

Yellow continued

because I liked to think of you wrapped in my sweater and when you offered to return it I thought you could keep it if you wanted to — Sarah upset because I'd given you a sweater she'd given to me and I protested that the only gift worth giving is a gift you don't want to give, a sacrificial gift, and that's true but I wasn't really thinking about sacrifices at all.

Years ago David often woke early in the morning to study the Scriptures and the commentaries — Anderson on Old Testament history, Henry on theology, Stott on Christian social awareness. Study and prayer, though he was never a good pray-er. Never quite overcome the feeling of talking to himself, or worse, of adopting a pose. Some of the brothers and sisters hinted at hours of kneeling with clenched fists breaking down the doorway to God. That was part of the problem, too. David could never understand why God was so willfully deaf, why he had to be reminded and badgered and shouted at. When Brother Eleazar got wound up in testimony meeting, you'd think he was arguing with his old horse, the way he roared and cried, the teenagers at the back snickering and the pastor nodding his head in tired patience, and God with his head buried under a pillow.

Now David wakes early in the morning to collect the eggs and feed the chickens and pigs. He doesn't read much about God anymore and he's given up most talking, talks mostly to the pigs. But God is still there. And David knows it. That's another thing about God that really bothers David. He won't go away. Not even after the whole mess blew and David was asked to resign or be resigned and Sarah couldn't cope anymore and David watched her and the kids drive away and the kids staring out the back window like two white circles of fire from the earth's center and David finally cried, the only time he took off the mask of rock wrapped around his shoulders and cried and the tears were cold and froze his face like pricks of fire and he swore he'd never cry again.

David is climbing the hill behind the house, the path a thin, twisting line through the trees. He likes to walk through the cool mottled shadows. He's carrying a bucket of potatoes for the pigs. Some of the men in Miles Cove feed their pigs with fish and claim that the pork doesn't have a fishy taste, but David read a few books on raising pigs and his are fed on nothing but vegetables and fruit and grain. The feed is Sarah's idea. She thought the children would like pigs. So, David bought six piglets and some chickens and geese and a few turkeys and built a small shed. He didn't want to clear any more land

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near the house. He liked the sense of the trees gradually coming together again like flesh and skin growing a wound together. So he built the shed further up the hill.

Even before Sarah left David had grown tired of getting up early in the morning to feed the animals. The children had never really cared much for them anyway. Adam was about two when a goose chased him, and Virginia (even at eight) was too busy with school and piano and Crusaders and running for the majority of Miles Cove to have time for pigs and geese. She wanted ducks and sheep and David had given up trying to explain that ducks needed a little pond and sheep needed grass. To frustrate him even more, Virginia wouldn't let any of the animals be killed. So, they all grew old and fat, a rather posh retirement home.

After Sarah left David renamed the pigs. The big boar was now Pleaman, after his principal. "Here you are you goddamn bastard." David throws a potato at Pleaman, asleep in a corner of the pen, dried mud, almost a concrete shield. Pleaman doesn't move — at three hundred pounds it is easier to sleep than move. David throws another potato and misses the pig. The same way he missed Pleaman. Swinging his fist up from his

side aiming for Pleaman's face, a hard furious swing, weeks of sleepless nights and bad words and shadow-boxing, all condensed in one iron-fist, swinging up, a red star shining in the firmament, and Pleaman moved his face and David's fist kept on swinging into the wall, and Harold and Gerry grabbed him so he wouldn't try it again and all he could do was squeak with the pain of his broken fingers. David throws another potato and misses again.

The anger is never far away. Jesus said to love your enemy. He just forgot to explain how. That was the problem. How do you love a man who drums up support in the church and town to have you kicked out of your job and you haven't done anything except love and talk about love?

Caitlin, where are you? I am dying and I am terribly afraid and terribly ashamed. It seems years since I last saw you and I am not even sure that you still are. Perhaps dead — or doll-like — ossified trace of a princess who wept stars of their God-appointed places in the heavens. Are you growing in joy? No longer wrapped in the confusion of your mad youth, smiling socially and socially happy? Have you sold your soul? Clothed

You love her for her words. My God, you two are redefining oral sex.

that raw, throbbing soul in bright cotton and sold it on a block in the marketplace where slave-souls are sold? I hope not. If you have, you are more dead than I am.

