickly enough, she might keep her clothes from getting damp. Her fingers began unbuttoning the front of her dress.

Soon she was sitting on the examining table, naked under the green paper gown. At first contact, the room's cool air soothed her overheated skin and, to her relief, the hot flash began to wane. But when ten minutes had passed and she was still waiting, she almost wished for another to warm her up. The tip of her nose had grown cold and goose bumps dotted her arms. Her icy feet dangled in front of her, mottled and bluish in the fluorescent light.

Dr. Brant announced himself with a discreet tap at the door, then swung into the room carrying Ruth's chart and wearing a professional, solicitous smile.

"Mrs. Gardner! How are we today?" He asked this in his usual personable tone, which he then contradicted, as usual, by bending his head over Ruth's chart before she could reply. In response she made the standard vague noises, then sat with her arms crossed, feeling chilly and impatient, and waited some more.

Ruth had been going to Dr. Brant for more than twenty years, ever since she and Richard had moved to town. Yet from one appointment to the next, she inevitably forgot the details of his appearance. As always, she recalled why when she saw his bland features, pale coloring, and perpetually mild, distracted expression. Together, they didn't add up to anything distinctive, only a generically human face.

In Ruth's view, the vagueness of his appearance was a virtue that had eased the indignity of the many examinations he had performed on her over the years. Each time his head disappeared behind her sheeted knees, her memory of his face would obediently fade, sparing her the sense of being exposed to anyone in particular.

This impersonal effect was amplified by his dark-framed glasses, whose thick lenses obscured his eyes and played tricks with the edge of his face, sometimes imposing a misalignment along his cheek. The distorting lenses made him seem somehow remote, not fully present, and created the illusion of distance that Ruth felt when her own eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. More than once, while spread-legged on the examining table, she had distracted herself with the idea of doubling that distance by wearing her sunglasses during the procedure. Unfortunately, the resulting mental picture always promised more self-consciousness than relief.

While Ruth waited for Dr. Brant to finish flipping through her chart, she studied the top of his balding head. Long grey hair had been combed up from one side and pasted across the shiny crown, leaving strips of pink scalp peeking through. Several strands of hair had peeled away and fallen forward when he bent over her chart, and as he raised his head again he smoothed them carefully back into place. The gesture looked oddly precise, almost feminine, on his large blunt-fingered hands.

"Excellent," he pronounced aloud to the room at large. He pressed his lips together in a tight smile, tapped his fingers once on the edge of his desk, and was about to stand up when Ruth spoke.

"Dr. Brant, there are a few things I'd like to ask before we ... before you examine me."

Her words stopped him half way out of his chair and he looked at her in surprise. Ruth caught a flicker of irritation in his eyes.

"Just some things I've noticed," she said apologetically. "They're probably nothing, but—"

"Of course, of course," he interrupted, his equanimity once more intact. He sat down heavily, making his chair squeak in loud protest. Then, with a manner suggesting he'd been inconvenienced, he took up his pen, reopened her chart, and nodded at Ruth across the large desk. "Now then. What seems to be the problem?"

Ruth took a breath and launched into an account of her concerns. First, she said, covertly unfolding the little finger of her left hand, there were the hot flashes, those rushes of heat up her neck and face. And the sweats at night, when she woke both overheated and chilled in her damp pajamas. They probably weren't anything to worry about, she added dismissively. Likely normal for women of her age. Still, they were unpleasant, especially the way they left her flustered and sodden at inconvenient times. Or tired and draggy if they'd interrupted her sleep.

Then there were her periods, she said, straightening her ring finger as she spoke. For years they'd arrived as regularly as clockwork and had been pretty much the same from one month to the next. But for perhaps half a year now, she had not known what to expect. Sometimes they were early, sometimes late. They might last for ten days or only for three, and her flow varied from extremely heavy to unusually light. There no longer seemed to be any pattern, and she wondered if she should be concerned about this.

While she talked Dr. Brant had again bent over her chart and she was obliged to direct her words to the top of his head. It was harder to think without the support of eye contact, and she pushed herself self-consciously through her soliloquy. Still, he was rewarding her somewhat by taking detailed notes. He seemed to be putting his mind on her, at least.

Before she could continue, Dr. Brant stopped writing, raised his head, and tapped his nose thoughtfully with the end of his pen. He frowned as if he was stuck on the brink of solving a puzzle.

"Any mood swings? Or fatigue?" he finally asked.

Ruth shook her head. Then, after a moment, she added, "Well, I mean Not really."

Dr. Brant raised his eyebrows and tipped his chin downward slightly, indicating that she should elaborate. She hesitated, then flipped one hand in a dismissive gesture.

