For the third time Alta was free. Freed of obligation and freed of men and freed of her home of ten years, a palm-log cabin with two dining rooms. She was seventy-four years old but she still felt like a young woman. Long ago she’d foreseen the day when time’s advance would collapse her into a dry heap, but that day hadn’t come, not yet.

Her new apartment was small and had wall-to-wall carpet with a chaotic pattern, but the view was nice. Her back patio looked out onto a Civil War battlefield returned to its native state: treeless and shaggy with grass that on windy afternoons was wonderful to watch. Sections of grass zigzagged open as gusts of wind swept through. If she positioned herself just right, all she saw was the vast expanse of grass, ceaseless as the sea. No houses, no landscaping, nothing but drab irregular movement. It reminded her of home.

She’d lived on the Florida coast for fifty years, until recently, when she too had been returned to her native state. Pennsylvania, pill-shaped, hilly patch of zilch. Her great-niece and great-nephew lived somewhere nearby. When her third husband, George, died they came to Florida and helped Alta move to In the Pines, not a nursing home, they insisted, a retirement village. Not a shelter for the suddenly senile and abruptly decrepit but a community of active seniors.

Wow! they said, following Alta down the hall and pointing out the exercise room, the computer room, the activity room. Hey now! Maybe we should think about living here! In her apartment they asked where she wanted the dining room table. “The dining room,” she told them, but there was no dining room. They helped unpack her clothes, programmed her VCR, cleaned the sliding glass door.

“What a view,” said her great-niece, a blithely confident girl named Brenna. She held back the curtains. “You’d think you were in the middle of the woods, Aunt Alta. Except that phone tower.”

Alta went to the patio door and looked out. Far beyond the battlefield, tethered by just-visible cables, was the gun-metal tower, red beacon lights blinking. Alta cropped it out by centering her view on the middle of the
battlefield. In Florida, she used to sit in a beach chair close to the ocean and let the tide run beneath her. She continued waiting, waiting . . . for what, she didn’t remember, or never knew. Her husband, maybe, to come tell her it was time to go. To put his hand on her shoulder, tap his wedding band against her clavicle, and reset her to normal.

“It appears,” Alta said in her new apartment, “that I need a man.”

Her great-niece and great-nephew hesitated, and then, together, they laughed. Alta was their favorite aunt, the one who knew just how to de-fuse an awkward moment. While the mood was bright, they hung Alta’s new apartment key on a metal hook marked *Keys*, and then excused themselves.

She ate pancakes with five others at her table, two men and three women who stared at her like dogs at an empty food bowl while she spoke. For weeks she’d been trying to interest the two men, offering easy questions like *Anyone been outside today?* and *Anyone play cards?* One man belched wetly into his cloth napkin, while the other clutched a biscuit and crumpled his face into a deep sort of personal frown, as if straining his bowels. Alta, who’d been married, and widowed, three times, had always relied on men to measure her own well-being—and, in better days, to enlarge it—and this, this dim unanimous disregard, was not good.

“Wasn’t our year,” one of the men said to the other.

“It never is,” the other said. “I hate to admit it, but we’re a national joke.”

“This year we are. What’s next year look like?”

“What do you think?”

“Same as this year.”

“Same as last year,” the second man said, “same as *every* year.”

Alta thought this the most dismal conversation she’d ever heard. “That’s an awful way to talk,” she said to them.

A few moments later, though, she realized they were just complaining about a sports team. She excused herself and left the table, but the low feeling stayed with her, shadowing her as she walked the asphalt nature trail around the man-made lake, in the center of which fountains made daisies of water. She passed dozens of memorial trees and their scuffed little markers. The younger trees were tethered upright like the phone tower behind her apartment, and Alta’s thoughts drifted as she looked over the names, former residents of In the Pines. What if the dead residents were actually buried inside the trees? She imagined beavers padding through at
night and, unaware of the trees’ ceremonial importance, chewing through their trunks, dragging them off, and heaping them all together into a mass grave, a great memorial dam.