In the week-years since I last saw you I have gained fifteen pounds and the assurance (really a confirmation of your twenty-year-old faith) that the universe is an inadvertent mistake and God a botched cover-up. How long and hard I rejected your said-blue steel-blue heaven — impenetrable — reflecting the music and words of the viewer, insisted with my head and later my heart, and finally my tongue (even though I knew by then I'd lost) that somewhere there was a planet and on that planet a little prince and a sheep and a yellow rose — a yellow rose still unatean. And I was wrong and I was wrong, and without rightness I cannot breathe wrongness, and with only wrongness to breathe, I will stop breathing. And goddamn you if you are laughing while I weep.

Pastor Winsor is standing near the log house looking at the harbour. He turns when he hears David poking through the trees. "Hello, David," David nods his head. He has always cared a great deal for Pastor Winsor, has enjoyed his goodness and intelligence. But Pastor Winsor chaired the meeting which investigated the charges against David and recommended his resignation, and one of David's pigs is now named the Pastor.

"Elsie says you haven't been down to pick up your mail for over a week. I thought I'd bring it up. A letter from Sarah here."

David takes the mail, mumbles "thanks", and moves toward the house.

"I know you hurt, David. You hurt — I feel — at least a little. Whole nights I've stayed up thinking about you, asking God for the right words. And week after week there don't seem to be any words. But maybe we can find some words together." David once loved Pastor Winsor, loved to sit in his study wrestling with the prophets, especially the poetic ones like Isaiah and John, caught up in the unspeakable mystery of God's ways, two brothers climbing tall trees for glimpses into heaven. But that was a long time ago. "I want you to come with me — out on the water — tomorrow."

The letter from Sarah is in a white envelope. When she was happy she frequently bought pale blue-green-pink cards and envelopes and wrote little messages promising kisses and hugs and sexual pleasures invented by Confucian monks and never revealed for fear ordinary men would get hernias. Now her letters came in white envelopes and inform David about the children's eating and sleeping and health. Sarah never asks about David or about his plans. In their last fight together in late June Sarah had said all she intended to say. The next move is David's. But David isn't moving — an aneurism has left him comatose.

Sarah had asked, "Are you in love with Caitlin?" David hates questions that demand a succinct "yes" or "no". His own speech is usually filled with qualifiers and conditions and reasons. His father always said he talked too much. His mother said he was bright. David dances around "yes" or "no" because he is afraid of their finality, their claim to truth. His favorite word is "but" (the Stuttering Bud, Harry calls him).

"Yes, but —"

"Are you sleeping with Caitlin?" David grins. Sleeping with Caitlin is not likely since she's always talking and moiving — Sarah once said that like a shark Caitlin would die if she ever stopped moving. "No, but —"

"Yes, but — No, but — You're in love but it's not sexual. Like I suspected. I don't have to worry about physical love, do I, David? You're in love with Caitlin, not for her skinny body or basset hound eyes. You love her for her words. My God, you two are redefining oral sex. You're lustful after that twenty-year-old delinquent because she talks crazy words and you love crazy words."

David isn't grinning now. Since he was sixteen David had loved Sarah because she was sane, and growing up in a crazy house on the side of a crazy hill he was like an fruit seeing the first purple crocus of spring after winter whiteness — stunned, crazy-blind at first, the whole world reconstructed in one purple crocus, one pretty woman filled with joy and innocence and sense, and David taught himself to revolve around his new-found sun and the orbit had the semblance of sanity, but after a million years of revolving David woke in the night choking on his phlegm, drowning in saliva and mucus, and crying with the emptiness of turning in a fixed circle like a hamster in a plastic wheel.

"Yes, but —"

"It's not fair, David. You're mine. I love you. I know I don't own you. I don't want to own you. I want you to be happy. But, David, I don't want to lose you either. If you've got to have Caitlin, then have Caitlin. But know what you're doing, David. Caitlin is like a meteorite. She'll burn herself up and every-

Strangers continued

related in a round-about fashion, so there's a family resemblance of sorts. Except that Clancy's always laughing and making jokes and he owns about a hundred goats so you can tell he's a real nice man. No-one with a lick of sense could ever get them mixed up, but when all this happened I never knew hide nor hair of Mort Henry. He used to live in the valley when I was really little, maybe even a baby, but then he moved away for a long time. Spit says he can remember seeing old Mort get into a fight with Clancy Olsen in the middle of a three-legged race at the Farmer's Picnic once, but I don't believe him. You see, old Mort left the valley on account of Clancy Olsen and there's not a man on the face of the planet that Mort Henry hates worse. So why would they ever get their legs tied together?

