

## The Renaissance of Memory - by Amy Sterling Casil

She sang to herself. *If wishes were fishes, then coffins could swim.*

Eyes shut tight, Carol Meyers remembered her husband's silver coffin sliding into the grave just like a salmon into a trawler's hold.

*Fish you will swim no more.*

Why was she singing and thinking of the funeral? She hadn't been dreaming of it. Had she?

"David," she said. Her husband's name. When she spoke, her tongue moved thickly. Stale, sticky, horrible breath. How long had it been since she'd brushed her teeth? Putting it off, just like her son had always done.

*Peter brush your teeth.* Singing up the stairs.

Her son, Peter. In her mind, she still saw the hearse and the silver coffin, but it was Peter's voice she heard now. Plaintive and so sad.

Carol Meyers, wife without a husband and mother without a son.

Her son Peter had died before his father.

Such things should never happen.

She tried to open her eyes.

Both of them dead. Husband and son, and where was she?

How old was she? She believed that once, she had been happy. Grief lacerated her throat and her eyes burned beneath their closed lids.

Long ago yesterday, David had cremated their son Peter and taken the cheapest urn, because he had refused to pay for a regular burial.

Perhaps that was why she had remembered his coffin. Slippery, silvery, sliding like a fish.

Then came the bitter memory: Carol had allowed David to bury their son that way. Shamed, she remembered how easy it had been to acquiesce, rather than fight. How weak she had been.

But hadn't she won, in the end? Outlasted David. Outlived him.

*God where was she?*

Still alive, but blind. Dreaming? No--truly awake. She struggled again to open her eyes.

Glued tight. Sewn shut.

But her heart was raw and open. It felt like both of them had died just--

"Yesterday?" a quiet, measured male voice asked.

"Yes," she said. Then, after a moment: "Terday." And all at once there were half a dozen voices around her. Words, all mixed together and crazy. Maybe the voices were familiar, and maybe they weren't.

"I'm Ned," the quiet voice said. "I'm your friend." Ned? He was inside her head. Far inside, like a ringing in her ears. She touched her right ear because it itched and she found a tiny bulb like a snail shell. She knew it immediately: hearing aid. But who had put it there? She certainly hadn't.

She was deaf. That was why the voices were so mixed-up and made no sense. Hearing aids did that sometimes. But when had she gone deaf? She'd always had fine hearing. Sometimes she thought that she heard too much.

"Don't be afraid," Ned, the voice, said.

She didn't know if she would see him, or the others who spoke, but she had to see. At last, grunting with the effort, Carol forced her eyes open.

Her lids split with a velcro-like tear. Eyelashes scattered downward on her chest. A semicircle of young, pinkish, scrubbed faces surrounded her.

They wore tall, striped hats of many colors. And they were grinning like fools. Like the Mad Hatter's tea party.

One of young people leaned close and took Carol's hand. But it couldn't possibly be her hand! It was the claw of a crone, age-spotted and thin-skinned, peeling here and there, with enormous gnarled knuckles, nails yellow and cracked.

"Yes, it is your hand," Ned told her.

"Shut up," she replied.

"Oh, my," the young woman said. She had curly black hair and hazel eyes. Rather pretty and vaguely familiar. Perhaps she had been one of Carol's students. "You've just woken up. Don't tell us to shut up now!"

"My husband is dead," Carol told her, feeling as though she had to repeat what had just come into her mind.

"Yes, he is," the young woman said. "Quite a few years ago. Don't be upset. Do you remember me? I'm Judy."

"Judy." The name meant nothing. Carol didn't know what to think of the patronizing tone in the young woman's voice. As if Carol was a toddler. Or a hamster.

"She's one of the nurses," Ned said. "She--"

One of the nurses. Carol turned away from the scrubbed young face.

Oh, yes, now she remembered. She had been happy. Like a toddler. Or a hamster.

She remembered a blue paper sheet with plastic on the underside. Remembered it being slid under her thin, withered buttocks. She had not understood, until that moment, that buttocks could so wither. She remembered showers, sitting in a chair, and the horrible feeling of lukewarm water slapping against her flaccid body. And Carol could not look this girl in the face again. The shame and weakness was unbearable.

Now she realized that her eyes had been so hard to open because they were pasted shut with rheum. The sort of sticky yellow rheum that came with old age and the clogging of

every orifice with dead tissue.

"Why didn't I die?" Carol asked.

"Oh, no," the voice in her head replied. Ned. "You can't die. You're too important to me."

"Who the hell are you?" Carol demanded.

But the others answered instead of Ned.

"We're your nurses," Judy said. "That's right," said two of the others at once. They all began to jabber.

*We love you, Mrs. Meyers. You're going to be better now. You're a very lucky person, Mrs. Meyers. You've got that big memory chip! And the nanos are fixing your body! Don't you feel better already? We're so happy for you. You'll be going to the recovery center soon, you'll have so much fun. You'll be jogging around the block in no time. I gave you your medicine in the applesauce. What do you remember, Mrs. Meyers? Do you recognize me? You like chocolate pudding! Don't you remember when I used to brush your hair? We used to watch football together. I took you on walks. You have such a pretty smile, Mrs. Meyers. I cut up your meat for you.*

Carol's chest trembled. How her stomach ached. "Who is the voice in my head? I do know who all of you are."

She did, too. She remembered all of it in that moment. Villa Vista "Retirement" Home, where she had existed for the past six years. She was eighty-six years old. David had been dead twenty years. Peter had gone...oh, Lord...had she given up so long before? Yes, she had. Peter had died by his own hand ten years before she'd buried David, when the man who had been his lover had left him. And Peter had tried to call her, but she had been on the phone.

Carol Meyers, unavailable, on the phone with a graduate student who had been interviewing her for Nineteenth Century Studies, yammering on for the better part of an hour about her theory of Tolstoy and not understanding a word she'd said. But he'd told her she was a very great scholar. Hadn't he?

*It meant less than nothing.*

Why had they forced her to remember?

At that moment, she recalled Peter's suicide note as clearly as if she held in her withered claw of a hand.

*Mother, I tried to call, but the line was busy. Wasn't that always the way? Your students came first. I'm sorry you never listened to me. I suppose that you just never had the time.*

"No time," Carol whispered.

"Oh, you've got all the time in the world," the young nurse Judy said, stroking Carol's cheek. "You're getting your new teeth put in tomorrow, and I'll pack your things for the recovery center."

There were tears in the young woman's hazel eyes. Carol looked up at her, wondering at all the water. Why was the silly girl crying? Was it possible that they knew how she felt?

"We're going to miss you, Mrs. Meyers," Judy said. "But you won't be lonely. You've got Ned."

