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GUEST JUDGE

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Zone Sixteen

RYAN, HOLDING the jar in one hand and his penis in the other, peed into the container. Today his urine was a deep maroon, the way he imagined a red tide, although he had never seen one. He remembered a fishing trip he'd taken to Idaho years before with his daughter Jenny. They'd come upon a vividly purple lake, like a dream lake or one a child might draw. The color was nearly phosphorescent, and everything in and around the water stood preternaturally still. It was one of the most beautiful things Ryan had ever seen, the beauty enhanced by his certainty that something had gone terribly awry. The ranger had explained that Fish and Game had been purifying the lake of all trash fish, after which they intended to stock it only with trout. However, they'd released too much of the chemical and by mistake had killed everything. Ryan and Jenny had found another lake, where they had caught mostly carp.

He capped the container and carried it through the den and kitchen to the adjoining greenhouse. The plants crowded against him. His glasses fogged in the moist heat and he cleaned them on his shirt-tail, then scrutinized the Black Mission figs, the kiwis (one male, two females) twining up a beam, and the bitter melon hooking its tentacles through the bamboo trellis. He looked for yellowing leaves, signifying a nitrogen deficiency, but every plant glowed green with health. In part they were so healthy precisely because he was not. He recalled the classic instruction of stewardesses: first place the oxygen over your own mouth, then over the mouth of the infant. Otherwise one

becomes like the mother in the famine, who gives all the food to the baby and ends up killing them both.

His own children no longer had any real need of him, though they dutifully came when called to pick bushels of fruit and nuts. But when he died most of the plants would die, he was sure of it. No matter how he coddled them now, when he was gone it would be only a matter of weeks for some, months for others. The ones in the greenhouse depended on him as much as a breast-feeding baby: he had to water them daily, and twice on especially hot days, which in September, the hottest month for the central coast of California, meant every day. As usual there had been no rain since May.

The trees he and his predecessors had planted out in the orchard would survive, but many of the younger trees remained pot bound, and would suffer without regular watering. In the last few years he had found it more and more difficult to put plants in the ground. It was too wrenching when the roots of a chocolate persimmon or a Tiger-striped fig were devoured by gophers.

For more than a quarter of a century Ryan had been battling the gophers. Before the drought, some of his neighbors would flood their orchards and wait with a twenty-two for the gophers to emerge. But Ryan, largely to his relief, was a poor shot. Gopher traps were another option, yet he detested prying loose the mangled animals. Instead he used to shove bleach-soaked rags into the burrows. The resultant chlorine gas, heavier than air, sank into the tunnels just as it had into the trenches of World War I, but the gophers always managed to be elsewhere. Finally he built perches for hawks, nesting boxes for barn owls, and filled his place with cats. These animals reduced the gopher population somewhat, but road noise made the raptors nervous, and the cats would just as soon kill a jay or a lizard.

Years ago he had stopped using the obvious alternative, gopher bait, when he'd discovered it worked by causing internal bleeding: when cut anywhere gophers quickly bled to death, due to their peculiar inability to coagulate. Nonetheless, despite his distaste for such barbaric methods, he always engaged the roots of those trees he did plant out in wire and broken glass. It seemed fairer to use a visible device, as though that made the animals somehow responsible for their own demise.

Still, most of his trees from the last few years remained in their twenty gallon containers in and around the greenhouse. The roots of

the older ones had grown through the drainage holes and into the ground, so that he couldn't have moved them even if he'd wanted. His son Carl had offered to trap the gophers for him, and help him transplant the trees, but Ryan had declined. He didn't like other people handling his plants.

As Ryan continued his daily inspection he noticed the watering can, full of rusty nails, hunkering beneath the potting table. This was his former method for providing plants with iron. Two years ago his citrus trees had begun to yellow. He had given nitrogen supplements but the yellowing had continued, proceeding from the outer edges inward, until eventually each leaf looked as if it had been backlit, for educational purposes, to reveal its innards.

