

*Melissa Hardy*

## **Past Due**

It was one of those afternoons in high summer when time slows like a clock running down. Under the gate-legged table in the front parlor, an ancient cocker spaniel sank into a deep squat, urinating luxuriously into the worn pile of the Aubusson carpet. Lizzie didn't notice. She was too preoccupied. Sitting in the corner by the bay window, hunched over a shapeless mound of knitting, her aluminum knitting needles clicking like train wheels along a track—as furious as that—Lizzie squirmed and fretted. Now and then she'd hear something—the old house shifting, settling. Then she'd glance sharply up at the ceiling—at that faultline in the plaster and the big water stain like a yellow bruise—close her eyes, and breathe deep; touch her heart through her skin—like a woman who checks to see that the pendant jewel of a precious necklace has not been lost.

This morning, as Lizzie was emptying the kitchen trash out back, Lew Foyle called her name. He'd been hiding behind that camellia border, waiting for her. She was so undone it set off her palpitations. So while she thumped her chest and woofed, Lew emptied the trash for her, then asked if she would hide him until nightfall. The police were on his trail for molesting that little girl up Etonia ways; he'd been caught, his pig in her poke, in the choir loft of that Church of The Signs Following After that he was the pastor of, not that it surprised a mortal soul in Buck County—Lew Foyle had always had him A Reputation. As for Lizzie, she had heard tell of it from Cy Murdoch on the radio news.

So up she took him by the back stairs to the attic—"I remember these stairs," he said, smiling his slow smile that was like a sun rising, pop, over the horizon—and there he'd been ever since, hot as it was, sleeping on that old army cot Beau Buford used to take with him on fishing trips, in amongst the hatboxes and the old birdcages. "When you get a chance," Lew told her, "get some money for me. Take some of Bob's jewels if you have to, or some of the silver. I can sell it later on."

Damn him anyhow! thought Lizzie now.

For thirty-four years he'd had little enough to do with her or his son by her, young Ed. Oh, he hadn't objected when she joined the Church of the Signs Following After—"Welcome, Sister!" he had said—but he'd drawn no closer to her on that account, as she'd hoped he might. Yet when the need came on him, he had come here, to her and this house where it had happened; and when she turned to leave the attic this morning, he'd caught her face in his two big hands as if it were some kind of a fine bird and whispered in that way of his that made her heart hang just this side of a beat, "Lizzie!"

Lizzie stabbed the ball of yarn in her lap vehemently with her needles. *Take that and that!* For a while there—years and years and years—she had hoped, she had hung on, but time passed, and nothing happened, and hope withered inside of her like a child that dies in the womb, dried to dust, until all that was left was the pain. Why, she wondered, did I ever bring him to this house? Why didn't I realize what kind of a girl Flavia Carley was? Rich and careless.

It was summertime then too; July, like now. A lot of years come and gone since then. Lizzie had been sixteen when it happened. What an age! She hadn't been too bad-looking then, maybe a little thin, but she'd had more teeth, and she'd done herself up better. Not that Lew'd ever been so much to look at himself—a big, shambling man—but there was something to him. A crackling in the air around him. He didn't once come near her that she didn't feel afterwards as if her innards had been rearranged—scraped out, and wrung like rags, and packed back in different somehow. And when he touched her, she thought she'd go crazy. Scream and scream. He was the sort of man can do that to a woman.

Lizzie got Lew the job working for Miss Bob. He weeded, and he hoed, and he mowed the lawn; that sort of thing. And when Bob took

Flavia, her niece that was up from Stokes County to find her a husband, out calling, then up Lew and Lizzie would creep to her bedroom, and lie crosswise on her rambling bed, with the blind pulled and a humming bird out blundering against the screen where the honeysuckle climbed; they'd make love with their clothes on in the hot half dark, Lew's big boots beside the bed.