For a long time, I couldn't figure out how they ever got Mort Henry to be Santa Claus, but Pa says he reckons Elsie Stein probably knows things that would make the devil change his mind. For a long time, old Mort would stop by for coffee when he left in a borrowing mood. When he noticed me at all, it was with the kind of look you'd give a moulty turpin. And I never liked him coming much either, seems as how he caused me the second most traumatic experience I'll likely be called on to live through.

It's not like it's him that's dead, though, it's Clancy Olsen. I keep forgetting it's that way round, even though I think about it a lot. It happened when they were tearing down that old grain elevator in Simpson last fall, and whoever wanted could salvage wood off it. Clancy Olsen fell off a scaffold that wasn't even as high as Finlay's loft that spit and I jumped off for fun, but he broke his arm. My pa wasn't there, but Spit's pa was and so was Mort Henry. And that night Spit's pa came to our house after I was in bed.

I would have been asleep, except that I felt real bad about Clancy Olsen. I wasn't listening to them, though, not really, I was just lying there with the quilt pulled up around my chin, letting the hiss of the lamp and their voices get mingled and blurred in my ears. Every now and then, I could hear a thump on

body else. She lives by no rules but her own and you know, David, she'll never share the rules with anybody else. She'll change the rules every time you think you know them. Do you want me to leave?"

"No, but —"

"No, but? Still the but. Oh, David I can't live with "buts", not after all we've been through. Caitlin is not a "but", she's a woman and you love her. I'm going to Corner Brook for a few weeks."

She and the children went about twenty miles outside Miles Cove that day, but the weather grew stormy and they had to return. And there were other days when she started to leave, but she didn't. Finally everything blew up and David was suspended and Caitlin disappeared and days later phoned

You're addicted to yourself. You want to save the world.

from Ontario to say she was never coming back and that she was convinced there was no yellow rose on a distant planet. And David folded into himself like a raisin till he disappeared, too. And Sarah and the kids were carried away in a storm of dust.

Pastor Winsor's dory rides the choppy waves, rising high into the air and falling with a crack, over and over. Pastor Winsor could slide up the side of each wave and slide down the other side, but he likes tussling with the waves, breaking them up into mist to reflect the sun. Neither of the men spoke. They would have to shout to be heard; the ocean is not a place for words.

Caitlin, I always knew but I didn't want to know. The ocean didn't move at Goodyear's Cove that day — the yellow ice-covered ocean was buried in its own blackness and you asked me if I thought it odd that you

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the table and I knew Spit's pa must have brought some whiskey. But all of a sudden I could hear them plain as day.

"It was terrible. Ben, just terrible," Spit's pa said. "Clancy climbed up on a scaffold that Mort had been working on. He just got there, he didn't mean no harm. But Mort, that old skinklin', he came leaping down from the next level howling like a mad dog. That's my word, he bawled. You stop thiefing my word. Well, shit, Clancy didn't know nothing. But he wasn't going to take that, either, so pretty soon they're both bellowing and shaking their fists like fools."

Spit's pa paused then. I heard the bottle bump against the table and after a minute he went on. "Was only Jim and me with them. We yelled at them to stop, but they didn't pay no mind. And before we could climb up there, old Mort reached out and gave Clancy a push. He only fell about ten feet, too."

My pa said something then, but I couldn't make it out, only what Spit's pa answered back.

"No, just me and Jim saw. And he never said anything, only that it was an accident, that he just fell. No good would have come of it. And there was old Mort standing there like he'd just seen his mother's head cut off. The poor bugger."

And Mr. Jim and Spit's pa never did say anything. Pa told me Jim and me with them. We yelled at them to stop, but they didn't pay no mind. And before we could climb up there, old Mort reached out and gave Clancy a push. He only fell about ten feet, too."

It's too bad you don't live in the valley, Miss Jacobs. Of course, if you did, you wouldn't need to get to know us better. But as it is, I don't need Pa to tell me there's some things about the valley you just couldn't understand. So I'm real sorry but when I write this up in good, I'll have to leave some parts out. I hope you aren't offended.

Spit Finlay said it was the dumbest thing...

by Gladys Blackmore