Ned. She wanted to claw him out of her head. How could these young people miss her withered carcass? As blank as a concrete brick, only less substantial. For six years, she had done nothing but eat, sleep, moan and shit, lost in the haze of Alzheimer's.

Shameful as it had been, she thought, at least she had forgotten the pain. And she thought that she had been...happy. It was better that way. Better to have forgotten.

"Where are you sending me?" Carol asked, suddenly afraid. Recovery center? What did that mean?

Finally, Ned spoke again. "You're going to have another chance at life," he said. "You'll learn how to take care of yourself again. Why, you might even teach again, if you like."

"I don't know where my home is," Carol said. And it was not the mad, confused speech of Alzheimer's, but the truth. She had no idea where she would live or go. With David gone; and Peter...and they were only the first...oh, the funerals she'd attended...so many...God, they were all gone. Everyone she'd known and loved. And she did not want to teach again. And then the thought came to her. How had this happened? What had they done to her? And why?

She had been a vegetable, her brain plagued up with Alzheimer's, her body slowly

withering into total paralysis. It was a crime, she thought, to wake someone this way. People were meant to forget. You got to the end of your life and you died. There were reasons for forgetting. Powerful ones. She twisted her mouth angrily and realized with horror that there was not a tooth left in it.

Ned spoke again. "You signed the donor form, remember? You gave permission for any medical experimentation which might help others. You and several thousand others have now received the implants."

"Jesus," Carol said. She had signed the form. She remembered it well. But what she'd meant was that they could use her corneas, or her liver, or whatever parts they could scavenge from her miserable wreck of a body. After she was gone. Not before! Good Lord, never before. Nothing like this.

"Your niece agreed, when you were selected for the Renaissance Project," Ned said.

"Renaissance?"

"Like 'Renaissance.' Rebirth."

"I know what it means, you damn fool. I taught comparative literature for thirty years."

Ned continued in a mild tone. "It's been successful so far. The only pitfalls are emotional. But your basic personality is stable, Carol," he said. "That's why you were selected."

As she and Ned spoke, the nurses began chattering again, their striped Mad Hatter hats bobbing up and down. God, they had a cake. Celebrating her awakening, she supposed. "Welcome Back Carol!" was written on it in purple frosting script.

"Your niece Ludmilla has power of attorney," Ned told her.

"Yes, I remember," Carol said. Ludmilla. A dour young woman with lank dark brown hair and a pimply nose. Ludmilla was a marriage, family and child counselor. She didn't recall Ludmilla ever visiting her in the convalescent home. And it had been six years!

It made no sense that Ludmilla could make such decisions. Then, Carol realized that she'd become a vegetable, and she didn't suppose that carrots or peas had much to say about what happened to them. Vegetables were marked to be eaten by the person who'd planted them, she realized. As she'd marked herself to be used, by signing that donor form. She was a canned pea, as far as everyone else was concerned. And someone had just prized off the lid and opened the can.

"Let me explain," Ned went on. "It's very important that this all goes well. I'm in your right temporal lobe. I've been matched to the architecture of what was left of your brain."

He paused a moment. "I hope that my way of saying this doesn't hurt you."

"Not as badly as other things," Carol whispered.

"I'm a neural enhancement device," Ned said. "Get it?"

"NED," Carol replied. "You do think I'm stupid."

Ned said nothing, which was infinitely worse than anything he could have possibly said.

"Was there some type of payment made for this?" Carol asked him, thinking of her savings, knowing that the University insurance would never have covered an experimental treatment like that, especially not for the old retired carcass she'd become.

Ned's reply was unexpected. "No, no--we're paying for all of this. Your niece received two hundred fifty thousand dollars. For your future care, of course." Then, he told Carol that, after six years in Villa Vista, she had not a cent left to her name. After the recovery center, she would go to live with Ludmilla and her husband Janos, a man Carol had never met. They would care for her, report back to the doctors. A trust fund had been set up. Carol shouldn't worry: she would be perfectly safe. Eventually, she might even work again.

"I can't even walk," Carol told Ned.

"Yes, you can," Ned said.

"No, I can't."

And in her mind, Ned sighed. "Trust me," he said. "We'll be friends for a while, you and I. Each time something triggers a memory, I'll help you find it. I navigate the plaques and find healthy new paths between your synapses. Little by little, your mind's going to rebuild itself. Then at some point, I'll be reabsorbed. When you don't need me any longer."

Carol shook her head. Need Ned any longer? She wanted him out. The young nurses had

begun to fork cake into her mouth. It was soft and horribly sweet. Carol supposed that she didn't need teeth to eat the cake. And she was right. She didn't.

But part of her wanted to make them happy. Make them think that she was happy.

God, shouldn't she be? A whole new life.

Dark crumbs and white bits of frosting scattered over her chest and she masticated the bits into a chocolately pudding in her sticky mouth, then swallowed.

"I'm a part of you," Ned said. "In a certain sense, I am you."

"I don't believe that I ever trusted myself," Carol whispered, as she watched the young nurses exchange their ludicrous hats, and cringed as they began to sing infantile songs for her entertainment.

And she remembered another thing. She'd felt dead for years before the Alzheimer's. Felt like nothing ever since Peter had--

"Stop," Ned told her. "Just stop. Enough for one day. Just remember--you're not alone. You'll have me as long as you need me."

Carol did not want him.

Nor did she want to remember.

The young nurse Judy spoke again, wiping Carol's mouth clean of cake. "Tomorrow you'll go to the recovery center," she said, grinning. "But first, we've got to get your new teeth."

Six weeks later, Carol was pronounced well. Another success of the Renaissance Project. She left the recovery center in an electric cab which hummed steadily as the driver, a young Armenian with a handlebar moustache, babbled on about the Dodgers and their new pitcher, a brave fellow who'd lost his right arm in a childhood bicycling accident, and who used an electric arm. And how the Commissioner had made a special allowance so that he could pitch. He was the best, the driver said. The absolute best. And wasn't it something that he could use that arm the way he did? They could have *grown* him a new arm, the cabbie said, but he wanted to use the prosthesis. More honest that way, the cabbie told her. Like, the guy didn't want to pretend that he hadn't ever lost his arm. *Guts*, the cabbie said. The electric-armed pitcher had guts.

Then, the cabbie turned around and said, "you're a nice-looking lady. What were you doing in that place?" Meaning the recovery center. It had been filled with stroke victims



and cancer patients, and people whose brains had rotted to spoiled jello, just as Carol's had. Before they'd given her Ned. And the nanos.

Carol decided not to tell him about herself. Her new teeth were pearly white and perfect. Her body had firmed, and her knuckles had shrunk. Her skin was elastic now, and the age spots were fading. Every day, growing from liverish brown to pale beige to hardly anything. Her hair had turned a sort of steel gray; a color it had never been during what she now thought of as her first life.

