

SABINE SAUTTER-LÉGER
VISITORS

THE LOUNGE HAD BEEN REDECORATED. The far wall was covered in nature wallpaper: an enlarged, photographic image of a deciduous forest in autumn. A few beams of light from an invisible sun pierced the copper and green foliage—but the rays did not reach the elderly. They sat, as usual, scattered around the room under recessed ceiling lights in chairs angled towards a television hooked high on an adjacent wall. The hefty box had recently been replaced with a wide-angle flat screen. A news station showed a freestyle skier soaring through the air in acrobatic pirouettes and then making an unfortunate, painful landing. I stepped forward; as the glass doors slid closed behind me, the commentary of the sports reporter became audible in the stillness.

That the building had been the elementary school before it was transformed into the community's old-age home was an irony lost on most of the third-floor residents, who didn't remember pushing their pencils here into awkwardly formed words or being called on to recite multiplication tables. Now when they arrived, they were introduced to old classmates as new neighbours.

My mother sat slightly apart in a wheelchair stationed close to the newly papered wall, her slouch accentuated by the starkly rising tree trunks in the background, her gaze fixed on an area just below the television. When I crossed the room to move into her line of vision, I noticed she had been dressed specially for my visit. She wore the shimmering blue blouse I'd sent for Christmas; but the chain of a gold necklace she'd had since I was a child caught over a high button on her top, and the decorative owl meant to dangle at her waist lay crooked on her left breast.

I smiled as I approached. As I drew nearer, one kind grey eye found me; the other slanted in a slightly different direction, outwards—towards a future, perhaps, where seeing would be less important. I bent down to kiss her forehead, then held out my bouquet. She thanked me, using my sister's name. "What a wonderful surprise," she said.

"I'm Simone," I said, placing the yellow tulips in her lap.

We are three daughters; a son, Luc, came late and left early. He hanged himself last year in his boss's office after a short but deep depression. My mother does not know of his death. As I pushed her wheelchair out of the lounge, she lifted one hand and made a flourish towards the wall. "Luc put this paper up yesterday," she said.

The apartment doors in the third-floor hallway have framed pictures of their inhabitants next to the names. We slowed as we reached my mother's room. "Mother and Father are here," she announced.

I hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, there they are in the back." Mounted on the far wall of her room were the familiar black-and-white pictures of her own parents, taken over sixty years ago. "There they are," she pointed.

"Those are very nice photos of your parents," I said.

"They came yesterday to see me."

"I don't think so, Mom. These are pictures of your parents, from when they were young."

"They were supposed to come this afternoon, too."

I paused. "And did they show up?"

My mother studied the floor a long moment before responding. My eyes followed hers down to the intersecting tiles. The grout was darker by the doorway. "They came and didn't come," she said at last, lifting her chin.

"There's another picture of my parents," she said, drawing my attention to a different wall.

"Mom." I said. "That's you with your husband, on your fiftieth wedding anniversary. It's you with Pa before he passed away."

My mother raised her eyebrows and acquiesced with ostentatious politeness. Reaching over the side of the wheelchair to her commode, she pulled on the first drawer; it stuck slightly and she had to jostle it. "I have something here for you," she said, tugging. A lifelong habit of making company feel welcome animated her. "Let me find it. Something—" She stopped short. "My goodness! Do I ever have a lot of stockings! Look."

I admired a drawer almost overflowing with rolled-up nylons in varying shades of brown. She closed it with a shove and with a shaky hand pulled on the drawer below. "These are my nightgowns," she explained. She waved me to open the last drawer. The bottom drawer contained folded sweaters and pants.

Her interest moved to a small wooden box resting on the dresser. It, too, had a drawer. She opened it expectantly. It contained a line of soda crackers, still enveloped in cellophane. "Look at that," she said. "I have biscuits!"

"I'll put the flowers in some water," I said.

"No, thank you," my mother said. She adjusted her glasses with a knuckle, brushed an invisible crumb off her pant leg. "I'm fine just as I am."

With the flowers arranged on the commode, I rolled my mother towards the window where a visitor's chair waited—a black imitation-leather recliner, the kind that can give a massage. We had given it to my parents when they still lived in their own place. The unplugged cord lying in the back had dust balls on it. I sat down opposite my mother and bent forward to put my hand on her arm. "The children send their love," I said. Her skin warmed under my touch. We looked out the window together in silence as an open triangle of migratory birds passed high in the sky. My heart beat itself into courage. "Mom," I said. From the corner of my eye, I saw my mother nod, almost imperceptibly. "We all miss Luc." My mother turned to face me. The corners of her mouth turned up weakly. My breath came with difficulty. "He's dead, Mom."

My mother turned again toward the window. After a few minutes her head tilted back and her eyes fell half closed. "Here come the young people," she said finally. A visiting couple, probably in their mid-fifties, was making their way down below in the parking lot past the rows of cars towards the entrance. A low afternoon sun shone on the pair and gave them a luminous quality. "The young people," my mother said again, more flatly this time. I waited. "The young people," she repeated. "They are always outside. They never come in."