Once he had researched and diagnosed the problem and devised the nail treatment, the plants had responded slowly but steadily. Shortly after that, Ryan had begun to urinate blood, which in its early, diluted stages had resembled the rusty water. He remembered when it had first occurred to him to cure his plants with himself. As he stood urinating a bright red he had thought of the Masai, tenderly slitting the throats of their cattle to drink the blood, but never taking so much that it would harm the animal. Midstream, Ryan had seized the empty plastic trashcan beneath the sink, finished urinating into it, and hurried to the greenhouse. The citrus' recovery had been remarkable, and he had preemptively treated all the plants. It was hardly a practice, however, that he could recommend to others in the Society of Rare Fruit Growers.

Ryan himself had refused all treatment. Had his wife Elizabeth still been alive he liked to think she would've understood, though he suspected that if she were there he might've agreed to the radiation and chemotherapy. They had understood their responsibility to keep each other company. As she was dying on the floor of the living room nearly three years ago he had reminded her of this obligation, but over the clamorous pain of her failing heart she had seemed unable to hear him.

The urine was still warm and Ryan rolled the jar between his palms. He glanced about him but everywhere the plants appeared vigorous and shining. They had never, in fact, looked better. Perhaps they would indeed live beyond him. He unscrewed the cap and emptied his urine into the bitter melon. By administering regular jolts of fertilizer he hoped to coax it into ignoring the shortening days.

Elizabeth would have enjoyed these months he now had to prepare for his departure, but often Ryan couldn't think of what to say to his children and grandson. *Espalier cherimoyas; prune back ninety percent of a grape's new growth; never reverse the twining direction of a vine or you will kill it.* These were the things he would pass on, but of what use were they to anyone save himself? Neither Carl nor Jenny had a garden and it seemed sadly true to Ryan that children came to avoid, if not despise, what the parents loved.

Such had not been the case with him. His parents had run a nursery and his grandfather had grown prize-winning roses. Ryan remembered the afternoons of his youth, concocting potting mixes and meandering through aisles with a long-necked watering can. The whole family had hands cracked and lined with dirt, and there was no shame in it. His father had suffered later with arthritis but Ryan had escaped such a torture.

It was from his father that Ryan had learned to prune, which to this day remained one of his favorite tasks. Pruning offered a pleasure not possible, though often anticipated, with children: the ability to control the form and direction of growth, to maximize beauty and production. The rules of pruning were essentially logical: remove dead, diseased, and disoriented branches. Ryan liked to think his behavior, in fact his very soul, had been improved by his work with plants, but on morose days he thought it didn't matter. Plants were only that, and had nothing to do with the sorrier, sadder actions of humans.

Ryan spotted a branch on the Fuji apple beginning to grow toward the middle of the tree. Pulling clippers from a sheath at his waist, he cut the stray shoot back. His father had tended to prune in the central leader design, emphasizing a strong main trunk. This method produced rugged trees which bore respectable crops and withstood fierce winds. By the time Ryan taught his own children to prune, he had become partial to the open center, or vase shape, which allowed light to reach the inside of the tree and ripen the fruit on the lower branches, and thus distributed the weight of the crop. A savage storm could wipe it out entirely, but the harvest was usually greater. Ryan's preference was not, however, strictly utilitarian. To stand beneath one of these trees in the early spring was to stand within a luminescent, overwhelmingly fragrant sphere of green. He would remain there for minutes at a time—inhaling deeply, his eyes wide—as though he'd been suddenly and recently frightened.

His father had also instructed him in rudimentary grafting, which Ryan now considered his true art. Although he had been an architect for over forty years, the delicate joining of one tree to another was his highest calling. The idea of it captivated him as much as the action: to force—or rather to compel, coerce, convince—one thing to grow into another, taking the benefits of each to create something better. Grafting operated on the principle that what tasted sweet to humans was generally weak, but that what tasted acrid could endure a great deal; thus the former became the scion, the latter the rootstock.

Ryan checked the soil moisture of a tree which bore plums, peaches, nectarines and apricots. He had compiled it years ago for Elizabeth, and although the grafting marks had steadily diminished, he knew they would never disappear entirely. Ryan encircled one of the scars with his thumb and forefinger. He could think of no equivalent to grafting in the human species. Children were, if anything, fruit, not grafts. In his younger years he might have believed love, perhaps even marriage, provided such an opportunity for union, but without bitterness he now knew this not to be true. He and Elizabeth had been during their best times capable of growing side by side, but there had never been any question of their being the same tree.