Alta didn’t want anything to grow in her name after she died. She wanted a hole to open up and swallow her, and maybe a nice-looking man or two. The pair assigned to her table were no good, but there were other men at In the Pines who were handsome and seemed warmish and alert. She had a habit of making quick, stubborn judgments, and maybe her perception had slipped a little, because lately whenever she made up her mind to talk to a man, he’d say something like, “I miss my car,” or, “Noodles are all I can stomach these days.”

Once, she took pride in her perception. Now it was punishing her. Once, she was confident of the effect she was having on others. Now it was as if her fellow tenants were suffering her like a chill, waiting for her to go away.

Alta first saw the soldier from her back patio, swatting at the high grass with his saber in the early afternoon. The field was shrill with sunlight. She watched and might have happily continued to watch as he walked on past, creeping far off into her view, briefly residing in it, then moving on. She might’ve noticed him without noting him, like the elapsing of a memory left untended. But when the soldier saw Alta sitting on her patio, he halted, smiled, and began swatting a path toward her.

He reached the edge of the field, took off his hat, and said, “Permission to come aboard.” Two more steps until Alta’s patio. He was an older man, with orderly features and a waffled sunburnt neck. His blue felt jacket was dark at the armpits.

“Are you lost?” Alta asked.

“I was,” he said. “My men are camped up on some ridge a ways back, singing beautiful songs about liberty and transformation. I set out to look for some berries and mushrooms and things. We’re hurting for rations.”

She invited him to sit. He sheathed his saber and sighed before dropping himself into the plastic chair. He was in his late fifties, maybe, no watch, no wedding band. He scanned the fields slowly, stopping when his gaze reached the phone tower. “Sometimes you’re watching the world,” he said, “and the world’s watching right back.”

As he said this, Alta looked down at herself and saw that she was wearing her yellow bathrobe over her clothes, which she often did, to keep warm. She couldn’t recall changing into the bathrobe, but there it was,
indisputably on her. She practiced a few responses, then said, “And sometimes you fall asleep but don’t realize it until you wake up with a man on your patio.”

The soldier smiled. “Well put,” he said, extending a hand to Alta. “Lieutenant Charles Thorn.” She shook his big warm hand and introduced herself and together they watched the flat grass retreat and advance and retreat. Alta waited for him to explain the uniform, what he was actually doing in the field, anything. But she was neither uncomfortable nor overly curious about it. She could still feel his warmth on her hand.

The Lieutenant let out a tidy satisfied sigh. “You’re brave,” he said finally. “Staying out here while the war rambles through.” He crossed and uncrossed his arms. “You probably have a husband or sons or some loved ones fighting?”

Alta started to say no but hesitated. The question wasn’t a question, but an opening, an invitation. “Come to think of it,” she said, “I bet I do. Any news?”

“Sporadic. So far it’s just some cavalry making raids on the fringes, rummaging, pillaging what they can.” The Lieutenant turned around in his chair and looked through the patio door into Alta’s apartment. “This place looks solidly fortified but you never know. Are there any other women in there?”

“Just us active seniors,” Alta said. “Maybe a few nurses, none too appealing.”

“You’d be shocked,” the Lieutenant said, “at what appeals to them. We’re talking about men who have amorous interactions with horses and dogs and livestock and each other and trees, even, whatever’s softest and available.” He shook his head so vigorously his brass buttons rattled. “Sorry. I haven’t talked to a woman in a few months. I’ve forgotten how.”

“You’re doing fine,” Alta said. “Tell me about the war.”

And the Lieutenant did. He told her about his battalion, a group of men from western Massachusetts, and about the little skirmishes and larger battles they’d seen so far. He was a deadpan storyteller, dotting his account with words like _contretemps, sanguinary, asunder_. He used his hands to shape what he described and paused after anything solemn. “At night in the encampments you can hear men crying in their sleep. Crying because no matter what they’ve done up until now, no matter how grand their aspirations, they’ve all been funneled to exactly the same god-awful place.”