One day, Lizzie fetched Bob some lemonade on the veranda. "Angela died today," Bob informed her. Angela was Flavia's canary; Bob handed her the bird's stiff corpse wrapped in a lawn handkerchief. "Just dig a little hole in the garden, where the ground's soft, and bury it there, will you, Lizzie? Flavia's absolutely prostrate with grief." Bob picked up her palmetto leaf and fanned herself vigorously as she scrutinized the street. (She was on the lookout for the Tylers' Christmas tree. It was rumored that they hung on to it well on into the summer because Ribbon Tyler, one of those poor Mongoloid children, was so taken by the lights. Bob could scarcely credit such a story and wanted to see if it was true.) "Says she can't possibly face the tea dance this afternoon," said Bob, "or the Kings tonight. And the Kings have that nice boy too. You know the one I mean. What's-his-name. Oh, Lizzie, look!" Bob pointed. "There's that pied dog of the Sewarts digging up the Tylers' tea roses again. Hah, hah! Won't Lucretia be mad! Well, I'd better be getting on, I suppose." Bob pulled white gloves over stubby fingers. "A lot of fuss an ounce of feather and an ounce of bone, if you ask me!" she said and left in a clatter of high heels.

Lizzie went inside, into the kitchen where a fan was busy fine-dicing the humidity. She felt moist and heavy and sick to her stomach. She was carrying young Ed, of course, though she didn't know it at the time. She thought it was the heat that made her feel so lowdown. Laying Angela's corpse on the counter, she sank down into a chair and peeled potatoes for salad onto wet newspapers on the formica table top; after a spell of that, she rested her cheek on her arm on the table and fell asleep.

It was the dinner bells ringing children home for supper which woke her. Darkness was just beginning to blunt the edges of things, and the air was succulent and full of lightning. She stood shakily and picked up Angela's mortal remains. They were so light. The corpse's rigidity gave it an air of great delicacy, as if it were a sculpture of toothpicks. I'll just

bury her out in the azalea garden, Lizzie thought. Then I'll get Miss Flavia some supper.

She had just turned onto the sawdust path which ran between the cutting garden and the kitchen garden when she heard the sound of soft laughter. She stopped. It was his laughter, Lew's, low and clear and heated. Surely he wasn't alone! No one laughed like that alone! He had once laughed that way with her, but not lately. Lately he had been strange, distant. The sound filled her with foreboding. She crept nearer, but the sound of Flavia's laugh—soft, quick, breathy—pulled her up short. She froze, staring in the direction from which the sound had come, the little gazebo at the centre of Bob's azalea garden.

The garden was growing darker. Behind her a lawn sprinkler whirled like a dervish, making a pattering sound like rain as its droplets struck the grass. Fireflies blinked yellow-green against the green wall of camellia bushes. Lizzie felt suddenly light-headed, as if she might faint. She took a faltering step backwards. Another. Then she stopped, unable for a moment to move. Like some animal which, spread-eared and tense, crouches in the forest, she stood frozen in the act of apprehension. Then, as the need to know what she couldn't know, what she knew all too well (for there lies within the lover a sixth sense, coiled like a snake, which sleeps much of the time but is quick to wake, and, when it wakes, is keen). . . . As this need grew in Lizzie so fierce that she could bear it no longer, she found feet enough to carry her down the path which ran along the front of the kitchen garden to the driveway, although these feet did not seem like her feet. These same mysterious feet took her around the garage, past the garbage cans, the garden shed, and the compost heap, and through that narrow crack in the wall of camellia bushes which surrounded the azalea garden. Scarcely breathing, she approached the gazebo from the back—it was so thickly covered in climbing roses that she could scarcely see the white lattice from which it was made. Then she dropped onto her knees in the border of thyme which surrounded the gazebo, pushed her face as close to the thorny rose vines as she dared, and squinted into the dark gazebo.

There on the floor of the small, confined place. . . . Even now, years later, she remembered how their naked limbs looked in the near dark, parting and meeting. Whitened, as if they were floating in a clear lake with a dark bottom.