"Why don't you tell him you're part of the Renaissance Project?" Ned said. "People are excited about it."

"Because I don't feel like it." And she left it at that.

Soon, she was at Ludmilla's house, which was in a neighborhood where several couples with whom she and David had been friendly had once lived. The house of the history chair and her husband, which Carol remembered as being a cheerful butter yellow, was now a dull grayish green. Margarethe. That had been the historian's name. Margarethe would never have painted her house that color.

Ludmilla's house was a white Victorian; two stories, with a bell tower. A black and tan terrier stood in the driveway, staring angrily at Carol. The cabbie took her heavy bag, the one with her new clothes in it. She grabbed her travel case.

The therapists at the recovery center had given her a complete set of makeup, including a light pen which she could draw over her eyelids to put shadow on them. For most of her life, Carol had eschewed makeup, but now she found a curious pleasure in playing with these things. She wondered if it was Ned's doing.

Ludmilla came out of the house, shadowing her face against the bright early afternoon sun. The sky was a painful, pure blue, fleeced here and there with high, wispy clouds. The cabbie set the big bag on the porch. Carol tipped him a twenty and he left, whistling merrily.

The terrier ran past Carol's leg, barking, and began to circle her.

Ludmilla picked the dog up. She smiled at Carol, but it was a wary smile, without much friendliness in it. They stood there for a painful moment, then Carol extended her hand. Ludmilla put the dog under her arm like a football and took Carol's hand. Her grasp was limp, her palm cold and damp.

"Janos will be home in about an hour. I've got your room ready," Ludmilla said. She

meant her husband, the stranger.

"Thank you," Carol said. They went inside. The house was cold, decorated mostly in beige, white and chrome. Carol watched Ludmilla's back as she followed her up the stairs.

Ludmilla had a widow's hump. Her hair was streaked with white and gray. So David's hair had gotten, before he'd died. Ludmilla was his sister's daughter. Sometimes she'd seen that sour look on his face. David lived in Ludmilla's expression as plainly as if he had greeted her at the door of this strange house.

"You'll be fine," Ned said.

Carol didn't bother to tell him to shut up. They had come to an arrangement, and the mere thought of shutting him up usually pushed him aside and created the desired result. There were so many things that he told her that she simply did not want to know.

Carol's room was not so bad as she'd feared. She had an oak armoire for her clothes, and a double bed covered in a Queen Anne coverlet. Twin windows overlooked the mountains: a view she had loved when she was young. In that other lifetime. She wasn't sure how she felt about the mountains now. They seemed new to her, and at the same time, oddly familiar.

"I left the directory disc by your terminal," Ludmilla said, pointing to an intimidating datapad and screen on a small cherry secretary next to the bed.

"You'll figure it out," Ned whispered, about the datapad. Yes, Carol remembered such things. She had disliked them, and had never understood why they'd stopped using plain old phone books. But nothing was plain any more. It had not been plain for...some time.

"Oh, thank you," Carol said. "You're so kind." And astonished herself at the poison she heard in her voice. Her friends? Ludmilla would have done better to leave the Hillside Memorial plot directory. And she nearly said that, but she kept quiet.

Ned sighed. "You could try calling people," he said.

"Damnation," Carol whispered. Didn't that fool Ned know they were all dead?

Ludmilla was unpacking Carol's clothes and thrusting hangers two and three at a time in the armoire. The little terrier was sniffing around Carol's shoes.

"I know this will be difficult," Ludmilla said, without turning. "But we're committed to helping you to make the adjustment."

"That's lovely," Carol said, not meaning it. She wanted to be at ease. Why couldn't she be at ease? They were helping her. Weren't they?

"Why don't you join Janos and me for some sherry at five? I'll leave you for a bit. I'm sure you'd like a nap."

Good Lord. Sherry? Carol loathed it.

"Tell her that," Ned whispered.

She mentally pushed him down and sat on the bed, putting her hands on her knees.

"Yes, I'd love that," she said. She pictured Janos as being as dour and lifeless as Ludmilla. Perhaps worse. A lantern-jawed Eastern European, with big black eyes and a single eyebrow.

"Oh, well, until then," Ludmilla said, as she left, smiling awkwardly, as if something pained her.

Carol was what pained her. Ludmilla wished she'd ever gotten involved, Carol was certain. Now that she was here, surely her niece, the stranger, was thinking that amount of money could have been enough.

"You don't know that," Ned said.

"I know in my bones," Carol replied.

Ned reminded her that her bones were no longer, strictly speaking, her bones, but rather the bones of her and the nanos which so helpfully kept her hale and hearty. Nice, kind nanos that she wished she could piss out in the toilet half the time, and lay awake sweating at night, worrying that they'd somehow get pissed out, and she'd turn old again, crumbling, and thanks to Ned, be utterly, horribly aware of every bit of degeneration.

It was bad enough to remember how she had become a withered baby in an ample, reeking diaper.

And she should be grateful to Ludmilla, she really should. My God, how else would Carol get out of Villa Vista? If she had not been meant to die, then, she supposed, it was better this way. It really was.

She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. Inside her mind, Ned caressed her, and his touch was as light as a feather. She felt, for a bare moment, that she was young again, and all her life was ahead of her. That she was lovely and sweet-smelling, and full of firm, pulsing life.

She moaned.

This young-old body. Feelings within her which she had not felt for years. Decades.

She and David had not made love after Peter died. The night Peter killed himself was the last time. And David had hurt her. She had been dry, with post-menopausal frailty and tenderness, and he had been rough. Uncaring. Perhaps ninety seconds of it, and after, she had bled, crying to herself in the bathroom, wiping the mixed semen and blood away with wadded tissues.

Her wandering mind remembered Peter's note. How the cop in the awful plaid jacket had told her Peter had hung himself. Oh, God, and the rage of David at it. How he had hated his own son.

She had always felt that he had hated himself so much more than that. And, realized suddenly, because Ned whispered it to her, that she had not really cared. The reason she had not fought David over Peter's funeral was that she had, at a certain point, and this point she could not remember, and Ned was silent about it, ceased to care.

Yet she had cared about foolish things. Like being told what a great scholar she was. The adulation of strangers. Now strangers were all that was left. She opened her eyes, thinking of Ludmilla and unknown Janos, shadowy mysteries in a cold, new world beneath a sky the color of a frozen robin's egg, wispy clouds wreathing the mountain which filled her with a vague sense of dread.