"There are days when I feel, well, unsettled. Everything seems so difficult. And ... pointless. When it happens I get frustrated at the slightest thing, things that shouldn't bother me at all. It usually goes along with this feeling of"

She studied the doctor's neck tie as she groped for words. Its burgundy stripes ran diagonally from the right to the left, across a somber navy background. Each stripe was lined with gold along its top edge. The general design was one Richard favoured for his ties and was, she realized, like those her own father used to wear.

"It's hard to explain," she ended feebly, suddenly stumped at how to make this man grasp how she felt. It was hard enough to put the sensation into words that a woman understood. On her first attempt to describe it to Helen, she had said what was closest to the truth. It feels like my skin has been turned inside out, exposing my nerves to every change in the breeze. In the end they had agreed just to call them her 'spells.'

"Please try, Mrs. Gardner. I can't help if you don't."

And obediently she began to explain herself.

The spells announced themselves with emotions strangely intensified and soured, jangling through her like electric shocks. Or the fleeting impression that time had folded back on itself, that she'd already said what she was saying or done whatever it was she was doing. These were followed by the disconcerting sense that the impression wasn't real and the anxious certainty it would happen again. All the while, her gestures and words were infected by a clumsiness that frustrated her efforts to do and say what she really meant. Words didn't come, her tongue didn't obey, her mind stubbornly didn't stir.

Dr. Brant was studying her intently, and to Ruth his unnaturally blank expression signaled a critical opinion beneath. His apparent skepticism goaded her and she tried harder to make herself understood.

"The clumsiness I feel, it's a bit like a mini-stroke," she suggested. "But not a real one," she amended hastily when the doctor cocked an eyebrow. "It's just that it makes me feel impaired, like part of me is watching the rest of me fail. My words, what I mean, don't hit their target." Like now, she thought silently to herself. I don't know what Dr. Brant is hearing, but I know it isn't what I mean. And my babbling is only making it worse.

With an effort, she willed herself to stop talking. Dr. Brant made a final note in her chart and nodded thoughtfully.

"Is that everything?" he asked.

"Well—" she began.

"What about your marital relations? Everything all right in that department?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. Just fine," she said hurriedly, eager to forestall discussion of her sex life. That was an area she would never be comfortable talking about with him. Sexual anatomy was one thing, activity another. She pulled the paper robe closer and felt it tear under her right arm.

Dr. Brant pushed his chair away from his desk, leaned back, and smoothed the length of his tie over his chest and belly.

"Now then, Mrs. Gardner. I would say that you're entering menopause. What you've described are simply early stages of the change."

He paused, as though allowing time for this to sink in.

"The symptoms you're experiencing are really quite normal. The hot flashes are just temporary until your body adjusts to the lower hormone levels. As for the bleeding, it's probably nothing to worry about, but we should schedule some tests to rule out anything serious. I doubt there's any problem, but we want to be sure it's not fibroids or cancer."

At the word 'cancer,' Ruth felt a shock of fear. Not that the idea hadn't already crossed her mind. She worried that all her body's tics were cancers growing wild. But hearing the doctor say the word gave the idea new life.

"Assuming the results are negative, which I fully expect they will be, we'll work out a regimen of estrogen therapy. That will regulate your bleeding, and there are other benefits as well."

The medication would keep her bones strong and slow the wrinkling of her skin, he explained. It would relieve her hot flashes and smooth out her moods. And revitalize her 'reproductive parts,'

he added, dropping his voice discreetly. Estrogen, it seemed, could ease her through menopause so smoothly she wouldn't even know it was happening to her.

"I'm not sure I like the idea of it," Ruth said weakly when he had finished. "I mean, doesn't it make it more likely I'll get cancer? Especially breast cancer?"

"Studies show a slightly greater risk. But that's of greatest concern for someone who's had cancer in her family—"

"I have," Ruth broke in with some irritation. She had long ago told him her mother had died of the disease. She had even seen him make a note of it in her file.

For a brief moment Dr. Brant looked ill at ease, perhaps even mildly embarrassed. The skin around his eyes seemed to have stretched, as though he had flattened his ears back in alarm, and his features appeared sharper and more distinct. When his eyes met Ruth's they held an expression that was unusually open and direct, and she had the disconcerting sense that she was suddenly facing a person replete with hopes and fears, successes and failures. Then his face shifted back into its usual remote set and he turned to her chart.

"Ah, your mother. Yes, well." He scribbled something while he spoke. "Every treatment has its benefits and its costs. You simply have to weigh them and decide what you want."