The fingers of the hand in which she had held the body of the canary closed into a fist. The hollow bones snapped like matchsticks, and the pointed beak drove through the thin lawn of the handkerchief into her palm, piercing the skin. A bright droplet of blood rolling down her wrist.

. . .

The antique cocker spaniel, grey-blonde, softly fat, dragged its ribcage across Lizzie's shins with the air of desperate but determined self-indulgence which characterizes a man with a terminal illness as he embarks upon a last orgy.

"Get on with you now," said Lizzie harshly, prodding the dog in its ribs with the blunt toe of her mules. It staggered off in the direction of the fireplace, propelled by the need, so often exhibited by the senile, to be on the move, as if by constant locomotion they might find the wits they have mislaid or at the very least dodge the death that stalks them.

"Marcel bites Negras!" a frazzled parrot warned the advancing dog. Perched upon a bamboo stand mottled green and white with guano dating back decades, it inclined forward and flapped its frayed wings in a gesture of menace.

"Quiet, Marcel!" Lizzie cried sharply. "You'll wake Miss Bob!" Glancing over at her employer who sat, dozing by the fireplace, she could not help but feel a certain grim satisfaction.

When Lizzie had first come to Bob, the matriarch had been her same age about—a glimmering pigeon of a woman in dusky bombast, reeking of lilac perfume and vanilla extract. She had husband, children, teeth; she had been A Force Within The Community. Now she was little more than a grab bag of brain cells, a bladder the size of a dried butterbean, and a great and pervasive malaise—as much the by-product of too many years lived upon this earth as the diabetes that had first manifested itself in her later sixties. And all of this—cells, bladder, ennui—locked into a geriatric chair on the orders of her doctor, by a table tray the mechanism of which she no longer possessed the brain reserves to unfasten. Comatose, cranked up, and bound in, her short white hair standing on end, Bob looked as though she might have fallen asleep awaiting the arrival of a dentist with a reputation for sadism.

But now Bob's nearly transparent eyelids slitted open. "I'm very thirsty," she complained in a parched voice which broke as she raised it. "Water! Water!"

Lizzie's right nostril lifted and quivered. For thirty-four years it had been, "Lizzie, this!" and, "Lizzie, that!" and, "Yes, I don't know why I keep her. It's just that I'm too lazy to change, and, 'sides, I don't know what Lizzie would have done without me. There are folks, plenty of folks, wouldn't have kept a loose girl like she turned out to be."

Lizzie turned her face so the old woman wouldn't see and grinned from ear to ear. *Heh! Heh!* she laughed. And now, after all these years, she thought, hasn't that worm turned? It was a foretaste of the Judgment, that's what it was. Make no mistake. When the high are cast down, and the low are brought up on to a real high place.

"Oh, Lizzie, please!"

"You'll only want more if I give it to you now," Lizzie informed her imperiously. "And then you'll wet yourself, and where will we be? There're no dry diapers, and the man from the Dydee Service don't come 'til two. You just hold your horses until Dr. Foote comes."

"But isn't it lunchtime now?" clamored Bob. "Surely it's time for lunch, Lizzie?"

"It's only eleven o'clock, Miss Bob," said Lizzie. "Now you be still."

"But I'm so peckish!"

"Be still, I said! Dr. Foote be here in a few minutes for your checkup, and I don't want you all gooey."

"What about those?" Bob asked, her eyes fastening upon a heart-shaped box of chocolates lying on the table just beyond her grasp. Her principal heir, young Buford Carley of Stokes County, well aware that his great aunt suffered from diabetes, never failed to send her a big Whitman's sampler on her birthday.

"Now, Miss Bob!" Lizzie chided her.

"Why not?" the old woman wheedled.

"You got diabetes," Lizzie reminded her.

"Go on!"

"You do!"

"Nawh!"

"You do too, Miss Bob!" cried Lizzie sharply. "Now you mind!"

The doorbell rang.

"That'll be Dr. Foote," said Lizzie. She stood and started towards the door, but Bob caught at her dress.

"Don't let him in, Lizzie," she pleaded. "He always pokes at me dreadful!"