Alta let herself settle into the cozy tragedy of it all. There was a kinship because she, too, felt as if she’d been funneled to a place to join a company
of people who neither cared about nor comforted her. Her routine had been permanently interrupted. Her past had been torn from her future and now here she was, subsisting on the bleak ripped brim of the present. She didn’t even have a dining room anymore.

Before the Lieutenant left, he reached into his jacket and presented her with a dried-out seedpod he’d found while searching for food. “It’s extremely valuable,” he said. “I’m giving it to you for safekeeping, and so I have a reason to come back.”

He put on his hat and ran his hand over the front of his jacket, which was adorned with—Alta counted them—seven long black bars. One for each day of the week. He took her hand, leaned down, and kissed it with his chapped lips. The saber’s blade, Alta could see, was engraved with something, but it was too faint for her to decipher.

She followed his outline as it wended through the field, swatting the grass with the saber, then disappearing over a small hill.

The moment he was gone, she wondered when he would return. She imagined him lying wounded on the battlefield gripping his stomach in agony, waiting for someone to cart him off. The image remained while she went inside to get ready for dinner until, after awhile, it yielded to another image: Vic, her first husband, crouching in the back yard, irately pulling weeds. He was most entertaining when angry, and yard work made him angry, so Alta sometimes watched him from the kitchen window. One afternoon she looked out to see him straining near the little camphor tree, banging his fist against his chest. She first thought maybe he was mad at the tree, or at her, but he was actually dying of a heart attack, a substantial heart attack, the doctor would later tell her. He was trying to punch himself back to life.

After dinner, she returned to her apartment in a good mood and found a blank notepad. She brought it to the dining room table, opened it, and wrote on the first blank page: Here’s all I know about men.

She’d had the idea at dinner to make a list for herself, to use it to organize her mind. She thought, Men are sometimes . . . tall. Men like certain . . . things. But she was too tired to remember them, both the things and the men. She underlined the one sentence, to make it look more imperative for her to return to it, and put it away.

A few days later, Alta sat on her patio after breakfast. Several times the high grass parted in such a way that she was sure someone would emerge, but the grass blew the other way, and the horizon returned to ordinary.
Alta ate a too-soft banana and flung the peel into the field when she was finished. “Damn this sundered country,” Alta said, and laughed. “Damn this Civil War.” She laughed until she made herself cough and then she stopped.

A blackbird circled and went call, call, call. The red beacon light atop the phone tower pulsed like a machine heart.

Last night she’d dreamed about her husbands again. In dreams her husbands were often all together, doing something they shouldn’t be doing. The three of them trying to ride the same bike, drinking from a water fountain all at once. In last night’s dream, she’d just finished tying her hair back for the night and when she came out of the bathroom she found the three of them, Vic, Don, George, lying in her bed. Though they said nothing she knew they wanted to see whom she loved most. There was no room for her on the bed. She’d have to lie on top of one of the husbands, and this would be the one she loved the most. She chose Vic. The instant she lay on him, the other two disappeared. She awoke disappointed, confused, tangled in her nightgown in her queen-size bed in her apartment, alone, at In the Pines.

The Lieutenant had better hurry, she wouldn’t wait all day. She was alone, yes, but she wasn’t that lonely. She could always walk over to her next-door neighbor’s, a not bad looking ex-optician named Fenn, and knock on his sliding glass door. Tell him she was locked out of her apartment, or that she needed to borrow a hammer, needed him to turn down his television, comb his hair, and whisper something tender into her ear . . .

Fenn, though, was out of the running. He’d hung a flag on his patio that said Spring Has Sprung, which featured two bunnies chewing carrots, and he watched game shows at maximum volume all day long. Sometimes she’d hear his voice through the wall and think he had a visitor, but it would turn out that it was just Fenn guessing along with the contestants. The viola! Marvin Hagler! Brussels!

