# The Journey to the Dead

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Living alone after nearly thirty married years, Martin Fredericks was beset with occasional importunities. A college friend of his former wife’s—a jaunty, sturdy comp.-lit. major named Arlene Quint—telephoned him one early-spring day and asked him to drive her to the hospital. He wasn’t sure he understood. “Now?”

“Pretty soon, yeah, if you could.” The plea in her voice was braced by something firm and ceremonious he remembered from college days. “I thought, you have that little car parked out behind your building, and in this city when you call a taxi it takes hours and then they drive like maniacs. I need to be driven gently.”

“You do?”

“Yes, Marty,” she said. “None of your sudden stops and starts.”

They had recently remet, after many years, at a party in an artist’s loft a few blocks away in town; she was less surprised to see him than he her, since she had been in touch with his former wife, Harriet, and knew he had moved in from the suburbs. She, too, lived in town now. She and Sherman Quint—a chem. major—had been divorced for several years. She loved being in the city, and free, Arlene told Fredericks. She looked sallow, and her pulled-back black hair had gone gray in strange distinct bands, but she seemed much as he remembered her, solid and energetic, with a certain air of benign defiance. Like his former wife, she had been a collegiate artsy type, in a pony tail and peasant skirt. Now, still pony-tailed, she sat up on a table swinging her plump legs in sheer happiness, it seemed, at being alive and single and here.

The table was a heavy harvest table that the artist, a small goateed man, worked on; it was peppered with thumbtack holes and covered with accidents of ink and paint. At Arlene’s back hung tacked-up charcoal sketches of idealized male nudes. At her side, space fell away through a big steel-mullioned industrial window onto the lights of the city, amber and platinum and blurred dabs of neon red, stretching far away; the city was not New York but Boston, and nothing in this direction looked higher than their own windows, the streets and brick rows streaming beneath them like the lights of an airport during takeoff. Her happiness glowed through her not quite healthy skin and her legs kept kicking friskily—the drumstick-shaped calves, the little round-toed Capezio flats. Those shoes dated her; Fredericks’ former wife, too, had worn ballerina shoes in all weathers, in rain or snow, as if life at any moment might become a dance.

The crowd at this party seemed young—young would-be artists with ugly punk haircuts, shaved above the ears and tinted in pastel tufts, boys and girls alike, wearing baggy sweaters and getting louder and shriller as they sipped wine from cheap plastic glasses. One boy took a flexible stack of these glasses and pretended to play it like an accordion. Their host’s voice, nasal and gleeful, cut through the noise. Only the host, and his Japanese boy friend, seemed close to Fredericks’ age, and though this troubled him the youthfulness of the gathering seemed to add to Arlene’s happiness, her aimless, kicking happiness like that of a little girl perched up on a high wall. “Hey. I think I’ll, as they say, split,” he said at last to her, in slight parody of her own eager assimilation to this youthful scene. “Want to be walked home?”

Her eyes abruptly focused on him. Shadows beneath them betrayed fatigue. “Oh no, Marty, it’s much too early!” Her voice came out high and as if from far away. Her lips were slow to close back over her teeth, which protruded a bit and were stained like a smoker’s, though she no longer smoked. “You’re sweet, but I can walk alone. This section of town is quite safe.”

He was glad to be rejected; he was involved with another woman and had made the offer in a truly protective spirit, and as an obscure gesture toward his former wife. Because the two girls had been close, a taboo as of incest had come between him and Arlene in college; it was strange to feel that taboo lifted, and a queasy freedom fallen over them all, relatively late in life. Freedom—that was what her plump kicking legs expressed. But Americans are oversold on freedom, Fredericks thought, and availability does not equal attractiveness. There was a glaze of unhealth on Arlene, and she had grown thick around the middle.

When he described the encounter to Harriet over the phone, she told him that Arlene had had a cancer scare but the chemotherapy seemed to have worked. The disease figured in his mind as another reason to let Arlene alone. She was taken. It slowly ebbed from his mind that she lived a half-mile away, working part-time in an art-supplies store near the local university, until this sudden phone call.