Ruth regarded him through a haze of confusion. Maybe this would make more sense if she wasn't so cold, she thought, dabbing at her runny nose with the back of her wrist. Part of her mind kept replaying a vision of herself jumping down from the table, snatching her dress from the chair, and hopping back up to drape the fabric over her goose-bumped legs. But not a single muscle so much as twitched in the direction of her clothes. Now Dr. Brant was telling her that estrogen would also reduce her risk of heart disease.

"Isn't there some other way?" she finally asked.

"Hysterectomy is always an option. It might actually become advisable if your bleeding continues or gets heavier. And at that time we could take your ovaries, too, to rule out the chance of ovarian cancer. But," he added in the manner of someone granting a reprieve, "I don't favour doing that yet. What I advise is estrogen therapy."

The word 'hysterectomy' startled Ruth. That was the procedure Helen had gone through some fifty years ago, and not for

good reason, in Ruth's view. Now a doctor was suggesting it as a way of treating her own menopause. It seemed drastic, far worse than the problems it was supposed to cure.

"I guess I was thinking of more, uh, natural ways," she suggested mildly, not letting on how strongly she felt.

Dr. Brant was silent for a moment, then spoke in a tone that Ruth heard as challenging. "And what would those be?"

"I've heard calcium can help," she said tentatively, releasing two more fingers, leaving only her thumb curled against her palm. "To keep my bones strong. And some people say vitamin E cuts down on hot flashes and it's good for the heart—"

"They also say it's 'a cure in search of a disease,' Mrs. Gardner. Good for what ails you, as the phrase has it, and therefore not much good for very much."

"But it isn't harmful—"

"Not in moderate doses, except perhaps to your bank account." He finished with a small, upside-down smile that suggested his own finances were far removed from any such threat.

Ruth smiled back gamely and waited for him to continue, but he remained silent. Pushing aside the worry that she was being a nag, she reintroduced the issue herself.

"But what about calcium? I mean, isn't bone loss a real danger after menopause?"

"You haven't suffered any fractures, have you, Mrs. Gardner?" Dr. Brant flipped idly through Ruth's chart as he spoke and glanced up briefly when she shook her head. "And you have a well-nourished physique. You haven't experienced any dramatic weight loss recently?"

"No, unfortunately," answered Ruth, forcing a short laugh.

Dr. Brant pursed his mouth in imitation of a smile, then let it fade.

"I don't see the need for you to take calcium supplements now. You seem to be in fine condition and you're probably getting enough from your diet. Do you get regular exercise?"

Ruth nodded and gave him a brief description of how she extended short outings, grabbing load-bearing exercise where she could. Dr. Brant nodded absently as she spoke, then advised her only to continue what she had been doing all along.

"What about iron," Ruth persisted, raising her final concern with the awareness that her time for questions had about run out. "My periods are so heavy sometimes"

"It won't hurt, I suppose, but it's not necessary, either." He paused to shove his glasses upward and massaged the bridge of his nose with two fingers.

"Mrs. Gardner, your overall health is quite good—except that you're going through menopause. Since that is an estrogen-deficiency disease, I advise you to consider a regimen of estrogen therapy. That is the way to correct the deficiency. If you choose not to, that's certainly your prerogative. But I would be remiss if I didn't point out that your estrogen level doesn't affect only your well-being but also that of your husband and friends. Something to keep in mind," he added with a significant look.

"As for these other options you've suggested"—he waved his hand as though stirring the ether—"frankly, they won't hurt, but I suspect they're a waste of money and time."

A familiar maroon haze shrouded Ruth's brain as she tried to take in what Dr. Brant was saying while holding her own train of thought. She still had the same concerns she'd come in with, and the answers he'd given had only made her more confused. Now he was shifting the topic of conversation and accelerating its pace, and she was finding it hard to think clearly. Before she had figured out what she wanted to say, he stood up, his eyes on his watch.

"We've spent a lot of time just talking, Mrs. Gardner, so I'm not going to be able to examine you today. I'm sure I can fit you in before the end of the month, though. Just check with Susan on your way out and she'll set up an appointment."

He closed her file and stood up from his desk.

"I'm also having her send you for blood work. To see what your hormone levels are."

He walked to the door, then turned, one hand on the door-knob.

"Now, is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked with the most personable smile he had shown that day.

Ruth looked at him for a moment, her mouth open and her mind blank. What did he mean, 'anything else'? What advice had he provided that she could use? Yet his offer, however hollow, gave her another chance, and she mustered herself for one final try.

"I ... I feel like I don't know what I should do." She wiped her nose with the back of her hand, partly out of need and partly to stall for time to think. "Everything seems so drastic—a hysterec-

tomy, hormone pills. Isn't there something ... I don't know ... simpler?"