There was no shame in waiting for the Lieutenant. He would either arrive or he wouldn’t. If he arrived, she would invite him in for a drink. (“If it isn’t too much trouble,” he’d say. “Don’t be silly,” she’d say. “You look like you need one.”) She came up with about a dozen different throwaway greetings: Come aboard; Hark; It’s about time; You look thirsty; Hello again; How’s the war; Don’t hurt me, I’m unarmed . . .

She continued sitting on her patio, watching the overgrown grass flit and shimmy to reveal flashes of pale scalp-like earth. No shame in watching the overgrown grass flit and shimmy.
Later, after dinner, the wind calmed down, and she saw the Lieutenant in the distance, chopping at the air with his saber. He was wearing a cleaner uniform shirt, one with a second row of buttons and gold piping along the sleeves. His saber glinted with fierce aluminum light until he sheathed it.

“I come with news,” he said, huffing into the empty chair next to Alta, “of unquestionable badness.” He didn’t wait for a reply. “Things are heating up. Two Confederate regiments are on their way here right now, to join the two that’ve already arrived. You can’t stay here. You need to leave while it’s still quiet.”

“Too late for that,” Alta said. “I don’t have anywhere to go.”

“Nowhere? No family or friends in nearby towns?”

“I’ve been relocated for the last time.”

His eyes wandered and stuttered across Alta’s face. “Life,” he said, and sighed. She thought he was going to pursue this further, but that was all he said. Alta was excited by the imminence of the enemy and by the Lieutenant’s heavy breathing, which mimicked each other and coiled into Alta’s mind. The day was warmly lucid and soon there’d be horses galloping to the sound of artillery and drums. How gallant everyone would be, weeping as they fired at the enemy, figuring out how best to describe the bleak night wind in their next letter home. Alta said, “Have you heard any news of my men?”

“They’re in Buford’s outfit, right?”

“Buford, yes. Those are the ones.”

The Lieutenant nodded. “That’s the reason I’m here actually.” He crossed and uncrossed his arms with a crackling of joints. “They were captured, Alta. Yesterday. They were undermanned, caught out in the open and they got snagged. Could be good news for them. They’re done fighting for a while. They probably have a better chance of survival.”

“Men,” Alta said. “You make promises you can’t keep and keep promises you never made. You create a lot of noise, but it adds up to barely a sneeze.”

She saw from the Lieutenant’s reaction that this was a fine, an agreeable retort. He put his hand on her leg, and the weight of it made her feel like something he could handily dispatch. She didn’t mind the feeling.

“I’ve got another precious trinket I’d like you to look after.” He unfastened the middle button on his jacket and reached in for an enormous ebony-colored nut. “It’s heirloom grade,” he said. “Very rare. I trust you’ll know how to care for it.”
She took it from him and ran her fingers over the smooth outer shell. Briefly she had the urge to shout, “It’s just a nut!” and burn away the pre-tense of the game they were playing, but the urge passed, and she let it. “This means you’ll be back?”

The Lieutenant stood up. “I promise,” he said, smiling. He saluted her with two fingers, unsheathed his saber, said, “Onward!” and was off.

Later on she heard cannon fire in the distance. It was a festive, un-threatening sound. As it moved closer and boomed louder, she tried to locate it on the battlefield, beyond the high grass. But it turned out that the sound was coming from behind her, on the other side of the apartment building. Closer, another boom, an accompanying hiss, and then the sound of wheels on asphalt as the garbage truck advanced north to grab another dumpster.

Alta was among the war wounded and war weary. They huddled over puzzle pieces in the activity room, turning them over one by one. “Border first,” Fenn was saying. “Inside last.” The puzzle was a picture of a lake at dawn, colorful sailboats rigged to a dock. Alta watched the puzzle come together in clusters, first the border, then the boats, then the water, then the sky. Everyone gasped hungrily from barely agape mouths.

She left before the puzzle was finished. She followed the vacuum stroke marks down the hallway carpet, which was the same nerve-racking palm-leaf pattern as the carpet in her apartment. The vacuum marks usually led her to the cafeteria, but today they veered left into the multi-purpose room, and so did she. The room was brightly lit and filled with residents sitting in rows. On stage, holding a microphone, was Mr. Santos, the head of In the Pines. Bald, red-faced, and thin, he reminded Alta of a talking digestive organ. Standing next to him were four little girls in hoop dresses.