"Let go of me, Miss Bob," said Lizzie. As she bent down to untangle the old woman's hands from her dress, she caught a whiff of acetone on her breath. The odor pulled her up short. She hadn't given Bob her injection this morning! Lew's showing up when he did had driven it straight from her mind, and now here was Dr. Foote. He'd have her hide!

"Lizzie!" Dr. Foote pounded on the door.

"Coming! Coming!" cried Lizzie. "Just a minute! Oh, Miss Bob, you ain't going into a coma, are you?" Bob's mouth had fallen open, and she was gulping air like a fish on land. "Stop that!" cried Lizzie. "He'll know! As soon as I can, I'll sneak you off, and we'll get you your shot. And I'll get you a glass of water. Just don't tell him, will you? Don't tell him that I forgot!"

"What?" muttered Bob.

"Lizzie!"

"*Coming*, Dr. Foote. We ain't decent!" She turned back to Bob. "Close your mouth," she insisted. "He'll smell the acetone if you don't. And hang on! Coming, Dr. Foote!" She scuttled to the door, took a deep breath, and flung it open.

"For Christ sake, Lizzie," Dr. Foote complained, pushing past Lizzie into the front room. "What's this about not being decent? Bob hasn't been decent for twenty years. I'm late to tee off as it is." A short, barrel-chested, barrel-bellied man, with a high, healthy color and almost no hair, Dr. Foote was always on his way to the golf course. He wore madras cotton trousers and a yellow Lacoste shirt. "And how's Miss Bob today?" he shouted at the old woman.

Bob gripped the armrests of the geri chair so hard that her knuckles went white; she bugged out her eyes and screamed.

Dr. Foote winced. "Why does she always do that?" he asked Lizzie.

"She don't want you to poke her, Doctor. Don't go too near her now, or she'll scream again. Won't you, Bob?"

Bob screamed again.

"There. She's all wrought up today. Wouldn't go near her if I was you. She'll scream and scream. Nothing wrong with her though. I can tell you that right now. Close your mouth there, Miss Bob. It's not polite to

sit there with your mouth open," cried Lizzie, wringing her hands and dancing in place.

"Might catch a fly," agreed Dr. Foote, winking. Mid wink, his eye caught on the box of candy on the table. "Candy?" he demanded.

"Weren't me did it!" Lizzie cried. "And I ain't let her have one piece, Dr. Foote. It was her great, great nephew Buford that sent it to her for her birthday!"

"Shame to let them go to waste," observed Dr. Foote, who was known for his sweet tooth.

"Oh, be Bob's guest!" Lizzie thrust the box of candy at him. "Close your mouth there, Miss Bob. She's gotta go to the bathroom anyhow. Don't you, Miss Bob?"

"That's my box of candy!" objected Bob, rousing herself.

"Mind your manners, Miss Bob," Lizzie pleaded with her. "Now, you set still, because I'm going to unfasten your tray."

"Little Buford give them to me for my birthday!"

"You don't want to wet that diaper now, do you, Miss Bob?"

"You there! Fat boy! Don't you eat my candy!" Bob protested.

"Fat!" queried Dr. Foote, offended. He investigated his paunch. "That's muscle."

"You got to go to the bathroom, Miss Bob!"

"No! No! I want out of this contraption, and I want my candy!" declared Bob.

"That chair is for your own good," Dr. Foote told her. "Lot of women your age fall down and break their hips. Not Bob!" He popped a chocolate-covered cherry in his mouth, inclining towards Bob as he did. Lizzie just about fainted from fear that he would detect the acetone on the old woman's breath, but at that very moment the cocker spaniel interposed himself between Dr. Foote and Bob, smiling at him with pink toothless gums. "Whew!" exclaimed Dr. Foote, rearing back. "That dog needs a mouthwash!"

The telephone rang. It was Dr. Foote's secretary.

"He'll eat them all, Lizzie! You got to stop him!" Bob pleaded.

"It'll be all right, I promise," whispered Lizzie. "But you've got to come with me."