Dr. Brant dropped his hand from the door knob and cleared his throat.

"Mrs. Gardner. You seem unduly concerned about your symptoms. As I've already assured you, there is nothing abnormal or alarming about what you're experiencing. Nevertheless, while I have suggested several ways you might deal with it, you have rejected them all." He took a step toward her. "I have to wonder if your emotional state is what we should really be considering."

Ruth studied him, fighting conflicting feelings about his suggestion. On the one hand she wanted solutions, so it was encouraging to hear him pinpoint a problem. If he put his finger on what was wrong, maybe he could make it right. On the other hand, something told her she shouldn't like what she was hearing.

"The moods you described," he prompted. "Your depression."

"But I'm not depressed. I mean, I don't feel sad."

"You said there are days when you feel depressed. At least, that's what I assume you meant when you said—" He perched on the edge of his desk and scanned the notes he'd added to her chart. "'Unsettled' and 'frustrated' are the words you used."

"Yes, but—"

"There's no shame in being depressed, Mrs. Gardner. It's quite natural for women to feel that way as they age and their bodies don't work quite as well. The change itself is an upheaval, a difficult and emotional time of life. What would be a shame is for you to have to suffer in silence."

"But I'm not unhappy! I don't have bad days very often. And even when I do, it's like the problem is layered on top of the other things that I feel, my real feelings. It's really not like I'm depressed." Ruth heard her voice becoming shrill. To Dr. Brant's ears, which were apparently tuned to pick up mental imbalance, she must sound almost hysterical.

"Well, now," he said, his tone condescendingly calming. "Perhaps 'depression' isn't a word we should use. But still, I think we should monitor this aspect of your complaint. After all, we want to consider the whole person, both the body and the mind."

"Uh huh," Ruth responded absently. She knew she should say something in her defence, but some instinct told her anything more would only confirm what she was trying to deny.

"Why don't we talk about this when all your results are back? We can see how things are then."

"Okay," she answered with some relief. She was still unhappy with what he had said, but at least the conversation was over for now.

"Just see Susan on your way out."

"I will, Dr. Brant. Thank you for your time."

"Not at all" His voice faded away as he hurried from the room.

Ruth had stopped shivering by the time she dressed and left the clinic, but her nose was still running slightly. She walked through the parking garage to her car, enjoying the absence of air-conditioning and anticipating the wave of accumulated heat that would strike her when she opened the Volvo's door. Abandoning her usual summer habit of unrolling the window even before she got in, she slid onto the driver's seat and sat for a minute, soaking up the warmth. Only then did she put the key in the ignition.

By then, rush hour was reaching its peak. It took her ten minutes to wind her way out of the garage and pay at the kiosk, and once on the street her progress through the Friday afternoon traffic was barely any faster. When a black BMW squeezed in front of her and left her to wait through yet another interminable light, she found herself pounding angrily on the steering wheel, bruising the side of her hand. The action seemed to burn a path through the fog that had been shrouding her thoughts.

"Depression!" she scoffed out loud. "I'm not depressed! Am I?"

The line of cars to Ruth's right shifted ahead slightly and Ruth found herself next to a woman who was singing along to her radio. Her rolled-up windows seemed to provide an illusory sense of privacy, for she was tapping her fingers rhythmically on the steering wheel, shimmying her shoulders back and forth, and moving her mouth in what looked like exaggerated pantomime. Ruth watched, both transfixed and embarrassed, though whether the embarrassment was for herself or for the woman she wasn't sure. She didn't know what was wrong with singing aloud in public anyway, but she stifled any further impulse to talk to herself.

Finally the light changed, and in her eagerness to get going Ruth let the clutch in with a jerk. The Volvo choked, then stalled

dead in the sea of cars. Horns blared behind her as she fumbled at the ignition key, drowning out the sound of the car's engine roaring back to life and making her grind the starter motor. The man in the car to her left shook his head disparagingly as he drove past.

Ruth fought to hold on to her composure and resolutely directed her gaze straight ahead. She grasped the steering wheel with both hands and concentrated on controlling the foot pedals. To her relief, the old car crept obediently through the intersection.

Her exasperation and the warmth of the car had finally coaxed the chill from her flesh, and now she reached over to unwind the window. The task took an uncommon degree of concentration, reminding her of when she was learning to drive. Back then she couldn't roll down the window and steer straight at the same time. Any more than she could pat her head while she rubbed her stomach. Still, despite everything, she was better off than that today.