It was late afternoon, becoming evening. The downtown skyscrapers visible from his window were broken into great blocks of shadow and orange glare as the sun sank over the Fens. By the time he had made his way to his automobile—a decrepit Karmann-Ghia convertible, its left fender dented, its canvas top slashed one night by a thief looking for drugs or an expensive radio—it was dark enough to use his headlights. Irritated and flattered, he inched through the rush-hour traffic to the address Arlene had given him.

She was standing in the vestibule of her building, and came out carrying a little suitcase, walking very carefully, with short slow steps. When he jackknifed awkwardly up out of the car and moved around it to take her bag, she lifted a hand in alarm, as if fearful he would bump against her. She wore a loose heavy cloth coat, but, even so, he could see that her shape was not right—her middle was not just thick but swollen. The street lights didn’t help her color; her face looked greenish, waxy, with hollows like thumb-marks in wax beneath her eyes. She smiled at the intensity of his inspection. Arlene, whose mother’s parents had emigrated from Macedonia, had a certain stiff old-world mannerliness, and Fredericks sensed her determination to make this mannerliness see them through. Though his car, double-parked, forced the street’s two lanes of traffic to squeeze into one, with some indignant honking, he made his own movements as unhurried as hers, and set the suitcase in the back seat as gently as if it contained her pain.

She slammed the door on her side but remained a bit hunched forward, her profile silhouetted against the side window, beneath the slashed and taped canvas: her sharp high-bridged nose, her lips’ prim set over her slightly protuberant teeth. He asked, before easing in the clutch, “O.K.?”

“Just fine,” she said, in a voice surprising in its normality. “You’re sweet to do this, Marty.”

“Not at all. Which hospital?”

She named one a mile away. The rush hour was at its worst, as darkness deepened, and there were many stops and starts. She rested a hand on the dashboard at one point, as if to brace herself, then abandoned the posture, as perhaps more uncomfortable than it was worth. The car was rusty and old and gave a jerky ride however delicately he shifted. “Sorry,” he said, more than once.

“You’re doing fine,” she said, almost condescendingly.

He couldn’t believe a taxi wouldn’t have been better. It was as if she had decided to accept, now, his rejected invitation to see her home. “Sorry the car’s cold; the heater should come on any minute.”

“I don’t feel the cold.”

“Is your—is this, ah, a sudden thing?”

“It’s been coming on.”

“They know at the hospital you’re coming?”

“Oh yes. They do.”

“Is it going to be a long stay?”

“That’s up to them. My assignment is to deliver the body.”

*The body*. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“About what, Marty?” They had broken free of the traffic for a block and were gliding along smoothly, between four-story bowfronts, beneath trees that in a month would have leaves.

“That your body’s, uh, acting up.”

The glide ended; a cross street, a principal artery, was jammed solid. “I expect it will all be all right,” Arlene said, after a second of tense silence in which she saw that the stop was not going to be jarring. Her voice had the false, light tempo of someone issuing reassurances to a child.

“I do hope so,” Fredericks said, feeling foolish and puny relative to the immense motions, the revolutions of mortality, taking place inside her, next to him in the shuddering, cold, slashed cave of the car.

She said, more conversationally, “You adjust. You come to terms with it.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes,” Arlene said simply, as if he were in on the secret now—as if he and she were now on the same side of the mystery growing within her. But he couldn’t imagine death’s having a human size, finite enough to come to terms with. The car heater was producing heat at last, as the hospital’s lights came into sight. She directed him to a curved side street that became a ramp. As he gently pulled up at the entrance, Fredericks had the impression of bustling all-hours brightness that an airport gives, or a railroad terminal in the old days—a constant grand liveliness of comings and goings.

He said, scrambling to extricate himself from behind the wheel, “Let me get the door for you.”

“I can manage.” She popped the door latch and was standing at the side of the car when he came around for the suitcase. She had that waistless stiff look women of the Balkans have, in their layered peasant outfits. She was reverting. Her face was turned toward the light pouring through the glass doors of the hospital lobby.

“Shall I walk you in?”

“No.” The answer was so abrupt she tried to soften it. “You can’t park here. I can manage.” Hearing the repetition, she insisted on it: “I want to manage. I’ve chosen to be on my own.” She looked at him quickly, with a suspicious slide of her eyes, and gave him her gracious, buck-toothed, matter-of-fact smile. “Thanks, Marty. That was a nice ride.”