“What would you like us to know about you?” Mr. Santos asked one of them. He pointed the microphone toward the girl and she said, “I love my school.”

“And what do you love about it?” Mr. Santos asked.

The girl, who couldn’t have been older than six, thought about it for a moment, then said, “Everything.” Mr. Santos nodded his bald head and said to the crowd, “Was that delightful? I thought it was delightful.”

Alta sat down next to a friendly looking man in a wheelchair. He was making notes on a card with a pencil stub.

“What is this?” Alta asked him. “What are you doing?”

Moffett
“Keeping score,” he said. “Little brown-hair’s completely stealing the show. She’s incredible. They still have scorecards if you need one.”

“I’m half-Canadian,” a blond-haired girl was saying. “I love the winter. I have a snow globe on my shelf that I look at all year, and I wish I was tiny enough to live inside it.”

“Aww,” said Mr. Santos and some of the residents in the audience.

“Okay,” the man in the wheelchair said, shaking his head. “That was rehearsed.”

 Alta needed to leave—in her mind she was already following the vacuum marks back to her apartment—but she couldn’t seem to stand up. Every so often she said to the man in the wheelchair, “I need to hurry along soon.” She watched as each of the young girls sang a song, then talked about how much her grandparents meant to her. Alta wanted to root for a specific girl, but whenever one of them spoke, Alta changed her mind. There was something unbearably alive in each of them, alive and rash and scrambling for egress.

 Alta felt the same way. She had lain in bed these past few nights, unable to sleep, ears still ringing from the noise of the day. The sound of voices placed atop one another like letters in a mailbox, and on top of all of them the Lieutenant’s. A big, good voice with a theatrical undertow to make it clear he was playing a game. She’d placed the seedpod and the nut on her kitchen windowsill so she could study them while she washed her hands. She knew neither the Lieutenant’s intent nor her own, but she knew the rules to the game and for the moment, certainly for now, this was plenty.

Before she’d left her apartment, she taped a note to her patio door that said I will return anon. She liked the word anon. Like a powdered veil, it provided cover for the fear that the Lieutenant wasn’t coming back. Sitting next to the man in the wheelchair, she said, “I need to leave. I have a good friend, a soldier, who’s stopping by. I hate to keep people waiting.”

The man in the wheelchair let out a harried little sigh. “Hand job,” he announced. “That’s probably all he’s going to have time for.”

 Alta had never heard this term before, yet she knew immediately what it meant. She studied him, trying to gauge by his expression what his intent was. He looked aggressively satisfied. “That wasn’t necessary,” she said. “You might’ve given up but some haven’t. I haven’t.”

“I’m only teasing you,” the man said as Alta stood up to leave. “I bet your soldier has time for all of it.”
“You shouldn’t be allowed around children,” Alta told him. “You should try to maybe show a little more . . . valor.”

The man in the wheelchair laughed at his scorecard. “Valor,” he repeated. “Valor’s how I ended up in this goddamn thing. From now on it’s sniping and petty malice.”

In her apartment Alta microwaved a freezer pretzel and brought it in a napkin to the patio. She pulled down the note and saw beneath her message, scribbled in faint pencil letters: ENEMY SIGHTED. BATTLE IMMEDIATE. PRAY FOR OUR MEN.

On the arm of her patio chair was a red oval leaf. She brought it inside, placed it on the kitchen windowsill beside the others.

The wind made barely a sound, Alta realized. Whatever was strained and blown by it—leaves, grass, scarves, flags—did the work. The gusts called to mind a neglected house, a storm door opening and closing, opening and closing.