She turned, reaching for the glittering directory disk on the polished cherry desk. What if she did use it? Perhaps her friend Margarethe the historian and her husband were still around. They had been younger. Margarethe would be seventy-six now. That was not so old. Margarethe had organized Carol's retirement party. She'd gotten the bust of Tolstoy put up in the courtyard by the English building. Oh, God, Carol thought, close to weeping, Margarethe had been her only friend during the final phase of her career at the University. Years upon years. Her throat tightened. How she missed Margarethe.

"You could learn Russian, you know," Ned said, for no apparent reason.

Carol reminded him that she was still working on tying her shoes properly.

She wasn't sure if it was he, or she, who laughed.

"You don't suppose Margarethe would still be around?" Carol wondered aloud.

Ned told her that she could look her up if she wanted. Look anyone up. Everyone.

Carol fingered the disk. It slipped from her fingers, clattering on the desk as Ned gave her another memory. She remembered that Margarethe's husband had died of Parkinson's disease, the year after David had slid into the earth like a dead fish in his burnished silver coffin.

Margarethe had moved to live with her daughter in Toronto. And Carol had locked herself in her study, though there was no one in the house to disturb her since David was gone. And in the study she had shivered, holding herself, trying to pretend that she was not alone.

At five, Carol splashed water on her face and went downstairs. Her stomach ached.

Janos sat in a wing-backed chair by the living room window. Ludmilla came in with a silver tray set with a decanter of sherry and three tiny fluted glasses. She'd arranged some dry rusks on a gold-rimmed plate. The rusks reminded Carol of the sort of faculty reception they held after someone presented an excruciatingly boring annotated bibliography.

She wondered if Ludmilla was trying to make her feel at home.

Janos smiled. His teeth were yellow, but his smile seemed genuine. His hair was steel gray, nearly the same color as the nanos had turned Carol's. His eyes were pale, dove brown, clear as amber glass. As he stood, she realized that he was a big man, still powerful, even though he was no longer young.

"Do you remember me?" he asked.

"We've never met," Carol said. "You and Ludmilla married after--"

"I know," he said. "But I was your student. In the Dostoevsky class."

Ned navigated around in her head, but there was nothing. She didn't remember Janos *at all*.

"I'm not infallible," Ned reminded her.

"You can't expect her to remember right away," Ludmilla said as she poured the sherry.

"I don't," Janos said, kindly.

Carol sat, taking a glass of sherry. She sipped it, thinking that it was every bit as awful as she'd remembered. It smelled like insecticide.

"I'm so sorry I can't remember," Carol said. And she really was sorry. Janos seemed decent. And he had an unusual name. How could she forget a student named Janos? Studying Dostoevsky, for heaven's sake?

"It was thirty years ago," he said. "I remember when your son died."

Ludmilla had seated herself opposite them, balancing a plate with two rusks on her lap. She leaned forward, her face strained. "Janos! Don't upset her!" There was kindness on her face. Carol did not understand why.

"I remember you, Professor Meyers. It doesn't bother you to have me say that, does it?"

Carol knew that he did remember her, though she truly did not remember him. She saw herself clearly as she had been in those days, as if she was watching herself in her own classroom in her navy merino jacket and crisp skirt, her eggshell white silk blouse, and her neat blond cap of hair. Still trim in her fifties, still erect, and as brittle as they came.

A hard woman, her friend Margarethe the historian had once called her. Fearless. So everyone had thought. Yet before each lecture, even up to the very end, she had vomited from nerves. Vomited into the bathroom sink, clotted brownish gouts of morning coffee, just from the thought of facing the day and all of those people: her supposed colleagues and the parade of bright little self-absorbed birds who were her students.

And one of those birds had been Janos. Janos who she did not remember.

"I know what Ludmilla does," Carol said. "But I'm not sure what you do."

He grinned. Before he could speak, Ludmilla said, "He's an architect. He did the new student union. And other important buildings."

There was no mistaking the irritation on Janos' face now. He wasn't comfortable with praise. "Yes," he said. "I do other things, too."

Carol shifted in her seat, trying to smile. "Interesting," she said.

"You could have said something a bit more sensitive," Ned told her in his quiet voice. She pushed him aside.

"Look," Janos said, setting down his sherry and walking over to the bookcases on the far side of the room, "I took out some of my old things. I thought you might like to look at them."

Carol rose and went to his side. He held an old yearbook from the college. She recalled sending boxes of them to the library when she'd retired. They gave her five copies each year when she'd been teaching; she'd never quite understood why. He thumbed the pages and found a picture of a young man with dark wavy hair falling in his eyes, wearing a paint-splattered t-shirt.

"That's me," he said. "The year I took your class."

He had been handsome, with a clean, firm jaw. He looked earnest. Carol still didn't remember.

"So young," Carol said, hoping to deflect him.

"Yes," Janos said, laughing. Ludmilla came behind them. She asked if there was a picture of Carol in the yearbook.

"Just your mug shot in this one," Janos said. "There's a better one in this one." He picked up another yearbook and found a shot of Carol giving the commencement address. That had been a day. The students had voted: for her.

It was an odd picture, because they had caught her in mid-word, and it showed all of her teeth, as if she had a thousand of them, and the wind had blown her hair away from her face. She had been...what...fifty-five then? Oh, God, yes, back when she'd still had sex, still felt somewhat alive. And with a little twinge of embarrassed vanity, realized that she thought once more that she looked well at that age. Very well.

And with shame, pushed that thought away. That had been before it had all happened. David. And Peter.

"I remember that day," she said.

And wished she could go back to it.

"So do I," Janos said. "It was my graduation. A wonderful day. I was the first in my family to graduate college."

Carol smiled at him. "Your family must have been proud."

He told her that they were.

"Everyone in our family was proud of you," Ludmilla said. Carol realized with shock that she was speaking to *her*, and not to Janos.

"They were? But, I don't--"

"You were very famous," Ludmilla told her. "We always heard about how brilliant you were. When I married Janos, he told me that you were the best teacher he ever had. Nobody lectured like you," she said.

"You made me love Dostoevsky," Janos said. "Love reading. I always hated it, before."

Carol's throat swelled. She couldn't speak. She looked between the two of them; both no longer young, and imagined the way they must have been when they were young. And she saw an echo of herself in their eyes. A sort of shadow-Carol, one she could not really recognize, or believe in.

"I'm glad," she said, after a long, awkward moment.

And suddenly she could no longer stay in that room. How could they say such things? Peter had died; died because of her! She was a failure, a sterile, useless failure who had curled in upon herself and dried up like a piece of old bread. Dried as hard and as tasteless and as useless as the rusks Ludmilla had served with the sherry.



And like rusks or raisins soaked in wine, she'd been reconstituted.

"Don't punish yourself," Ned said.