“Do you want visitors?”

“I’ll have plenty, thanks. All those children we had for some reason.”

“Call me up when you’re done and I can come for you.”

Her lips slowly closed over her teeth. “I should be up to a taxi by then.” There was no offer of a pecked kiss goodbye, though he would have been careful not to bump against her. But if her own body was betraying her, Fredericks thought, why should she trust him? She passed through the glass doors and did not look back. From behind, she seemed, with her little suitcase and bulky coat, an immigrant, just arrived.

Arlene was not the first dying woman his own age that Fredericks had known. In the suburb where he and Harriet had lived together, a mutual friend, the merriest wife in their circle, had a breast removed in her early forties. For years, that seemed to have solved the problem; then she raucously confided to them, outside the doors of the local supermarket, “The damn stuff’s come back!” The last time they saw her, it was at a small barbecue lunch that all the guests tacitly knew, though none would admit aloud, to be a farewell to their hostess.

On that summer Sunday, as Fredericks and his wife in their car pulled into the property, a new green hose, stretched to reach a flower bed, lay across the asphalt driveway, and he braked. Their hostess, in a sun hat and gaudy muu-muu, was standing on her lawn and vigorously waving him forward onto a section of grass set aside for parking. Hesitantly he eased the car—a Volvo station wagon, which felt stiff as a truck to drive—forward into the spot she was marking, fearful his foot might slip and his front bumper strike this woman already stricken by disease.

He got out and kissed her on her upturned face, which in illness had become round and shiny, and explained that he hadn’t wanted to run over the hose. “Ach, the hose!” she exclaimed with startling guttural force and a sweeping, humorous gesture. “Phooey to the hose!”

Nevertheless, Fredericks went back and moved the hose so the next car would not run over it, at the same time trying to imagine how these appurtenances to our daily living, as patiently treasured and stored and coiled and repaired as if their usefulness were eternal, must look to someone whose death is imminent. The hose. The flowers. The abandoned trowel whose canary-yellow handle winks within weeds in the phlox border. The grass itself, and the sun and sky and trees like massive scuffed-up stage flats—phooey to them. Their value was about to undergo a revision so vast and crushing Fredericks could not imagine it. Certainly he could not imagine it in relation to the merry presence who entertained them, sitting with her guests on the screened porch while her husband cooked at the grill outside, in a cloud of gnats. As a concession to her debility she lay on an aluminum chaise longue, her feet in thick wool slipper-socks though the day was warm, and still wearing her sun hat, perhaps to hide her chemotherapy-blasted hair. The party, as the guests drank wine, became ever more relaxed and hilarious, the hostess urging the conversation into mundane channels—local zoning problems, and movies they had seen. She elaborated so feelingly on the horrors of a proposed condominium development that they forgot she would not be there to see it or to contend with the parking problems it would pose. When another woman objected that all the movies seemed to be about—with emphasis—*sleaze*, the dying woman quickly joked, “*Gesundheit!*” and then, merrily, added, “I love sleaze. Sleaze,” she said, “is truth. Sleaze,” she went on, excited to a crescendo by the laughter surrounding her, “shall set us free!”

A season later, attending her funeral, trying to picture her moving somewhere from strength to strength as the service claimed, Fredericks wondered that none of them that afternoon had been able to find a topic more elevated, more affectionately valedictory, than condominiums and sleazy movies, and wondered where that garden hose of which he had been so solicitous now lay coiled.