* * *

Ryan, after fortifying every plant with his iron-rich urine, had finally gone to a doctor. He had been diagnosed with bladder cancer, which Dr. Stihl said was greatly advanced and probably in his prostate as well. Dr. Stihl wanted to remove his bladder—or “the bladder,” as he referred to it, as though it were merely some hypothetical organ, not belonging to anyone in particular—which he would reconstruct six months later from a piece of Ryan’s intestine. In the meantime, however, Ryan would have an external bag instead, an indignity which he did not care to suffer. He thought of the last years of his mother’s life, during which she had been constantly catheterized, although fortunately in her senility she had seemed never to fully grasp that fact. Sometimes she emptied the bag, with what he found a remarkable amount of self-possession, into the bushes outside the back door, where in previous years she had disposed of the grease from the Thanksgiving turkey pan. At other times she paced about her living room, heedlessly dragging the clear sack of urine behind her. When it snagged on a corner

or sofa leg she would turn to him and inquire, “What’s that, Dear?” as though she had never seen it before.

On the ultrasound screen he and Dr. Stihl had viewed his tumor, which appeared, if Ryan remembered correctly from pictures his daughter had shown him, to be approximately the size of sixteen weeks’ gestation. He had recalled the time some six years before when Jenny had exhibited for her parents the ultrasound photo of what would soon be their first grandchild. The incident made Ryan vaguely uncomfortable, almost as if he were present at his daughter’s pelvic exam, rather than merely viewing its results. The ultrasound image, murky and meaningless to him, caused Jenny to point excitedly at different blurs, saying here lay the head, there curled a leg. Ryan recognized nothing, but had pretended otherwise, as he knew was expected of him. Elizabeth had crowed and patted her daughter’s stomach dotingly. Ryan distinctly remembered how the presence of infants, in utero or otherwise, made women into entirely different creatures.

“I asked them not to tell me what it is,” Jenny had said. He had realized that Jenny was talking about the gender of the child, but it took him a minute to shake the sense that what they were really pondering was the very nature—monster, inanimate, human?—of the thing inside her.

Last week Ryan had had Jenny and Carl over for dinner and told them about his illness, and that he had declined treatment. He wanted to give them the opportunity their mother could not, of becoming accustomed to the idea of his death. In truth though he doubted that that would help much. You could attempt to acclimatize a tree—through exposing it to ultraviolet rays, wind, and harsher temperatures prior to planting it out—but still there was always a shock. He thought it only fair, however, to let his children know he was dying, to give them at least the possibility of preparedness.

Jenny had immediately set her coffee down, mid-swallow, and asked how far along the cancer was. Ryan had noticed her terminology, “how far along,” and been tempted to use his own analogy of fetuses, but thought she might find it offensive. He had simply lifted his hands and held up an invisible globe, about the size of a grapefruit. His children had sat there stunned, as if, like a magician, Ryan had suddenly produced a rabbit or a dove from the empty air between his palms.

“How long have you known about this?” Jenny spoke in a cold, al-

most haughty tone. The stiff tilt of her head was, he recognized, his own mannerism, though it was mitigated by her soft curls.

"Since the doctor's a few weeks ago."

"I can't believe you could have something that big inside you and not know it until now," she said, pushing away from the table.

Ryan reddened and sat back in his chair.

"Jenny," Carl said.

"I just want to know what's really happening," she said impatiently to Carl. "I'm not going to sit here politely while he," she faced her father again, "while you die."

"He's not doing it on purpose," Carl said, placing his large hands flat on the table, as if to steady it.

"Thank you, Carl," Ryan said, regretting it when he saw Jenny's expression.

"How can you not even attempt a cure? Don't you care enough about us to try?" she asked.

"It's not about that," Ryan said.

"It's his decision, Jen," Carl said.

"That is crap. All our lives he's taught us to fight and achieve and keep the family together and now he's tossing in the towel, just like that. What if Mother were alive?"

"She's not," Ryan said, aggravated.

"Is that it?"

"There is no 'it.'"

"What if me or Carl were sick?"

Ryan flinched at the idea, as well as at her incorrect grammar.