This small proof of her competence boosted her spirits and she began to drive with greater aplomb. Less than a block further on, traffic thinned out dramatically and began moving smoothly. Ruth consciously relaxed her shoulders, then began sorting out why she had left the clinic so disturbed. Dr. Brant seemed to think that she was depressed. She had received the suggestion with complete surprise and a sure sense that the diagnosis did not describe her. But he had not seemed persuaded by her denial, and when she reflected on the tone of her own voice—shrill to her ears, probably hysterical to his—she began to wonder herself.

Perhaps she was making light of her tremors of anxiety, of the unnerving turns her mood could take. She had assumed they were not unique to her. Even Helen had admitted to similar feelings. But did they imply a more serious ailment? Depression, for instance? The moniker still did not strike her as a good fit. Yet maybe it was a condition she should not expect to detect.

If Dr. Brant had asked whether her throat was sore, it would be an easy matter for her to tell and he would not challenge the answer she gave. Yet he had been skeptical of her claim that she wasn't depressed, suggesting she wasn't in a position to know. This proposed ailment was a slippery suspect. It left its taint on every feature of herself she examined and lent to each silver lining a cloud.

She hated to admit it, but maybe the doctor was right. Maybe her spells were cracks in the fragile veneer of her sanity. Perhaps

her happiness was nothing more than brief respites from more unsavory, unsettled states.

Now Ruth berated herself for leaving the clinic without asking more about depression. Then she recalled how Dr. Brant had cut the discussion short and how she'd barely got through all the questions she had come in with. It was frustrating that he had not provided more information. But over the years he had rarely made her feel that his goal was to make her better informed.

Dr. Brant had been recommended by the wife of one of Richard's colleagues, when Ruth and Richard were new in town. At Ruth's first appointment, he had been pleasant enough and his standing in the community had suggested she could have confidence in his abilities. But he had been too detached for her tastes, she recalled, and her intention had been to find someone else.

But when the time for her next office visit rolled around and she still had done nothing about her concern, she relaxed her standards and saw him again. With every appointment she grew more accustomed to his manner and, as he became ever more familiar with her background, she invested more in staying with him. Whatever else he lacked, there was at least some continuity in his care. At this thought, she remembered the look on his face when he realized he'd forgotten her mother's breast cancer. How could he overlook such an important thing?

He was becoming an old man, she realized. Growing comfortably into the old-fashioned ways that he'd had all along. For instance, he had never taken up her invitation to call her 'Ruth.' The clinic itself carried an air of yesteryear, too. There was the faux-leather furniture, the odd seam now patched with gray duct tape. And the row of diplomas on the waiting-room wall that touted credentials as though they'd otherwise be in doubt.

Even twenty years ago he had not been young. Maybe now it really was time she moved on. But that prospect wasn't a pleasant one, either. Finding someone she liked who was taking new patients. Spreading her legs for exams by a stranger—likely someone whose presence would be harder to ignore. Forfeiting Brant's amassed understanding of her; even his meager stock was better than none. Ruth was appalled to find she might actually prefer the devil she knew.

No, she couldn't face a change just now. And besides, she'd have to see Brant to hear the results of her tests, which now included a mammogram—an appointment she had been ambushed

into by Susan. Not that she could bring herself to be annoyed at the receptionist, the one person in the clinic she could imagine ever becoming a friend. But when Ruth was arranging for her Pap test and blood work, Susan had pointed out that Ruth was due for the exam and had set up a time before she could object.

The prospect unnerved Ruth more than reason could explain. She'd had mammograms before—the baseline that heralded middle age and one every two years after that. The results had been fine every time and the experience was not as bad as a pelvic exam. But the thought of the next one suddenly resurrected the fears that had enveloped her earlier in the waiting room. Now, at her age, it was deemed wise to have these tests every year. Early detection, they said, was the key. But what if something did turn up? Then what would she do?

Ruth thought yearningly of her sister Joan, who would understand these worries best. Throughout the years of watching their mother die of breast cancer, and especially during the endless and ultimately useless treatments and tests, the sisters had often shared fears of what might lie in wait for them down the road. Each had accompanied the other to her first mammogram, and when distance precluded that form of solace they still phoned before, during, and after the day. Perhaps, thought Ruth, she could recapture some of that comfort by writing her sister about her concerns. She owed Joan a letter anyway.

Her thoughts were on the other things she would write, when she reached the driveway of her house, and just then her stomach emitted a loud, gurgling growl. She glanced at her watch to see if her appetite was legitimate and was pleased to see it was soon time for dinner. Her hunger could be satisfied without the guilt that attended between-meal snacks. She was 'well-nourished' enough, she thought, patting the soft flesh that swelled below the waistband of her dress.