"Why?" asked the old woman. Her voice was fainter now, and her eyes wandered to a point past Lizzie's shoulder and hung, unseeing, on it. "Why?" Her lips formed the word this time. No sound emerged.

"Oh, Miss Bob!" exclaimed Lizzie softly.

Bob's dazed expression gave way to one of abstracted puzzlement. She rose up tentatively on the blade of one buttock, took a deep breath, squeezed closed her eyes, waited for a moment in this expectant posture, then began to fart seismically.

"What?" Dr. Foote shouted. "Debbie? You'll have to speak up. Miss Bob here's re-creating World War II!"

Lizzie grappled for Bob's two matchstick elbows. "Come on, Miss Bob," she whispered. "This is our chance!"

"Marie May's two-year-old *gummed* the toilet bowl freshener?" Dr. Foote repeated into the phone receiver. "What the hell for? Cherry scented? No. No. Well, are there tooth marks? Then what's everybody so worried about? OK. OK. I'll be right over. *Of course* it's a bother!" He replaced the receiver. "I've got to go, Lizzie," he said. "It's one of those goddam emergencies. Bob'll hang on 'til next Monday, won't she? You'll hang on, won't you, Bob? Whew!" Pinching his nostrils between the second and third finger of his right hand, he dived into the front room and snatched up his bag.

Lizzie just couldn't believe her luck. She was positively reeling with relief. "Oh, she'll be just fine, Doctor," she panted. "She's fit as a fiddle. Ain't you, Bob?"

"'And lead us not into temptation!'" quoth Dr. Foote, appropriating the Whitman's sampler. "Goodbye, now, Lizzie. See you next Monday. Bye, Miss Bob!"

And he was gone. Miraculously.

"Saved!" Lizzie shook Bob. "We're saved!"

She half-prodded, half-dragged Bob down the dark hall towards the bathroom off the butler's pantry.

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Lizzie sank into a straw-bottomed chair in the pantry. The table's rough, pitted surface was scarred with shadow; a gardenia bush marked the window. From the bathroom came the sound of Bob's obsolete

plumbing rattling, clanking; the smell of acetone. It minded her of Bob sitting at this very table, doing her nails, her soft button of a nose, like the pope's nose on a chicken's behind, wrinkled up at the smell of her nail polish remover—acetone on dab of cotton peeling back the blood red polish. "You're a dog's lunch, Lizzie. No use hanging on, hoping he'll come back. He ain't coming back. You just be glad you got a job. You just be glad I'm a Christian woman can forgive your sins."

But what was she doing just sitting here? she thought. She started to her feet. She could give Lew the egg money, but that wasn't near enough to get him out of town and away to some place safe. She should be gathering up things for him to sell—jewels and silver. There was that silver frame, and the wine flagon, and that teapot. . . . She'd need a paper sack.

"Lizzie!"

Oh, Lordy! she thought. Bob's through, and I have to get her shot, or she's gonna go off into a coma! "I'm coming!" she cried.

"Lizzie! Lizzie! I'm very uncomfortable on this hard toilet!" Bob wailed shrilly.

"Coming!" Lizzie pleaded.

First she'd get a paper bag. They were folded up under the kitchen sink. Then, after she'd given Bob her shot, she'd fill it with silver. Bob might fuss, but she'd never remember long enough to tell anyone about it, and Lizzie could say that . . . a thief broke in, overpowered her. She'd think of something.

She dipped through the swinging door into the kitchen. The room smelled of rust and Dutch cleanser and creeping damp. Wild roses grew on a trellis outside the window over the sink. Their tendrils tapped against the glass with thorns like fingernails. Kneeling before the sink, Lizzie pulled open the cabinet door and drew out a paper sack which she tucked under her arm before returning to the pantry, flinging open the door to the bathroom, taking Bob by her elbows, and hoisting her off the toilet.

"I'm not wiped!" protested Bob weakly. The smell of acetone on her breath was very strong now.