The dying, he marvelled, do not seem to inhabit a world much different from ours. His elderly neighbors in this suburb plucked with rakes at the leaves on their lawn, walked their old lame dogs, and talked of this winter’s scheduled trip to Florida as if in death’s very gateway there was nothing to do but keep living, living in the same old rut. They gossiped, they pottered, they watched television. No radical insights heightened their conversation, though Fredericks listened expectantly. In college he had been a classics major, and dimly recalled the section of *The Odyssey* in which the dead stare mutely at Odysseus, unable to speak until they have drunk of the sheep’s blood with which the hero has filled, by Circe’s prescription, a pit a cubit square and a cubit deep. The hero’s own mother, Anticleia, crouches wordless and distraught until he allows her to drink “the storm-dark blood.” The dead in Homer feel themselves inferior, even—in the T. E. Lawrence translation—silly. Dead Achilles tauntingly asks Odysseus, “How will you find some madder adventure to cap this coming down alive to Hades among the silly dead, the worn-out mockeries of men?” And Aeneas, in Virgil’s Avernus, cannot elicit a word from angry Dido, who listens to his entreaties and apologies with fixed eyes and a countenance of stone, and who flees still hating him—*inimica*—back to the shadowy groves where Sychaeus, her former husband, responds to her cares and equals her love*—inimica refugit / in nemus umbriferum coniunx ubi pristinus illi / respondet curis aequatque Sychaeus amorem*. Virgil’s version of the underworld becomes implausibly detailed, with the future of Rome set forth at length by Anchises, and various rings and compartments all laid out as if in anticipation of Dante’s definitive mapping. Whereas Gilgamesh, an older journeyer still, found only, as far as the broken tablets of his tale can be deciphered, confusion and evasion at the end of his passionate quest: “Sorrow has come into my belly. I fear death; I roam over the hills. I will seize the road; quickly I will go to the house of Utnapishtim, offspring of Ubaratutu.…”

Utnapishtim answers Gilgamesh in broken clay, “Since there is no … There is no word of advice … From the beginning there is no permanence.… As for death, its time is hidden. The time of life is shown plain.”

Fredericks was shy about calling Arlene, lest it seem to be a kind of courtship. Yet in decency he should ask, after their perilous ride together, how she was doing. For several weeks, her phone didn’t answer; then, one day, it was picked up. “Oh,” she responded, with a thoughtful, chiming, lazy lilt to her voice which seemed new, “not bad. There are good days and bad days. They have me on a mixture of things, and for a while there the mix was all wrong. But it’s settled down now. I feel pretty good, Marty.”

“You’re home now,” he said, as if to fix a fact in this flux of unimaginable therapy. The wandering drugged sound of her voice awakened firmness in his. “Are you going to work, too?”

“Yesterday, which was so sunny, I trotted over to the art store, and they were happy to see me, but I’m really not ready yet to be on my feet all day. Some afternoon next week is my goal. You learn to set goals.”

“Yes.” His firmness seemed to miscarry—a punch at empty air. “Well, take things a day at a time.”

There was a pause. “I don’t mind visitors,” she said.

He thought of the artist’s loft and that noisy crowd and how happy she had been to be among them, and felt spiteful. If they were all so great, where were they now? “Well, I could come by some day,” he said. “If it wouldn’t tire you out.”

“Oh no, Marty,” she said. “It would be cheery.”

Fredericks felt uncomfortably obliged to set a time, late one afternoon, after his own work. He did not feel, in this single interim of his life, quite free—the woman he was involved with was possessive of his time, and kept watch on it. His life seemed destined to be never wholly his own. By his choice, of course. Arlene had told him, *I’ve chosen to be on my own*.

At the hour when he drove to Arlene’s address, cars were leaving the streets to return to the suburbs, and he had no trouble finding an empty space at a meter. Every day, the sunlight clung to the city a few minutes longer. Her house was a bowfront brownstone, handsomer than his brick tenement, and faced not the downtown’s little knot of skyscrapers but a strip of old-fashioned park, part of the Fens, with iron lamp standards and a stone footbridge arched over a marshy creek dotted with beer cans and snow-white Styrofoam takeout boxes. A wide-spreading beech tree whose roots drank at the edge of the creek was coming into bud. *The time of life is shown plain*.

Arlene greeted him at the elevator, unexpectedly, so that he nearly bumped into her. As he kissed her cheek, she stayed hunched over, so it was awkward to plant his lips. Her cheek felt dry and a bit too warm.