Later, after a simple meal of leftovers pulled from the fridge, Ruth and Richard had moved into the living room. He sat erect in a high-backed chair, one ankle resting on the opposite knee. She lounged on the couch, her legs folded to her side and covered with the skirt of her dress. The room was still filled with the day's heat, and in self-defence they each nursed a tall glass of club soda over ice.

Dinner had been uncommonly quiet, for although they routinely reported medical news to one another, they observed an unspoken rule not to do so while they ate. With Ruth's appointment clamouring to be described, other topics had seemed too trivial in contrast and conversation had quickly ground to a halt.

Ruth had actually appreciated the excuse to keep to herself and sort out her thoughts. As though her reactions had been slowed by the clinic's chill and were only then thawing out, she had realized she still harbored a knot of frustration. All afternoon, obstacles had been thrown up between her and the few things she wanted: to have her questions answered, to keep her clothes on, to stay comfortably warm, to get around town without fighting traffic. Then Richard had come home late, having been held up in a meeting, and she had grown lightheaded with hunger while she waited for him.

When they finally ate, her face had felt rigid as she chewed her food, having caught the contagious set of her stiff upper lip, and she'd had to force it into animation the few times she was prompted to speak. Then, in relief, she would retreat back into herself, her eyes fixed downward and the boundaries of her body turned comfortably in. The uncommon silence was soothing, cocooning and numbing.

Now, however, it was time for them to talk. Richard was looking at her expectantly, waiting for her to begin. But the delay had inflated the import of her news, making it seem anticlimactic even before she spoke. She was tempted to puncture the mood with a joke. I have good news and bad news, she pictured herself saying. The good news is your wife is going to live. The bad news is she's turning into an old woman. Ba rump bump. But the prospect of bad news might alarm Richard at first, and in the end he probably would not think her small joke was funny. She settled for a modified version as her opening line.

"Dr. Brant seems to think I'm going to live. I'm just having the normal problems of menopause." She considered telling him how Brant had dismissed her ideas about calcium and vitamin E, but Richard was skeptical of such remedies anyway. Having a medical doctor reject them too would only confirm his prejudices. Instead, she described the steps she'd be taking. The Pap smear she'd have at the next appointment, since time had run out on her today. The blood tests the doctor had requisitioned. The mammogram Susan had sprung on her. She heard her voice matter-of-

factly proffering reasons for each procedure. Her confident tone betrayed none of her concerns and neatly sidestepped the mess of loose ends Brant's answers had left.

"Really, my health is quite good. I'm just going through menopause," she finished. As she absorbed the strange taste of Brant's words emerging from her own mouth, she realized Richard was studying her. His expression was similar to the one he'd assumed the other evening when she'd touched on the fact of their childlessness. Had she been feeling more like herself tonight, it might have unnerved her, as it had before, and discouraged her from pursuing the subject. But from the far side of her emotional remove, she was impervious to any criticism he could make, even curious about what he might say. She took a guess at what was on his mind.

"It makes it seem real, doesn't it?"

He stiffened slightly and lifted one hand as if he was about to demur. Then he dropped it to his lap.

"You mean, that we're the age we are?" He smiled gently as he spoke, and Ruth found herself touched by his tact. He was offering her easy escape from the topic, and she was tempted by the option. But something made her choose not to take it.

"Well, yes. And that we didn't have children. And that now we never will."

Again he grew sombre and Ruth braced for his reaction. But, just as quickly, his face relaxed.

"This is just a natural stage of life, Ruthie. Like reaching puberty. Or getting grey hair."

"But it's hard to take when you lose such a big thing along with it. Richard—" She paused until he met her eyes. "I know you're not completely happy with the way things are. With us not having children," she added.

Richard sat silent for a long moment, then took a careful sip from his glass. The tinkle of ice cubes jarred against Ruth's nerves as she waited impatiently for him to answer.

"I kind of overstated things the other night," he finally said. "I don't really think we made a mistake. But the desire does well up in me now and then. You know, having the house full of the sounds of kids, knowing they need you to take care of them. Not that I don't like the way we live. But it does seem a little self-centred sometimes." He stopped, then added in a rush, "I just don't want us to be like the Gerricks."

Howard Gerrick was a colleague of Richard's, and the Gardners dutifully saw him and his wife Doreen every six months or so for a meal. The Gerricks had no children but lavished their income and energy on their house and, at each of their dinners, showcased some new and elaborate dish. During a recent gathering the conversation had revolved around their new set of china, which they displayed with the self-conscious pride of parents showing off a child. Afterward, when Richard and Ruth autopsied the evening, each had confessed to being mildly disturbed by the inordinate focus and the empty life it seemed to suggest.