"Carl or I," she amended sarcastically, with her usual ability to sense his silent rebukes. "Would you let us do what you're doing?"

"That's different. You're both young, and you have a child."

"So do you, need I remind you, two of them, not to mention a grandson. But what if Carl were peeing blood and had a tumor the size of a baseball in his gut?"

Carl winced and said, "Stop it, Jen." Carl's big-boned body appeared suddenly fragile to Ryan, as it had not since his son had outgrown him years ago.

Jenny ignored Carl and leaned toward her father. "Would you resist if he didn't want help?"

Ryan stared at her. "That wouldn't happen."

"Or Todd," Jenny persisted, although Ryan could see it pained her

to speculate about her son this way. But she swallowed and persevered. "What if Todd were sick and something could be done medically but Kevin and I refused? Wouldn't you fight us?"

Ryan looked at her for a long moment. She was right, of course, and also wrong—he would fight them in such an instance, but she and her husband would never refuse treatment for their child. But it didn't matter; that wasn't what she was getting at, anyway. "Yes," he admitted finally. "But it's not the same thing."

"He's right, Jenny," Carl whispered. Ryan had a sudden absurd wish that his son too would plead with him to fight for his life—that indeed Carl would fight with him, for him. But it had always been Jenny who fought him.

"I don't care if he's right. There is no right, he has no right. He can't do this." She removed her glasses and rubbed her temples, then snapped her head up to glare at him. "How long have you known?" she demanded, replacing her glasses.

Ryan took a deep breath. "About two years."

"Two years?" Carl repeated. "Dad, how could you?"

"I knew it," Jenny whispered, staring at Ryan as though he were very far away and she could just barely make him out. "I knew it."

* * *

Although Ryan was an architect, he had not built his own house. He and Elizabeth preferred old houses, and throughout his career he would never escape a sense of longing for dumbwaiters and widow's walks. He could have incorporated these things into plans, but he considered them sullied by quaintness when installed just for effect, rather than use. The houses he designed were ruthlessly modern and Californian: hot tubs on patios overlooking the Pacific; living rooms with ceilings two stories high.

Instead he had designed his greenhouse, which was attached to the southern side of their 1890s farmhouse. He had bought and dismantled an old Victorian greenhouse and reconstructed it himself into a large octagon, with a high arched ceiling. In the center lay an octagonal pool full of goldfish, lily pads, lotus flowers, and water caltrops. Ryan had introduced frogs, ostensibly for insect control, and they sang loudly and often. In the cold months he regulated the temperature so that any surplus hot air blew through the house, filling the

rooms with the scent of orange blossoms or jasmine; the latter he had convinced to bloom almost year round. In the summer he opened ceiling vents during the days and closed them at dusk.

He and Elizabeth had moved here thirty years ago, when Jenny was a baby. Ideally, Ryan would have preferred one of the warmer climates available in the area. But they had fallen in love with the house and the land, bordered on one side by a creek and another by woods, and subsequently Ryan had made allowances for the fact that it was in Zone Fifteen.

According to the *Sunset Western Garden Book's* categorization of climates, he lived in one entitled, "North Coast Cold Winters." Ryan's particular frosty winters were due to the fact that his house was situated in a small valley, for cold air, like chlorine gas, sank. Such winters prevented him from growing (beyond his greenhouse) cherimoyas, jacarandas and tamarinds, to name but a few. Many of the subtropicals—Hass avocados, Natal plums—fruited poorly, if at all. The weather of this zone, the book said, was influenced by the ocean eighty-five per cent of the time, and by inland currents the remaining fifteen. Ryan wondered how such percentages could have been accurately arrived at by the book's authors, but still it pleased him to be so affected by the unseen Pacific. When close enough to hear and smell it, you entered Zone Seventeen. Freezes hardly ever occurred there, but the fog made it impossible to grow those plants most captivating to Ryan.

Zone Sixteen, on the other hand, had an ideal subtropical growing climate. These choice locales had warmer winters because they lay in thermal belts, along slopes from which cold air drained. Ryan was, in fact, surrounded by Zone Sixteen—they existed in the protected forests, on low ridges, and on southern and western facing hill-sides. When he drove to town he could spot the pockets of Zone Sixteen by the fruiting avocados, and the nasturtiums flowering in the midst of winter.