"Never mind that," said Lizzie. "We've got to go to the front room now. We need to give you your shot."

"Not back to . . . the chair!" cried Bob.

"Now Miss Bob," said Lizzie urgently. "Don't dawdle."

"Not the chair, Lizzie!" Bob pleaded weakly, turning and trying to escape but stumbling over the toilet.

Lizzie seized her by the waist and dragged her backwards into the kitchen. She wheeled her around and grabbed hold of her forearms.

Bob grappled pitifully at the front of her housecoat. "I hate the chair, Lizzie! Oh! I hate being locked in!"

"Come on now, Miss Bob," said Lizzie roughly. She dragged her out of the kitchen and down the hall. Bob was trembling all over. Her breathing was deep and tortured. Her mouth hung open. Her face twisted in agony. Her eyes stared straight ahead. Even with Lizzie holding her up, she stumbled and nearly fell. "Hang on there, Miss Bob," Lizzie begged her.

"I'm going to be sick," moaned Bob, her fingers dancing spasmodically on Lizzie's arms, her face ashen. Her breath smelled very bad now.

Lizzie hauled the old woman into the front room and, throwing her down into the chair, dropped and locked the tray into place. She took a vial of insulin from the table beside the mantle, a hypodermic needle, and a tourniquet.

But now Bob was hiccupping, her hand pressed over her parted lips; then she was retching.

"Hang on, Miss Bob!" cried Lizzie. Her hands were shaking so much that she almost dropped the needle. Would one dose be enough? she wondered. Maybe she should give her two? One for this morning and one for now? The old woman was due in another quarter of an hour.

Bob caught onto the armrest of the support chair and leaned over it, vomiting up a thin stream of greyish liquid onto the carpet below. The parrot screeched hysterically and tumbled up and down his perch.

Three! Three doses! One for this morning, and one for now, and one to prevent the coma which would follow the retching!

Lizzie loaded the needle. Then she skirted the puddle of vomit oozing over the floor and, grasping Bob's thin arm, wrapped the tourniquet around it, tightened it until the vein bulged blue, then, placing the needle on the patch of skin above the vein, closed her eyes and sunk it into Bob's flesh, catching her breath as she did and holding it. She stood there for a moment, her eyes closed, her breath held, the needle beating in her

hand. Then she opened her eyes, at the same time pulling the needle free with a popping sound.

Bob slumped over the arm of the chair. Her head hung over her chest. Reaching out with one hand, Lizzie grasped her by one shoulder and pulled her up and back so that she lay against the chairback, her head hanging over one shoulder. Bob's eyes were closed. "Are you all right?" Lizzie whispered.

No answer.

Lizzie drew back. "You'll be all right soon," she told her. "You'll see." She lifted her hand to her throat. Then she snatched up the paper bag she had brought from the kitchen. She couldn't afford to waste any more time. She'd clean up the vomit later. She tore the brittle daguerreotype of Bob's father from its silver picture frame and stuffed the frame into the bag. Then she made her way through the tangle of furniture to the sideboard. She picked up one of the silver wine flacons and, pausing, looked over her shoulder at Bob. The old woman didn't seem to notice. She only stirred, as if in sleep. Lizzie dropped the wine flagon into the bag and seized the teapot. "You'll be all right," she told her. "I've got to go upstairs now. I'll be down by and by." The jewel boxes were all in Bob's room. Brooches, and locket, and lavoliers. They'd fetch something. Avoiding the puddle of vomit, she crossed to the hall and started up the steps.

Then she stopped short and uttered a cry of joy, for there, standing at the top of the stairs, with his back to the light which poured onto the landing from the window so that he had no face but only a silhouette, was Lew Foyle, as he had stood so many years ago when she and he were young and lovers. He stretched out his hands towards her. And walking up those stairs to him . . . it was like ascending into Heaven. Well, something like that.