"You think our lives are pointless?" Ruth asked. "That we're like them?" Alarm eroded the edges of her comfortable reserve and she could hear it seeping into her voice.

"No, no. I don't mean we are like them. I just don't want us to be. You know, all turned in on ourselves, only interested in people as audiences. And busy congratulating ourselves on finding that amusing Chardonnay." He cocked his little finger sarcastically.

"Still," he went on, "things around here sometimes seem a little too, I don't know, self-absorbed. Like last Saturday. What did I do, other than fix the radio and go for a run? What would it have mattered if I hadn't? I mean, to anyone other than me? Or maybe you?" He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, his eyes fixed on Ruth. "Maybe what we do should matter to someone else. We'd have that if we'd had a child. And without it, well ... sometimes we're kind of afloat."

Ruth sat quietly, engrossed in making rings on the coffee table with the sweaty bottom of her glass. Her calm objectivity had abandoned her and tears were stinging the inner corners of her eyes. She had never felt the need for kids to give her grounding. Her life didn't suffer from any such lack, and she couldn't help taking Richard's words as a sign he wasn't satisfied with her. Apparently, she had not been enough for him when she was still able to bear a child. So how could she ever be now?

"Ruthie," she heard him say with gentle persistence. "Do you know what I mean?"

"No," was all she managed to get out before her throat constricted with emotion. She clamped a hand to her mouth to keep her lips from trembling. To her surprise, Richard got up from his chair and moved to sit next to her on the couch.

"Come on," he said gently. "It's not like it's something I feel all the time. Just every now and then."

She looked at him sharply, ready to doubt his sincerity. But his expression was earnest.

"Really," he insisted. "I'm not complaining. I'm just saying it's something that crosses my mind once in a while." He raised his eyebrows and waited expectantly, as if begging her to see his point.

Ruth sat silently, her emotions tugging her one way, then another. At least Richard was being open, explaining how he felt without becoming defensive. The relief of not getting his usual cold shoulder tempted her to let go of her hurt. After all, she'd often told him all she wanted when they disagreed was for him to be frank and receptive, to talk things through. But his confessed regrets had stung so much, she wasn't sure she could put them aside.

Before she'd decided what she should do, Richard reached over and brushed her hair away from her face. The tenderness of the gesture caught her off guard and she started to weep. For a few minutes her tears flowed freely and Richard soothingly rubbed her back. Finally, she gathered herself enough to speak.

"I never knew you cared so much about having kids. I mean, when did you start to feel like this?"

"I don't care 'so much.' I already told you, it's just something I sometimes wish we'd done differently."

"But, like what? Like ... wishing we'd painted the shutters a lighter grey?" she asked, knowing she was almost certainly understating things but still hoping he would agree.

"No. It's definitely more than that," he corrected somewhat testily.

"Where did this come from all of a sudden?" she blurted out. "Why didn't you tell me earlier? Why did you wait till it was too late!" Her mouth crumpled as her eyes filled again.

"Ruth. Listen to me." Richard took her chin in his hand and held her face so her gaze met his. It was an uncommon gesture for him, and Ruth found herself charmed by it. "We can be fine with this. It doesn't have to be a big deal, not unless we make it one."

"But it makes me feel so hopeless," she persisted. "Like we've made some awful mistake."

"We haven't, we're fine. This is how we are, and it's fine. More than fine." His eyes were still locked on hers, but now his

hand was gently brushing the side of her face with the back of his fingers. With each stroke, some of her anxiety fell away.

"So you don't resent me because of this? Because I never had a baby?"

Richard smiled and shook his head.

"No, not at all. Don't even think that."

"But it is how I feel, Richard. It's how I always feel when you talk about kids. You're a natural with them—it's so obvious when you're around them. You like them and I don't. And maybe it is my fault we never became parents."

"It's not a question of fault. One way or another, this way of life is what we've both chosen. Neither one of us is more to blame for it than the other."

Ruth looked at him, unconvinced.

"Really. We shouldn't have regrets about it. Maybe I do like kids more than you, but so what? You like lots of things I don't, too. We just have to accept that we differ on this."

"Yeah, but—"

"Aw, come on, Ruthie. Don't worry about it. You've got enough on your mind after what you went through today."

Ruth blew her nose loudly, then slumped back against the couch cushions. The surge of emotions had left her drained and limp.

"Oh, god. I think I'm just scared by this damned mammo-gram. I know I should have it, but just the thought of it brings back everything my mother went through."

"I know, I know. But none of that's going to happen to you." Gently, he pulled her close to him, then eased the two of them back against the cushions. "Everything's going to be fine," he crooned, rocking her gently back and forth.