Carol turned and fled up the stairs, back to her room where the last rays of the day were showing pink against the blind face of the mountain. The clouds had thickened. A storm was blowing in.

"You're so foolish," Ned said as she threw herself to the bed. "You'll get better. And they don't hate you. They're not using you. They care for you."

"No one cares for me," Carol said, thrusting her face into her pillow. Her heart was a piece of ice, sending icy rivers of chill blood all through her body.

"Because you don't know how to care for yourself," Ned whispered.

"Oh, fuck you," she told him. "Fuck you, you sanctimonious prig. God meant for people like me to fade away and die. Why didn't I?"

Ned made no reply.

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Ludmilla served Carol scrambled eggs with fresh chopped salsa. She sat across from her in the breakfast nook and sipped coffee as Carol ate.

The eggs were velvet and the salsa was sharp and crisp.

"You remember that taste," Ned said.

With little effort, Carol recalled a breakfast she and David had eaten on their honeymoon. They'd taken a week in Carmel, far too extravagant for their student budget, and they had gone to a little English tea room called the Tuck Box. And they had ordered not eggs and salsa but Eggs Benedict with velvety sauce and Earl Grey tea and crumpets with marmalade and honey.

"Do you like the eggs?" Ludmilla asked.

Carol drew herself back from the memory. "Yes," she said. "They're wonderful."

"Weren't they?" Ned asked.

Ludmilla grinned. She looked almost young.

"They remind me of something I ate years ago. On my honeymoon," Carol said.

"Indeed," Ned said.

And she wanted him gone. He did go away, for a bit.

And Carol remembered by herself. Carol and David had made love for hours upon hours in Carmel. It hadn't seemed to matter that they were in that lovely place, where the gray ribbon of Highway 1 went south along the edge of the Pacific to Big Sur. Some years later, she had come to regret that they hadn't taken advantage of the natural beauty there. The place drew her and she'd always wanted more of it. Often, at odd moments over the years, she had thought about going back.

They never had.

"Oh, that must have been wonderful," Ludmilla said. "I love Carmel."

"Have you been there often?" Carol asked.

Ludmilla shrugged, sipping her coffee. "A few times. Janos likes it."

"Ah," Carol said. And Janos would. He was sensitive, she'd discovered in the intervening weeks. A childish smile would cross his face at the oddest times. Twice she had heard him giggle.

Ludmilla took a deep breath. She didn't speak for a long moment, then she reached across the breakfast table and took Carol's hand. "Would you like to go there?"

Carol did not know what to say. She tried to smile, then shrugged.

"Why not?" Ned told her softly. "Why not go?"

"The doctors said that it would be good for you to go back to places you were fond of. That

it would help you adjust," Ludmilla said. "You don't have to see them again until next week. Plenty of time."

Carol shook her head. "I don't know," she said.

As Ludmilla started to speak again, Janos came in from the back yard with a metal basket of pomegranates.

"They're ready," he said. He tossed one to Carol.

The pomegranate split open as she caught it. The red seeds glittered inside. She hadn't seen one for years; nor had she thought of them. She remembered the juice as slightly tart-sweet, but also insipid. And the seeds were impossible to handle gracefully.

She set the broken fruit next to her plate.

"Try it," Janos urged.

Carol divided it in half.

"You couldn't have done that before," Ned said.

He was right. She couldn't. Couldn't have caught the pomegranate, either. It would have struck her chest and splattered red juice all over her chest.

And Ned gifted her with the memory of the slack, moronic smile she had worn for those dead six years in Villa Vista. Excruciating parties in the dining hall. Birthdays, once a month, where they were all lined up like monkeys in their wheelchairs and a young man with greasy blond hair and a snowfall of dandruff on his sloped shoulders played an electric organ. Some of them had sung, remembering some of the words, because who could forget "Happy Birthday?" Or forget their name?

Carol had forgotten her name.

Her name had become "me," and she had relished and cried for spoons of mashed squash with butter, smacking her peeling lips, feeling the slick, wet slide of it down her chin, because they could never get all of it in her mouth. Never.

It was time to eat the pomegranate.

Nimbly, she withdrew four jeweled seeds from the fruit and placed them on her tongue. Crushed them against the roof of her mouth, and tasted the juice, unutterably sweet.

"Good, isn't it," Janos said. Ludmilla smiled.

"We were talking about Carmel," Ludmilla told him.

Janos nodded, fingering his chin. "We haven't been for years," he said. "We ought to go."

Carol spit the pomegranate seeds into her palm, then put them neatly on her plate. She arranged them in a diamond. They were pale beige. If anyone had asked her, she would have said that the hard inner seeds of a pomegranate were black, like the seeds of a papaya, but they were not. They reminded her of baby teeth.

"Yes," Ludmilla said, standing and putting her hand on his forearm. "Let's go. Tomorrow."

Carol looked between the two of them. They meant it.

"Oh, I don't think I'm--"

"Nonsense," Ludmilla said. "You'll love it. You'll get to see all the things you remembered. We can take the drive down Highway One to Big Sur."

"I'm afraid of roads like that," Carol said. She and David hadn't gone on that drive, though they had planned to go. They had been too occupied with each other for that sort of sightseeing.

She could not say what was really bothering her. A car trip. Hours. The memories of her honeymoon. Weeping. She recalled that it took five or six hours to drive to Carmel, and that was on a quick trip. These days, she had no idea. And she feared that she couldn't sit that long. That the car would shrink until it smothered her, that she'd become claustrophobic, or like a child, would become nauseous.

"Oh, it'll be fine," Ludmilla said. "Don't worry. You're so far ahead of schedule. You're doing wonderfully."

"Yes," Janos said, beaming down at her.

Carol had the impression that they thought she was a particularly bright child, or perhaps, a parrot that had just begun to speak.

A parrot. "Polly wants a cracker," she said.

"Good God," Ned whispered. "Have you gone mad?"

Ludmilla and Janos exchanged confused looks, neither willing to respond to Carol's outburst. Perhaps they thought that Carol was regressing. It was the kind of thing that people with Alzheimer's sometimes said.

"Oh, you still have the disease," Ned told her. "The plaques are growing. If you didn't have me there, you'd--"

"Stop," Carol said. "Just stop."

Ludmilla squinted uncertainly at Carol. "I'll pack your things," she said, after a moment.

Janos squeezed Ludmilla's shoulder. So had her husband David done with her, Carol recalled. Protective. There were years he had been kind. And protective. "Yes, yes, and I'll get the car checked out. We'll go tomorrow morning."

"Won't it be lovely? Think of all the things we'll see and do."