If the renderings of the great masters were any indication, then Eden lay in Zone Sixteen. Paradise was not, despite the nudity of its inhabitants, in the tropics. Not with apples, anyway, which require a certain number of chill hours in order to set fruit. Recently horticulturists had attempted to develop hybrids which bore in tropical climates, but Ryan didn't see the appeal. Who would want a second-rate apple when you could eat instead a mango, a starfruit, a durian?

But here in Zone Fifteen the apples were superb, and he knew he would live to see them all harvested. Since he had broken the news to Jenny and Carl, Ryan had found himself wishing his dying would either speed up or slow down. He preferred to die at a time when the demise of the natural world would not so achingly symbolize his own. He suspected though that his wish resembled the actions of a suicide, who leaves the faucet running or radio on to assure himself that the world will continue beyond him.

It would be best to die soon, during the height of autumn—the big leaf maples aflame, and clusters of stubby berries hanging high in the madrone's muscular limbs. Or maybe he could last until the early spring's onslaught of rain, when the bulbs began their determined ascent into air. But Ryan knew he would die in the winter, when the woods had filled with orange-bellied newts and the grey whales glided past the misty headlands on their way to Mexico.

Elizabeth had died in late January, a month after the worst freeze California had seen in decades. Catastrophe did not distinguish between zones. That December the citrus groves to the south glistened enchantingly with ice, entire crops and orchards destroyed. When the storm cleared he and Elizabeth had hiked to a nearby ridge. Even the puddles along the trail had frozen, whereas usually the forest insulated itself. Loma Prieta, for the first time in years, was covered with snow, while below them Monterey Bay arced impassively.

Before the freeze Ryan had spent hours watering everything deeply, due to the extraordinarily low humidity, and a dewpoint forecast for a frightening fourteen degrees: dryness and cold, he knew was the deadliest combination. Then with blankets and sheets of plastic, he'd covered young trees and subtropicals that couldn't take less than twenty-five degrees. When he'd returned to the house, scratched and shivering, Elizabeth had been exasperated. "Why don't you grow things that belong here, that can survive this?" she'd said. This was an old fight, akin to the one that began, "You spend more time with your trees than with your children." What could he reply? But she hadn't given him the chance to answer. "You act as though you believe we live in Hawaii, or you wish we did," she'd said, which was of course ridiculous. They both knew that much of his pleasure came from cultivating plants that were meant to grow elsewhere.

Despite his efforts, however, many of the plants hadn't survived. The temperature had plummeted to seventeen. But the duration of the

cold was what did the most damage, and it had lasted three days. He and Elizabeth walked about the property afterwards, examining each tree and shrub. Tender grafts had died down to the rootstocks, and the blood orange, chilean guavas, passion fruit and white sapotes, and most of the younger trees, had died altogether.

Elizabeth was furious in the face of such loss, while Ryan simply felt dazed. Although it was devastating to have so many of his carefully tended plants die, at least it had not been by his hand. He comforted himself by imagining what he would plant next, what mistakes he had made over the last twenty-five years that now, with his greater experience, not to mention the time he had since retiring, he could rectify. In the next week he had ordered five times his usual amount from nurseries, and sketched numerous planting designs. He decided to redo the whole property. He planned wind breaks, understories, heat-retaining walls, arbors, trellises, and a walled garden in which they could have their morning tea.

Then Elizabeth had died. And the trees had come in, from all over the country, singly or in groups and pairs, their bare roots wrapped, somehow pathetically, in burlap. It was all he could do just to pot them. The greenhouse, already crowded with trees he should have transplanted, became even more jungly.

For a while he was incensed with Elizabeth. Not only had she removed herself, but by doing so she had also taken from him the one thing, besides his family, that he loved: his gardening. That spring he did no grafting, and his pruning was half-hearted and sloppy. The crops were poor by his standards but his children did not complain, although he knew they noticed.

Elizabeth had always planted a large, year-round vegetable garden, as well as flowers here and there. They had joked about the fact that for the most part he did the perennials, she the annuals: that he aimed to keep things alive and thriving, whereas she liked to watch them be born, year after year. He pored over horticultural books and magazines, seed and tree catalogues, diligently researching any intriguing cultivar or variety. She, on the other hand, simply planted what she wanted to eat or see bloom.