Ruth's first impulse was to ask challengingly how he could be so sure. But for once she took his prediction as it was intended and let herself be comforted by his words.

For a time they sat, Richard's arm around Ruth and Ruth leaning against him. It had been weeks, perhaps months, since they had last sat like this, and she found the solid feel of him, even the slight movement of his chest as he breathed, both familiar and excitingly new. All other thoughts were being pushed from her mind by the warm weight of his arm against her back and the gentle pressure of his body at her side. Her mood had changed so

quickly, it surprised even her, but the pleasure of Richard's gentle attention had made her worries fade away.

Impulsively, Ruth snuggled into Richard, bringing them so close together that her hand came to rest on his thigh. She closed her eyes and tipped her head back against the sofa cushions, settling in to let the last residue of emotion drain away.

To her surprise, she felt Richard nuzzling the exposed stretch of her neck. Then his hand slipped from her shoulder to caress the outside curve of her breast. He seemed to have taken her snuggling as a desire for something more. But she was still too stirred up, too exposed and vulnerable, to be in the mood for this.

Ruth held herself still, torn between the urge to stop things short and a reluctance to put any more distance between them. Then Richard began to stroke her hair back from her face, a gesture she had always loved, and she leaned into his hand. Perhaps, she told herself, she should see Richard's overture as a more generous one, as evidence of love and an urge to give her pleasure. After all, she knew sex was his way of bringing them closer. She was the one who had to feel close and secure before she could think of making love.

Apparently noticing her hesitation, Richard pulled away slightly and peered at her.

"Something wrong?" He spoke caressingly and his voice held the extra resonance it often carried when he was aroused. He kissed her gently on the temple, just at her hairline, then flicked his tongue lightly across the sensitive skin at the side of her mouth. Again reminded of the pleasure that sex might bring, Ruth felt her irritation give way to the enjoyable sensation of being seduced. In answer to Richard's question, she raised her face toward his and closed her eyes, waiting for him to kiss her.

After a few minutes of high-school-like passion on the couch, they stood and walked upstairs hand in hand. At the side of their bed they stopped and turned to each other, as if the move had been choreographed. Ruth looked up at Richard, aware of nothing beyond the room and the warm darkness pressed between them. She leaned into his slim body and felt his familiar contours meld with hers. The room seemed to fade away.

Soon their bodies moved smoothly together, anticipating each other and exchanging a pattern of touches laid down over the years. As lust took hold, Ruth relaxed and let it move her along,

waking her skin and flooding urgency through her limbs. A steady rhythm took over and deep in her belly a soft heat glowed.

Her abandon caught Richard by pleasant surprise and in seconds had compounded his passion. He moved faster, more urgently, and his fervor broke through Ruth's abandon and sent a flash of tension through her. She had been caught up in sensation and didn't want the mood to end, and she tried to will her mind back to oblivion. But Richard was listening to his own pulse, and his pace quickly outstripped hers. As he left her behind, frustration flooded through her, dampening any desire and leaving her original irritation in its stead.

Now her mind whirled coolly and mechanically, divorced from her body except to keep it moving in imitation of interest. She observed their coupling as remotely as if from behind one-way glass, and with a shock she realized Richard was so absorbed in his own sensations that he hadn't noticed her distraction. There was no need to pretend, and so she lay still, waiting only for him to finish.

At last, Richard rolled off her and lay back, still breathing heavily. "You're terrific, hon," he said after a bit.

Ruth, lying on her side with her back toward him, did not answer. All she could think of was how often his peaking desire determined the end, how he would move away and leave her panting, startled and blinking, in the dark. Why was it that he never saw the tables as turned, never noticed that she had met his desire in the absence of hers and that it might be his turn to do so for her?

"Something the matter?" he asked absently when the silence had stretched to its limit. He placed one hand on her back, as if to gauge her frame of mind.

Ruth held herself still, pretending to be asleep while she concentrated on trying not to cry. When she remained silent, Richard withdrew his hand and turned away to his side of the bed. Immediately, tears began trickling down Ruth's cheeks to her pillow and she fought to keep from snuffling through the congestion collecting in her nose. Not wanting Richard to know she was upset, she made herself take regular, slow breaths. As always, it was more difficult than she expected, for her lungs needed to empty more than each exhalation would allow.

Suddenly her concentration was interrupted by a raspy snort from Richard, who had fallen asleep with uncharacteristic speed.

The sound made Ruth feel utterly alone, but to her surprise her tears stopped and her breathing cleared and returned to a slow, regular rhythm. She turned her pillow over and dried her cheek against the soft surface. One knee crooked itself into the back of the other and she lay staring into the darkness, wondering idly at her sudden calm.