And Carol could not speak. She had four more pomegranate seeds in her mouth, and as they burst, she remembered the flutter she had felt inside when David's had run his hands along her body. How she had opened to him, like a flower. And she had been young then, under that central California sun. It was God's Country, David had said.

"God's Country," Ned echoed. That was before it had all... before all of it. She could not, would not think of Peter, of the rope around his neck. God's Country, with the waves crashing against the ragged rocks and the valleys of deepest velvet green.

Why hadn't the nanos healed her back to that? Why could Ned not take her back to then? Ned was as silent as a stone.

Perhaps he could, she wondered. If she tried hard enough.

Or wished, with the burst of tart-sweet pomegranate juice in her mouth, and the tiny seeds rolling on her tongue.

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"Do you want to go along Highway 1?" Janos asked, turning, as he had his arm around the seat, behind Ludmilla's shoulders. Carol was in the back seat of the Rover, trying not to look out the window. She had already become nauseous.

"My stomach's not quite right," she said.

"Oh, gosh," he replied. Then he told Ludmilla to give Carol another Dramamine. "I'll drive slowly. It's scenic. Everyone goes slowly."

"All right," Carol said. She and David had never made the drive. Too busy with other honeymoon business. She smiled, remembering.

"It was nice, wasn't it?" Ned said.

"Yes," Carol whispered, as she gazed out the window at the beige central California hills, dotted with dark green, twisted live oaks. Beyond the hills was a cloudless sky of a blue so pure that it nearly burned her eyes.

"Don't you remember being here?" Ned asked, as they turned onto Highway 1 forty miles south of Big Sur.

p>"No," Carol told him. She could not have forgotten, had she been there. They were at the edge of the continent, the Pacific spread out like a deep green-gray jeweled carpet dotted with white froth, and on their other side, the old-growth redwood forest pushed its way toward the torn cliffs which met the waves.

Janos rolled the window down and the peculiar woody, rich smell of the redwoods hit her, then the biting, fresh salt odor of the sea.

"The smell," Ned said. "I'm working as hard as I can."

The highway wound through the forest, then came back out by the sea.

"We're lucky it's not closed," Janos said. "It's often closed through here."

"Why?" Carol asked.

Ludmilla turned. "Because of the storms. They wash the road out. It's very difficult to fix."

Carol could understand that. They were still far from Big Sur, and she'd seen no other road intersect the highway, and precious little sign of civilization. It was just the trees, the cliffs, and the sea.

"Don't you remember?" Ned asked again.

"No," Carol said, more vehemently.

Ludmilla frowned as she leaned over the seat. "It's a shame when it washes out," she said.

"Yes, I should have said," Carol replied. "It is a shame."

"Coming up on Big Sur," Janos said, pointing at the shoreline. "There's a place I've heard about. We can stop."

"Where?" Ludmilla asked.

"It's called Nepenthe," Janos said.

"What a strange name," Carol muttered. The rocks fell into the sea now. Carol wondered if some time, deep in the past, Neptune had thrown them against the continent in a rage. Neptune. Nepenthe. The two had to do with each other. She had heard the word before. Perhaps it meant "memory." She thought that it did. Ned was silent on the matter.

They passed a small green sign on the ocean side of the highway. "Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park."

"Look at that," Ludmilla said. "I bet that's beautiful."

Janos raised his brow. "Want to stop?"

"I thought you wanted to go to Nepenthe," Ludmilla said.

"It's still early," Janos said. He slowed, pulling the Rover off the highway, then turned down the path into the state park.

They bumped along for quite some time, as Carol's stomach roiled. Dust clouded around the Rover. They stopped. Janos helped Carol from the car, and as the dust settled, she saw a trailhead. A sign pointed to the beach, saying it was a mile-long hike.

"Feel up to it?" he asked Carol, winking.

"Not me," Ludmilla said. "I'll stay here." She pointed to some picnic tables in the shade of a scrubby oak.

Carol wondered. Her legs didn't feel strong, and her stomach was still weak. Yet the ocean breeze filled her nostrils. It smelled wonderful.

"You really can't remember?" Ned asked. "I'm working."

"Thank you very much," she told him. "Not very effectively."

He fell silent.

Janos started down the path. He wore shorts. Carol watched his strong calves flex as he walked. There was a spring to his step, despite his steel-gray hair and bit of a paunch.

They walked for ten minutes, and there was no beach in sight. Carol's legs had begun to cramp. Janos stopped, offering her his arm. They continued this way for some time, until Carol was ready to quit and ask him to carry her back to the Rover. Just as she was about to speak, they came around a tall boulder, and saw the beach.

"Now, you remember," Ned said.

There was something. Carol suddenly could not catch her breath.

To the south of the white sand cove was a great arch, about which the waves crashed. To the right, a spectacular outcropping of cliffs and wave-worn rock. The salt spray hit Carol's face.



It burned her skin as she said, "yes."

She had been on that beach before. Dreamt of it.

"No, not in your dreams," Ned said, and for the first time in the weeks since she'd awakened, Carol thought she heard a tinge of sadness in Ned's voice in place of his blandly relentless insistence.

Janos led her to a flat sandstone outcropping, carved with countless names and dates.

Carol knew that her name was not on the rock, though the names of many other lovers were. She sat beside Janos, crossing her legs Indian-style, as she'd not crossed them for decades, and rested her chin in her hand, looking out at the waves crashing against the rock arch. Gulls flew overhead, shrieking.

"There," Janos said, pointing at the south end of the cove, nearer to the arch. "Right over there."

She remembered.

"His hand between your legs," Ned reminded her. "Gentle. You thought cruel."

It sounded as though he was reciting a poem.

"You took me there," Carol said, looking at the south end of the cove, where the waves had pushed the pale sand close to the cliffs. How little it had changed. "I was still beautiful," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Ned spoke, not Janos. "And so you were, I think," he said. "As honestly as I can say."

"Who are you," Carol asked Ned. "Really."

Ned made no reply.

"Oh, you know," Janos whispered. His face was in her hair.

"You gave me such dreams," Carol said, as she felt Janos' lips on her neck.

"I'm glad she stayed by the car," he said, about Ludmilla.

"Are you happy, Janoschka?" she asked, as his fingers brushed her nipple through her thin blouse. Ned had retreated somewhere far away.

"No," he said, as he pressed against her.

Carol tore away from him, uncrossing her legs and leaping from the outcropping. She strode toward the sea, her back to him, arms crossed.

Janos followed.

"When did you remember?" he demanded.

"Now," she told him. She felt the most powerful feeling of loss that she had ever felt, a hot, sliding agony down her throat and through her body, even into her thighs. She could not speak. The salty, sandy air whipped her cheeks, and she could no longer see the arch clearly. She sensed and heard the gulls wheeling and crying overhead, but could not make out their individual forms against the azure sky.