Everyone made a noise. Her first husband made a glassy noise. Her second and third made humming and rasping noises, respectively. Thinking about the husbands reminded her of the Lieutenant and remembering the Lieutenant, who made the most noise of all—a marching-away noise—now reminded her of the man in the wheelchair who made a word noise: hand job. From time to time she still waited for the Lieutenant on her patio, and this wasn’t reasonable, she knew, but who expected her to be reasonable with so much noise?

“The Boer War!” Fenn yelled through the wall. “Geometry!”

Far away the battle made a faraway garbage-truck noise. Her men were there. She’d dreamed about them, Vic, Don, George, all charging the enemy with the same rifle. Acting and counteracting.

She awoke thinking: I am losing my mind. She’d begun saying this aloud before George died. Whenever she couldn’t find her keys, or when she forgot to turn off the television. She wanted to get into the habit of saying it so that she’d remember to continue to once she indeed started losing her mind. Saying it aloud, even if it didn’t avert things, might at least soften the stupor when it came. Make her sympathetic, the same way a drunk admitting he was drunk lent him a sorry sort of dignity.

One night, after reading a magazine article about how the brain like any other muscle needed regular exercise, she told George she wanted him to start asking her more questions. This was one of the suggestions in the article.
“About what?” he’d asked. They were in the living room having a pre-
dinner drink. Alta drank a glass of sherry while George sipped an unre-
frigerated Coors from its twinkly can.

“Anything,” she said.

He squinted, considering. Though not handsome, his face had a vola-
tile softness that made it interesting to look at. “Name me,” he said, look-
ing at his beer can. “I’m what you get by combining copper and tin.”

Watching him wait for the answer, she tried to remember what it was
he’d first said to her, how he’d expressed interest. It wasn’t much. Hello,
maybe. Or, Hey you. After Vic she stayed a widow for a few years, but Don
came along and then George, and here she was, sitting next to her third
husband, her third, a couple of spent batteries nestled inside a toy. George
sighed while Alta listened. She knew she’d outlive him. She could hear his
spirit clawing off as he breathed.

When you combined copper and tin you got . . . something else. “I
have no idea,” she said.

“Uh-oh.”

“What?”

He patted at his shirt with a napkin. “Spilled a little beer.”

He was going to make her ask for the answer. Though she knew very
little about him, she knew him. She knew that he would continue silently
sipping his warm Coors until she said something.

“Out with it,” she said. “What do you get?”

One final sip. “I am bronze,” he said. “I am the world’s first alloy.”

She liked thinking of her men out on the battlefield with the Lieuten-
ant. It gave her a tighter stage on which to regard them all. George the last,
Don the middle, Vic the first. Vic, who made himself known to her in high
school by using masking tape to draw a line from his front door, down the
sidewalk, around the corner, down another sidewalk, all the way to Alta’s
house. He was in some of her classes, but she’d never noticed him before;
after this she couldn’t quit noticing him. He had pale hands and he held
his pencil like a fork, poised for when the teacher said something notewor-
thy. He sneezed and, when Alta said bless you, he nodded. Alta perceived
everything about him in that sneeze and nod.

After Vic came Don, then George. Each damaged her fortifications a
little, made the next one possible. Sometimes, waiting on her patio for
the Lieutenant, she felt as if she’d squandered her affection. She had ex-
changed it for a few shared meals and a shoebox of photographs. Not long
after they died, the circuit failed and she was getting married again, and
again. Thinking about them now, Vic and Don and George, they were easily drowned out by the advance and retreat, the rustle and thump, of the wind. Where was the Lieutenant?

She brought fruit onto the patio and ate it there, throwing the core or the peel into the field when she was done with it. She waited for news. Just when she thought she’d lost hope of the Lieutenant returning, she’d see a distant movement in the grass, a glint of dark color—she would sit up in her chair, crane her neck, and find there was a little more hope to lose.

Sometimes the fruit would get hung up in the high grass where she could watch it tan and wither for the next few days.

“Casualties,” she’d say when that happened. She might forget where she was, or when it was, but never for long. There are no new wars, she’d think, and then she’d think the opposite, There are only new wars, and that seemed true as well. She sensed she was growing smaller and smaller, that her own noise was becoming shallower, a murmur.