Many of the flowers that spring—because they were perennials, biennials, or bulbs, or annuals which had dropped seed the previous year—blossomed of their own accord. But the tulips and foxgloves filled Ryan with melancholy rather than delight, just as the weather

did: that relentless California sunshine that before had been such a blessing, but which now seemed an impossible mandate of happiness. The winter cover crops of fava beans and red clover overtook the vegetable garden, but because Elizabeth had planted them Ryan could not bring himself to turn them under. Some lettuce, squash, and brassicas had self-sown, but many were hybrids and thus did not come true to seed. For the first time in twenty years Ryan had to buy vegetables and fruit.

At the market one late summer morning two years ago he had looked morosely down into his cart. It contained last year's mushy apples (in lieu of his own early, crisp Gravensteins) and tasteless oranges that had, for no good reason, come all the way from Florida. Ryan abruptly considered moving, taking a trip, getting a flat in San Francisco, maybe even accepting Jenny's offer of her garage apartment. But what then would he do with his plants? Whenever he entered the greenhouse they crowded around him, drooping demandingly. The banana and papaya trees pushed impudently into the ceiling. A fig in the corner that he'd failed to water properly had one day in revenge dropped every single one of its hard and green and still inedible fruits. In the orchard a peach he'd neglected to prune was gradually dying, due to limbs so burdened with fruit that they'd broken off and torn the tree in two, exposing its now infected center.

He couldn't exactly just up and leave. The thought of returning months later to a hothouse full of brown stalks, where once there's been lush greens and blooms, was too much to bear. Besides, he didn't really want to go anywhere else. He wanted to be at home, gardening, with Elizabeth. The latter was of course impossible but the former was not.

When he returned from the market he went into the greenhouse and saw for the first time in months the clear and righteous indignation of the plants, who had come to him on good faith and not expected such surly treatment. From that moment on he pledged to care for them. The next month he urinated blood for the first time. He had felt oddly relieved. He thought then that he could manage to live until he would die. He felt, not without irony, that new lease on life that the anticipation of death had long been purported to bring. He decided not to go to the doctor, or tell his children, or do anything about it at all. Instead he watered his plants attentively, even transplanted a few out of their pots, and rotated those in the greenhouse which were

becoming lopsided from growing towards the light. He meandered through the orchard, running his hand along the various smooth and ridged and knotted trunks. As the autumn progressed and the cold came on he fertilized, he pruned, and again, in the spring, he grafted.

* * *

To Todd's delight his grandfather drew his pruning shears from their sheath like a revolver from a holster, pointed them at Todd and made a shooting sound. Todd laughed his high, spiraling laugh and formed a gun with his fingers, which he fired repeatedly into Ryan's torso.

"You're dead, Grampa," he said, with his most wicked grimace. Ryan smiled nervously, as much at his grandson's face as at his daughter's obvious discomfort. This was only the second time he'd seen her since giving her the news.

"You're not supposed to smile. You're supposed to be scared," Todd instructed. Ryan adjusted his expression accordingly.

"Don't tell Grampa what to do," interrupted Jenny.

"You tell me what to do," Todd complained.

"I'm your mother, hush up." She looked directly at Ryan. "How are you?"

Ryan felt a twinge of annoyance. Such a question, innocent enough two weeks ago, now had the irritating weight of hidden meaning.

"The Brown Turkeys are coming in," he said, in lieu of a reply. He'd discovered that one advantage of age was that people let you—in fact almost expected you to—digress, be absent-minded, lose track of the direction of conversation. Jenny, however, wasn't fooled.

"I want to see the turkeys," Todd said.

"They're figs, honey," Jenny explained. "They're called that because they're the color of turkeys."

"Oh," Todd said, obviously disappointed.

"But we can pick them." Ryan knew this would cheer Todd. He had learned years ago that children always enjoyed gathering their own food, which most adults quickly tired of. But give Todd a basket and he could harvest happily until he'd claimed every visible fruit or nut.

"Now?" Todd asked.

Ryan looked at Jenny but she made no sign either way. She was, he saw, still upset with him. But he was determined not to be swayed by her. "Sure," he said. "I'll get you a basket."