She felt Janos at her side, and was thankful that he did not try to touch her.

"I used to think that it was wrong," she said, realizing that the pain was making her weep. "That I was vile, less than nothing."

For doing what she had done. Now she remembered it all.

It had been no student interviewing her for Nineteenth Century Studies when Peter had tried to call on that horrible night. She had been in her study, whispering filth with Janos, believing that he thought her beautiful, worthy, and lovely. And later, David had wanted to make love. And it had been so difficult, pretending. Her body had torn, because she could not make it do as she commanded. It had tried to keep him out. And it had hurt. God, the blood.

Nothing compared to what had happened to her heart.

Selfish, lying fool with a son who needed her, whispering sex with a boy. Her student. And then the lie, with her husband.

And then, grief-stricken and blank inside, she had come to this place with Janos in the shadow of Peter's death. And they had made love, in the shadow of the great arch cut by the sea.

"You were never vile," Janos said. "I loved you then. I love you now."

His arms slipped around her waist and he pulled her close. Still, she would not turn.

"No," she said. "Peter had hardly gone. How could I have--"

"I never thought we were wrong," Janos whispered.

"And this isn't wrong now?" Carol asked. "Your wife back there waiting?"

"She could come at any moment," he said. Carol thought she heard a hint of excitement in his voice, and it sickened her.

"I'm eighty-six years old," she said, not caring how bitter she sounded. "It was bad enough before. It was--"

"And I'm fifty," Janos said. "Not so very young. Don't you see yourself now? You're almost like you were. Younger, in some ways."

"Does Ludmilla know?" Carol asked.

Janos laughed. "No," he said.

And then, with a chill in her stomach, Ned returned. "Isn't this a mirror of what happened?" he asked. "It's not a memory, Carol. But I know it's not what you want."

Carol didn't speak for a long while. "I will never touch you again," she at last told Janos.

His arms slipped away. "Carol," he said.

She turned to see the hurt plain on his face.

"And remember now," Ned said. "All of it."

How they had made love in the cove in the shadow of the rock. Carol still raw from Peter's death. Rawer, perhaps, from David's blame. For he had seen the note first. It was he who had read it to her. Not the plainclothes detective in his awful plaid jacket. His voice had been as cold as anything she had ever heard. And part of her had relished his coldness. Because that was how she felt about herself.

*You were a lousy mother, Carol. You're a selfish bitch. All you care about is your job, the way they all adore you. Prizes and accolades. From strangers. You quit being a mother to Peter years ago. I don't know if you ever really were.*

David had left it unsaid that she'd been no wife to him, but she'd heard it as clearly as if he had screamed it.

But David had not paid attention to her for years. Made love like an animal, grunting over her in the night, then falling asleep. Torn into her, on that awful night. Because she could not bear to think in any depth about it, she had begun to laugh. She remembered laughing with Margarethe, saying that she should write a book: "Fuck and Snore." And when Carol had published the monograph on Tolstoy, David had wanted to know "who would read something like that?" When they'd made her a full professor, the youngest woman ever to receive that honor, he'd said, "pretty good." It was all "pretty good." She got more praise for cooking meat loaf and green beans for David than she ever had for...anything else in her life. How she had worked. And it had mattered less to him than a good steaming dish of vegetables.

And she had gone, colder than David had ever thought of being, with Janos. For a week, to Big Sur, and Carmel. Because she felt that she had to. Or die.

"His lips," Ned said.

*And Janos' hands and his young, young body. Straining against him. Flesh together on a blanket in the sand, the salt spray, hair whipping back as he entered her. His face, dark, so fine, jaw etched in her memory, the pleasure of the curve of his lips and the memory of his half-closed eyes in the most perfect moment of love she had ever known. Betraying her husband in the shadow of her son's death.*

Carol faced the sea. She extended her hand. She was at the very edge of the waves.

"Walk with me into the sea," she said to Janos.

You weak, weak woman, she thought.

"You still can't trust yourself," Ned told her.

And Janos took her hand.

Carol did not know why, but at that instant she turned to see Ludmilla's form at the trailhead. Ludmilla was shielding her eyes, looking across the cove at them.

Janos smiled. He leaned over, as if to kiss her. Carol felt herself shy away. She shook her head.

"I was infatuated with you," she told him. "Not love."

"You liar," Ned said in his measured voice. Carol wanted to strike him, wherever he was. Whatever he was.

"If not in the sea, then back to her," Carol said to Janos. Their eyes met, for a long moment, and he slowly released her hand. They started back across the sand to Ludmilla.

"Take me to Nepenthe," Carol said. "To memory." There was something she had to meet there, though what it was, she didn't fully know. Not yet.

As they reached the trail head, Carol saw that Ludmilla was smiling, her eyes veiled with uncertainty.

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As it had always been, Big Sur was still a place of hippies and outsiders and madmen, the home of Henry Miller and countless other disaffected renegades. They lived on each side of the narrow highway amid the woods which came near the rugged sea, amid the green streams which flowed from the great forest.

"A good place," Ned said.

And Carol remembered it. Remembered the days and nights with Janos in the little cabin with its antique bakelite radio. Big Sur, like the arch, the cove, and the beach, had not changed. She had sensed, even back then, that time had a different meaning in this place. That it moved more slowly. Perhaps, she thought, it did not move at all.

And Nepenthe she remembered. A store and restaurant on the edge of one of the most spectacular views on the Pacific Coast.

A redwood deck jutted out from the main building. Janos had gone inside, looking at T-shirts and books.

Ludmilla stood at the edge of the deck, gazing down the coast. The arched cove where Carol had remembered it all was ten miles south, veiled in mist. Carol walked to her and braced herself against the waist-high railing.

"I think this is the most beautiful place I've ever seen," Carol said.

"Possibly," Ned said.

"Yes," Ludmilla said. She shivered, wrapping her arms around her body. "But it's cold."

The wind had blown up. Carol felt the chill as well. She put her arm around Ludmilla.

"Take care," Carol said. "Of yourself."

Ludmilla smiled at her, and in that moment, Carol realized that she knew. All of it.

"How could she have taken you in if she knew?" Ned asked.

"It's not your part of me which knows," Carol told him. "The logical part. It's my instinct. The disease didn't kill that."

He sighed.

Carol squeezed Ludmilla's shoulder. "I would never hurt you," she said as she moved a few steps away.

Ludmilla's eyes were full of wonder. "I know," she said. "What do you remember?"

Carol felt herself smile. "Everything."

"Not quite," Ned said. "But almost." His voice sounded more distant than ever before. Barely audible.

Janos came down the steps from the shop, a black T-shirt draped over his arm, a silver mug in his hand.