Alta’s great-niece Brenna called one afternoon and asked how she was doing. Fine, Alta told her. She asked if Alta would mind if she came over sometime and Alta said no, and a few minutes later there was a knock at the door. She’d been calling from the lobby.

“I won’t stay long,” Brenna said before sitting down on the sofa. She had a flushed, pretty, complex face that made her look as if she spoke a different language. “I love what you’ve done with the place.”

Alta looked around. She hadn’t done anything except hang a portrait of a peach-colored seascape that Don had painted. She offered Brenna a cup of coffee and, when Brenna accepted, remembered she no longer had a coffeemaker. She went into the kitchen, microwaved a mug of water, and dropped a teabag into it.

“It’s nice knowing you’re nearby,” Brenna said, sipping the tea. “I have such nice memories of you in Florida. The beach. Uncle Vic taking us to look at all the jellyfish that had washed ashore. The man-of-wars with the purple tentacles. You remember?”

Alta remembered. She remembered Vic liked making up stories about the jellyfish, telling the kids that they were from a different planet, that once high tide pulled them back out to sea they would find their mother ship and go home.

“Men-of-war,” Alta said.

Brenna had been an odd child. When she came to visit Alta and Vic, she would sleep in a sleeping bag on top of the covers, because she didn’t
like the feel of the sheets on her legs. She was a hoarder, too. She stockpiled candy and pocket change and, if you asked her what she planned to do with it, she would say—she couldn’t have been older than nine—she’d say, “Have it.” She planned to have it.

Now she said, “I’m getting married.”

“Well,” Alta said, studying the girl on the sofa, trying to calculate what this had to do with her memory of the girl. “That’s good news. I met a man, too. I met him behind my apartment.”

Brenna stood up and walked over to Alta in her chair and hugged her. “I’m so happy for you, Aunt Alta. I love how everything’s worked out.”

Alta had to lean forward to accept the hug, and when she did her hand landed on the girl’s backbone and she smelled a crushed-rose fragrance in her hair. The girl sat back on the sofa, straightened her skirt, and said she wanted to ask Alta for a favor. Her face became less animated, dumber. She said, “I was hoping you’d let me have your wedding ring. The one your grandmother gave you.”

Alta smelled the crushed-rose smell and still heard the girl’s assessment, Everything’s worked out. The girl was so young. She thought love was a door you carefully opened once, just once, and then you were there. Where? It didn’t matter. Opening the door was the important part, making sure you locked it once you were through, and maybe the reason Alta loved Vic then Don then George was because she never thought to lock the door. She gazed at her apartment key on the metal hook and fought the urge to get up and lock the front door.

“I don’t want to impose,” Brenna said. “I bet it still means a lot to you. I just want you to know I’d be honored to wear it.”

She’d be honored to wear Alta’s key? Alta hesitated for a few seconds and then remembered that Brenna had asked about the wedding ring. She looked so earnest and inflated with anticipation. I’d be honored was rehearsed which, more than anything, made Alta not want to give her the ring. But it was only a momentary impulse, an itch that Alta could ignore. Besides, she didn’t need the ring anymore.

“Wait here,” she said to Brenna, and she went into her bedroom and opened up her jewelry box for the first time since moving to In the Pines. She found her engagement ring, two twisted gold bands studded with pallid gemstones.

When Alta brought the ring to her, Brenna was smoothing the front of her skirt. She took the ring and, her eyes beginning to tear up, brought it to her face, her mouth opening slightly. “Don’t eat it,” Alta said.
“I am so grateful,” Brenna said. Then, studying the ring, hesitating, looking pained: “I don’t think it’s the right one. Katie said it was silver, with sapphires along it?”

Alta looked at the ring and realized that this was the one Don had given her. He’d offered it to her at night while they were walking his dog. Don had picked a flower from a magnolia tree, given it to her, and asked her to marry him. All the way home he hummed an unidentifiable song: hmm-hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm.