In the pantry hung the many baskets that Elizabeth had collected over the years. Ryan selected one with a wide base, which Todd could not easily overturn.

They walked out to the orchard which spread over the western portion of Ryan's ten acres. The morning shone clear and fogless. Three hawks circled in the warm air currents above the nearby woods, before settling atop an old Doug fir.

"The soft dark brown ones are what you want," Ryan told Todd when they reached the fig, which he'd planted years ago at the top of the south-facing slope. The high white wall behind the tree reflected and thus increased the light and heat, making for sweet, prolific fruit.

"I know," Todd replied indignantly. Lately he had refused to admit any ignorance, an instinct Ryan could sympathize with, though it amused him.

"And leave the ones with ants," his mother said.

"I know that."

"There's nothing he doesn't know," Jenny said with an exasperated sigh. Todd ignored her, bending earnestly to his task. Ryan thought Jenny oughtn't to tease Todd so much, although he would never say that to her. But he didn't need to; she could always sense his disapproval, just as, now, he could hers.

Ryan remembered Jenny at Todd's age, tow-headed and stubby-legged. That was only a few years after they'd moved here, but time enough for him to prune the ancient fruit trees in the abandoned orchard, remove the dead ones, plant new ones. He recalled the August morning in 1965, harvesting pears with Jenny while Elizabeth, hugely pregnant with Carl and unable to bend over, had sat in a chair nearby, wearing a wide-brimmed hat. After a while Elizabeth had risen ponderously and reached into the laden branches to remove a bulbous, perfect pear. As she bit into it her water broke. Jenny had burst into peals of nervous laughter, believing her mother had wet her pants.

Ryan recalled, with some chagrin, that he had immediately thought that the amniotic fluid would make an excellent fertilizer. The following year, however, overcome with family and work, he'd forgotten to compare that tree to the others, and now he couldn't even be sure which pear it had been. He could still see Elizabeth clearly, though—her strange, massive body radiant in the sunlight, but her face shaded entirely by the hat as she gazed down at the darkening ground,

the first water that soil had seen for months. In her hand she continued to grip the pale yellow pear, its white flesh striated evenly by her teeth, while her other hand rested protectively on her belly.

"Dad," said Jenny, lowering her voice slightly in deference to Todd's talent for homing in on the crucial parts of conversations. He would appear to be still immersed in play, but he would ask, without even deigning to lift his head, "What's a tumor?" or "Where is Grampa's wife?" or simply repeat words or phrases: mortgage, tremor, international terrorism.

"I'm fine, Jen," Ryan said preemptively. "Let's not talk about it today."

"Talk about what?" Todd inquired.

"Nothing," Jenny said. "Something between me and Grampa."

"What, Grampa?"

"I'll tell you another time," Ryan said, feeling a sudden lurch of sadness. How could he have forgotten he would need to tell Todd? "You find all the figs yet?" he asked. Todd shook his head and got on all fours to continue searching.

"We can't just not talk about it. Admit that much," Jenny said. "Are you feeling any worse?"

"No." Ryan bent to the ground to salvage a perfect fig, miraculously not yet invaded by insects. Pain shot through his abdomen and it took all his concentration not to wince. He could no longer bend straight over like that, a recent development. Beyond the constant tenderness in his belly, and the deep ache when he relieved himself, he had experienced little pain, although the doctor repeatedly assured and indeed threatened him that soon this would not be the case.

"You're being selfish," Jenny said to Ryan as she watched her son squish figs between his fingers. "Think of Todd," she hissed.

Ryan saw Todd's head move almost imperceptibly in their direction. "I am thinking of Todd. Aren't I, Todd?"

Todd looked up and grinned. He had been caught eavesdropping but no one had said anything about the smashed figs. "Yes, you're thinking of Todd," he said gleefully.

"Me," Jenny said, correcting him automatically. Then she turned to her father. "You're not thinking of me." She spoke plaintively, like Todd did when he wanted something. "Or Carl."

"Will Uncle Carl take me swimming today?" Todd was briefly at-

tentive, until he spotted a yellow jacket hovering around his gooey fingers and made a swipe at it.