"Anyone hungry? Let's have some sandwiches and some retsina."

The restaurant on the second deck served Greek food and liquor. They went down and split a plate of souvlaki and grape leaves, with a decanter of retsina which Janos poured into hand-blown green glasses. It was nearly the same meal that Carol had eaten with him in this place thirty years before.

They sat at a table beside the redwood railing and talked about very little. Ludmilla laughed to see the seagulls circling overhead, and wondered if they were hungry for Greek food.

"If it was fish," Janos said.

Carol smelled the salt air again. The wind was chilling, but the sun was still bright, casting pinkish rays over the waves. In the distance, the spectacular cliffs had turned a deep gray purple. And time stopped.

They ate, talked, and drank.

"Do you remember?" Ned asked. Carol could barely hear him.

*The sour tartness of the grape leaves. The rice, slightly sticky and slightly sweet, savory on her tongue. The resinous shudder of the retsina. So hungry, sunburned and tired, full from Janos, full of his love. No food or drink had ever tasted so, Carol had thought.*

Janos' fingers trembled as he poured the retsina. A grain of rice had escaped his mouth and rested on his chin.

Smiling, Ludmilla brushed the rice away.

They're old, Carol thought. Not young at all. Why didn't they use the nanos?

"Perhaps they will," Ned said. "Someday. But you will grow younger, younger, younger. It won't stop. I'll fade away, but you'll go on. Body stronger every day, hair darker, skin smoother. Not them."

Awkwardly, Janos took Ludmilla's hand in his and held it, his arm extended across the table. His hand was spotted, and there were wrinkles between his knuckles, and the skin was cracked here and there. How lovely his hands had once been. How smooth, and gentle.

A hundred feet below, the Pacific crashed against the rocks. The gulls cried overhead.

Carol rested her arm against the rail. She could spring up, and in a moment she would be over the edge.

Gone. Her red blood would wash to nothing amid the waves.

Janos kissed Ludmilla's cheek. His eyes were dark, their expression undecipherable, as he looked over at Carol.

The sun warmed Carol's cheeks. She closed her eyes. She would savor the salt air. Savor the last taste of retsina in her mouth, this echo of her memories. Listen to the waves. They crashed, back and forth, like the rhythm of her heart. The ocean beat as if it was her own heart. In a moment, she would go. But not yet.

"Should I not?" she asked Ned. Why shouldn't she? What did it matter that her body was young, if her spirit was not?

But Ned was silent.

"I have loved," she whispered. "I have hurt. And I'm tired," she said. "So tired."

She moved closer to the railing. Even with her eyes closed, it would be easy.

"Did I kill my son?" she asked Ned. "Was I such a bad mother? And such a bad wife?"

Why couldn't she have stayed in that haze? The memories ate through her like a cancer. They were third-degree burns, but inside, not outside her body. Unsalvable.



"Those aren't my answers, Carol," Ned said. "They're yours. But you need to remember that you did not do only wrong. You did a great deal of right."

Then he fell silent, as the waves crashed. Carol heard Ludmilla eating, then sipping retsina, and shut the sound away, listening for Ned. As if he whispered along distant telephone wires, Ned spoke at last.

"I cannot stop you," he said. "Not if you cannot learn to trust yourself. You no longer need me, Carol. The memories are all back. Now you know, and now you may choose. But for each painful memory there is one of joy as well. That, you must not forget."

His voice faded to nothing.

"Even so," she asked him, "if they could heal everything else, why couldn't they stop the pain?"

Ned was silent.

A warm hand touched hers. She opened her eyes.

"Where were you?" Ludmilla asked, smiling. Janos had gotten up, and was wandering the deck, massaging his lower back. Like an old, old man.

"On the edge," Carol told Ludmilla, and her voice sounded so young. "To memory and back."

She did not need Ned to tell her that she was lying. But sometimes lies were better than the truth.

Everyone she had known and loved was gone, except these two remnants of her past. And they deserved their lives together. Peaceful. Unmolested. The waves and the rocks beckoned.

Ludmilla leaned across the table and said softly, "I don't hold a thing against you."

Carol smelled the retsina on Ludmilla's breath and realized. Her senses made memories and what ran backward might run forward. If she tried.

"Why?" she asked Ludmilla.

"God," Ludmilla said, shaking her head. Then, she took Carol's hand and placed the fingers lightly against her cheek. "Don't you remember, Aunt Carol? When I was a little girl, I used to come to your office after school and file papers for you? Clean up?"

Carol shook her head. Then, bit by bit, it all came back.

"You were a lonely girl," she said.

And at once, Ned was back. "So she was," he said.

Ludmilla nodded.

"Your mother drank," Carol added. Good God, it had been nothing. Who wouldn't try to reach out to a child in need? What had Ludmilla been? Twelve? Thirteen?

"You tried to help Peter, too," Ned said. "How many rehabs was he in? How many doctors did you take him to? How many hours did you spend with him?"

"Oh, God," Carol whispered, as she remembered those years alone, struggling with her troubled son.

Ludmilla smiled. "I wanted to be just like you," she said. "Back in those days. You gave me hope that I could have a normal life."

"But Janos...taking me into your house..."

Ludmilla squeezed Carol's hand against her cheek. "You introduced us. Don't you remember?"

And then Carol did. It had been after. Not before.

"This is not what I thought," she said at last.

"Oh, no," Ludmilla said. "Not what I thought, either."

"Back there," Carol said. "On the beach."

"I know," Ludmilla replied. "And I saw you walk away."

Carol tried to take her hand from Ludmilla's cheek, but Ludmilla held her fast. Carol's eyes began to burn.

"You can't--"

"I trust you," Ludmilla said. "I always trusted you."

And Ned's voice echoed. *You could never trust yourself.*

"Now it's time," he said.

"Ned," Carol said, her heart rising in her chest, feeling as though it would burst. Lord, please don't go, Ned, please don't--

"Goodbye," Ned said. And he was gone. Just like that.

Ludmilla looked at her, slightly puzzled.

Carol couldn't breathe for a long moment. Finally, she sighed, and said, "I have to learn to trust myself."

What had Ned said? Perhaps, a bit at a time, there would be new memories to join the old. Could there be? She had to heal her pain, pushing the old memories back behind the new.

She needed to start with a touch.

She caressed Ludmilla's cheek, feeling the delicate bones under the no longer young skin, feeling it so that her body would remember for what life she had left, feeling it with joy tinged with a bit of sorrow, for she knew that she would have to leave. Soon.

"Thank you," she said to Ludmilla. "You are lovely to me. And I will always remember you." And she knew, though Ned was no longer there to confirm it for her, that she spoke the truth.

- END -