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Down in the front room, Bob Carley Buford sat locked into her geri chair, her head hanging to one side. How heavy it had grown! As big as a melon in its season and as gorged with juice. Her poor stalk of a neck felt like it would snap from the weight. Her breath, which now came in short pants, made her windpipe shimmer like a glass windchime in a stiff

breeze. *Not much time left, Bob*, said the clock on the mantelpiece. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* Mocking her heart. But *au contraire!* she thought. She felt very young. Younger than ever. Positively light-headed, like a girl at a dance. When had she felt so free before? It was only that she couldn't move. It was as if all her bones had melted and slipped away. She would have to be carried everywhere she went, she supposed, like a puddle wrapped in a blanket. That wasn't so bad if one had beaux. Men were often quite partial to frail girls. And didn't the noblewomen of China bind their feet to show the world they had no need of feet? Servants carried them everywhere they went. Well, I have servants. I have Lizzie. Hadn't Lizzie been here just a few moments ago? Bob couldn't quite remember.

Don't go so blamed fast, she begged the clock. In its excitement it had actually begun to rock from one gilded foot to another, beating out a drum tattoo on the Burmanstoft mantelpiece. Don't you see how you egg on my heart?

"Lizzie!" she tried to call, but the flow of air out and suck of air in was so rapid and so powerful that she couldn't slip a word into the flow or skate one over its surface. Since when had she felt so light-headed? After dancing a waltz at the cotillion that summer with young Dr. Thompson, a boy then, such knowledgeable fingers, might have known he'd end up a surgeon, and him bending over her, saying "Are you feeling faint, Miss Bob? Shall I fetch you something?"

"Oh, yes please. Please fetch me something. I can hardly breathe."

She felt a tingling in her toes and her fingers. Ah yes! There they were! She had thought them lost in the general melting of her limbs, but there they were, electrified, tingling. Her hands began to shake, just a little at first; then they rattled in her lap like castanets.

"Lizzie!"

The clock tap-danced on the Burmanstoft mantelpiece. It divided into two clocks, then merged, then divided. She closed her eyes, thinking that this would discourage the clock from such antics, but when she opened them again she could no longer see its face. Only its curved shape remained visible, and even that didn't remain steady but ballooned and contracted and flattened.

And the air had altered. It was no longer a transparent medium, but swarmed with black dots. She tried to turn her head but couldn't find the strength.

"Caca!" shrieked Marcel. The sound pierced the fog like a knife splitting open a sack of grain. The flow outward.

Caca! thought Bob. Yes. Caca. It's true. That much at least I've learned.

The pain began. A pinch at first, then a nip. Then it grew. Tore at her. Like a child within the womb, it bulged and shoved, trying to exit by the smallest aperture. She gasped and, regaining momentarily the use of her limbs, pushed against the tray which held her captive.

"Lizzie!" she tried to cry, but her words were circumvented not by the flow of her breath this time but by what was left of her breakfast. It shot up her throat like hot metal, and she leaned over the armrest of her chair and disgorged it in fiery waves over the hill of guano below Marcel's perch. Her eyes were open wide now, but, as her head tipped back, she saw no more than a riot of greens and orange as the aged parrot scuttled back and forth along its wooden perch, dragging his rusty leg chain along the nicked wood, knocking over his seed dish, which fell to the floor with a clatter, and shrieking. "*Negras! Negras!*" Seeds everywhere.

I'm in a jungle, Bob reckoned apprehensively. And there are lions and tigers all around.

That was when the blood clot, unleashed and sent reeling around her veins by the overdose of insulin which Lizzie had administered to her, came to rest in her brain, blocking the flow of blood and thus of oxygen to that ravaged ocean. Bob began to die.

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Across the street from the Carley mansion, old, old Mr. Tyler, followed by his middle-aged idiot son, Ribbon, dragged a desiccated fir tree, nearly devoid of needles but palely glistening with silver icicles, down the back steps of his house across the street and laid it down beside the garbage pails. Ribbon clung to the porch rail, drooling and whimpering. "Don't take on so, son," said old Mr. Tyler, irritated by the spectacle. "We done hung on to the damn thing as long as we could."