When Alta brought out the correct ring, Brenna stood and said, with slightly diminished emotion, “I am so grateful.” She reached into her purse, pulled out a beige engraved envelope, and set it on the coffee table. She waited with a smile. Alta realized that this was the kind of moment when she was expected to say something vast and benevolent to solidify the exchange.

“What a little of yourself,” she said to the girl. “Just a little. He’ll never miss it.”

The girl nodded, as if to a song whose words she didn’t know, steadily. “That’s really wise,” she said. “That means a lot, for you to pass that along.”

“I don’t think it’s all that wise,” Alta said. “It just took me a long time to figure it out.”

“But still,” the girl said.

Afterward, sitting on her patio, Alta knew she could’ve told Brenna to only eat corn chowder on odd-numbered Thursdays and the girl would’ve said that means a lot. She, Brenna, wasn’t going to dwell on anything that might muddy her happiness. From now on she was going to gather it up, hoard it, and keep it clean.

“I’m going to sit on my patio to enjoy my view,” Alta had said to her. “If you want, you can join me.”

“I’d love to,” the girl said. But she couldn’t. She needed to go tell everyone the good news. She had brought an empty gray ring-box with a plush little slit in which she secured the ring. The box made a croaking sound when she closed it, a swallowing-up sound.

Alta was a lifeguard. She sat on her back patio and scanned the grass for problem areas, never looking at the same spot for too long. She wasn’t sure what she was guarding, but when the wind blew through, she could see banana peels and fruit cores in the low grass. Stray cats came through, birds, owls, foxes maybe, possums maybe, raccoons, squirrels, snakes, men.
Once, a pair of men with metal detectors and shovels wandered in, and Alta watched as they slowly passed through, stopping every so often to dig. A different version of Alta might consider wading out into the grass and leaving a trail of coins to her patio door for the next metal detectors to come find. Taping a note on her sliding glass door that said: Better Treasure Inside.

This would involve a major refashioning. Leaving a note like that meant fashioning herself into the sort of woman who would leave a note like that. A woman who wore scarves and costume jewelry. Who calmly told men, when they made mention of hand jobs, to go choke on a vitamin.

One afternoon someone came up from behind her while she was on her patio and tapped a hand on her shoulder, trying to surprise her.

“Oh,” Alta said. It was the Lieutenant, wearing not his hat and uniform but a pair of ironed pants and a pearl-button shirt. His hair was sandy gray. He looked older though somehow sturdier without the uniform. “You could scare a person like that.”

“Mind if I sit down?” he asked.

No, Alta didn’t mind. She never minded, not once.

The Lieutenant sat in the other chair and folded his hands in his lap. He smiled, hesitated, smiled again, as if crossing and uncrossing things off a list. “Well, war’s over,” he said. “We won.”

“I heard,” Alta said. “It was in all the newspapers.”

“Now comes Reconstruction.”

“Then another war.”

“It never ends,” he said.

“I’m glad you came back,” she said.

She went inside and returned with two Scotches and water, then went inside again and returned with his valuables. He sipped the Scotch and talked about his days as a history teacher. There was a new earnestness to his voice, a cleaner pitch. He told her about a sign he’d hung next to the clock in his classroom, which said Time Passes, Will You? It was meant to scare students into concentrating, but it probably had the opposite effect, like most of what he did in the classroom.

“How about you,” he said after awhile. “You seem to be out here on your patio a good bit. Are you a bird-watcher?”

A fine question, which Alta thought about while gazing at the field. The night before had been cold and she had dreamed she was making a quilt out of Vic, Don, George, and the Lieutenant, sewing their legs and chests together while telling them to remain very still.
“Maybe,” she said.
“Maybe? You aren’t sure?”

A few seconds later a crow landed near the edge of her yard, hunted around in the grass, and found a shriveled apple core. It picked up and dropped the core several times, trying to improve its purchase. Two flaps of its wings and the crow was off.

“I wasn’t,” Alta said. “Not until now.”