"Don't swat. You'll just annoy it," Jenny said.

"But it's annoying me."

"That's because of the figs you squashed," she returned. "Go rinse your hands off."

Todd stood, his sticky hands extended before him, and ran downhill to the faucet, where Ryan knew he would spray water everywhere until told to turn it off.

"Alone at last," Ryan said wryly.

"Dad, please," Jenny pleaded.

"Of course I'm thinking of you," Ryan said. "I'm thinking of all of you. Do you think it would be better for me to draw it out?"

"Mother would be furious."

"I don't think it's up to you to decide how your mother would or wouldn't feel." Ryan was often irked by his daughter's assumption of his dead wife's opinions, as though Jenny had been appointed her mother's proxy. "There's no way for any of us to be sure how she would've reacted." Ryan too assumed he knew what Elizabeth would think, but after all he had known her for over forty years; she had been his wife. Surely a spouse saw more than just certain aspects of a person, which parents and children, no matter their age, seemed bound to do.

"Next thing you'll be telling us you've found God," Jenny said with a slight sneer.

"I should think you'd be happy for me." Ryan got a small thrill from her expression, which was, he noted, nearly more shocked than when he'd told her that he was dying. He bit into the fig and chewed meditatively for a moment. "Should I be so lucky," he added.

"Jesus," she said, grinning suddenly, "you gave me a fright."

Below them Todd squirted the slats of a fence. "We'd better go before he drains my well," Ryan said. He glanced at the basket by his feet. How to pick it up? If he squatted he could avoid aggravating his belly, but squatting might make Jenny suspicious. He set his jaw before bending carefully to retrieve the figs.

When he straightened he saw on his daughter's face her certain knowledge of his pain, and he recalled vividly the particular anguish of watching those you love suffer. How could he have overlooked the fact that he would cause that sensation in his children? Over and over

again he would have to witness its mark on their faces, as clearly as if he had slapped them and left bruises. Unless, of course, they learned to conceal it. Perhaps he should not have told them of his illness. For a moment he wanted to give into Jenny's pleas for treatment, as if that temporary, torturous delay would change her expression rather than merely suspend it.

Unwillingly he remembered Elizabeth's body on the rug, how after she was still he had painstakingly straightened and smoothed out her pale limbs. While doing so he had recalled a winter evening years before when, after a day spent pruning his fruit trees, he had made urgent love to her. Sprawled beneath him she had stroked his cheek and murmured, "The horticulturist espaliers his wife." That memory, and his daughter's expression now, caused in Ryan such acute pain that he wondered if he were dying right then, until he realized that the pain resided not in its customary location in his gut, but radiated instead throughout his entire body—that indeed what he felt was love so suffused with sorrow and loss that he could not distinguish between them.

"I'll get that, Daddy," Jenny said, coming forward suddenly, reaching for the basket.

"I'm still strong enough," Ryan joked feebly, intending to be affably self-deprecating, for as a man with a slight build he'd never been particularly strong. But seeing Jenny's stricken face he knew that she had misunderstood. She thought he had admitted to already being weaker, but that he could still manage to lift a few measly pounds of figs. He'd have set her straight, except that sooner or later her mistake would be true.

With her fingers wrapped around the handle, he knew she simply wanted to help him, but that was something he'd never been much good at accepting. He tightened his grip. Her hand dropped forlornly then to her side and she moved away, leaving him feeling not just foolish but selfish, for what else remained for him to give her?

"Here," he said, abruptly extending his arm. "Thanks."

Jenny didn't move. She looked down into the basket, where the leaves, insects, soil, twigs, and both good and rotten fruit lay jumbled together.

"He hasn't hit the discriminating stage yet, has he?" Ryan asked, smiling. "It's all still fascinating." He swung the basket slightly between

them. "Go on," he said softly, coaxing, the way he'd spoken to her when, as a child, she'd been frightened. "You take it."

Todd gave a sudden whoop, startling them. Jenny took the basket from her father's hand. "Mommy, Grampa, look at me," Todd shouted. Together they turned to watch him. He pointed the hose skyward, then stepped beneath the water and tilted his face up joyfully, gratefully, in a perfect imitation of a farmer, after a long dry spell, at last receiving rain.