She was wearing a kind of navy-blue running suit, and looked much thinner. The sallow skin of her face had tightened, and her eyes—a surprising light brown, a flecked candy color—peered out of their deepened sockets suspiciously, around a phantom corner. Hunched and shuffling her feet, she led him toward the front room and its view of the park. From her windows he could see through the budding beech a diagonal path and, in the middle distance, an iron bandstand. Her apartment was on a higher floor than his own, though not so high as the artist’s loft, and abundantly furnished with surprisingly expensive furniture: loot from her marriage, he thought. She let Fredericks make himself a drink while she lay on a brocaded sofa, with her feet up, and sipped Perrier water. “What a *love*ly place,” he said, and then feared that his emphasis betrayed his assumption that she lived shabbily, in bohemian style.

“I missed it those weeks I was away. My plants were so happy to see me. A cyclamen died, though I had asked the super’s wife to come in twice a week and water.”

“Has Harriet ever been here?”

“Oh yes—a number of times. She likes it. She says she hates being stuck out there in that big rambling place of yours. I mean, that the two of you had.”

“The children aren’t quite flown. And if she moves into town, too, we’ll have an overpopulation problem.”

“Oh, Marty, you know she never will. Harriet needs all that showy country space. She needs animals.”

The conversation began to excite him. He sat in a chair so unexpectedly soft he nearly spilled his drink. From the low angle, Arlene’s front windows were full of sky, sky only, with white spring clouds set close as flagstones and hurrying thus close-packed in a direction that made the room itself seem to be travelling, smoothly pulling its walls and furniture and late-afternoon shadows backward, toward the past, toward the time when they were all in college and young and freshly acquainted, and the elms weren’t blighted and cars were enormous and the Army-McCarthy hearings fascinatingly droned over the radio into the spring afternoons when they should have been studying Chaucer. And then later, still keeping in touch, Arlene and Sherman and Harriet and Martin shared the astounding feat of making babies—creating new people, citizens, out of nothing but their own bodies—and the scarcely less marvellous accomplishments of owning houses, and tending them, and having friends who were sometimes wicked, and giving cocktail parties. Though they lived in different towns, in different circles, they had occasionally entertained each other. The Quints had installed a pool, and Fredericks remembered Sunday cookouts on the patchy lawn where the recent excavation had left scars, beneath a sky marred by charcoal smoke and the lazy *bop-pop* of tennis drifting in from their neighbor’s clay court. The sun of youth dappled their reminiscences, as Arlene stiffly adjusted her legs on the sofa from time to time and Fredericks sank lower into the chair and into alcoholic benignity, and the sky with its travelling clouds sank into evening blue. Arlene’s voice had a high distant quality as if she were reading words from a card held almost out of eyesight. “Harriet took a shine to our minister,” she said, Fredericks having recalled the cookouts.

“She did?” Though he had become adept at receiving the signals women sent out, he had never thought of Harriet as sending out any.

Arlene laughed, on a high thin prolonged note, and then her lips closed slowly over her prominent teeth. She said, “Reverend Propper—not that he *was* so proper, it turned out. He was a Unitarian, of course. Harriet even in college liked that kind of boy—a *serious* boy. You weren’t *serious* enough for her, Marty.”

“She did? I wasn’t?” He blamed himself for their breakup, and was pleasantly startled to hear that the rejection hadn’t been all on his side.

“Not really. She adored idealists. Union leaders and renegade priests and Erik Erikson—these healer types. That’s what drew her to Sherm, before she discovered he was just one more chem. nerd. I guess we didn’t have the word ‘nerd’ then, did we?”

“I had forgotten that she went out with him for a little while.”

“A *lit*tle while! The whole sophomore year. That’s how I met him, through her.”

“Did I know that?”

“You must have, Marty. She used to say she loved the way his hair was going thin even in college. She thought that was a sign of seriousness. It showed his brain was working to save mankind. All those soc.-rel. majors wanted to save the world.”

He had even forgotten that Harriet had majored in social relations—not forgotten, exactly, but not had the fact brought back to life. There had been a time, in those Fifties, when sociology, combining psychology, anthropology, history, and statistics, seemed likely to save the world from those shaggy old beasts tribalism and religion. Harriet had been, with her pearly shy smile and pony tail and tatty tennis sneakers, an apostle of light, in those unfocused pre-protest days. “I hadn’t realized that she and Sherm had been that serious.”

“*Serious*. You said it. He never smiled, unless you told him something was a joke. God, it was good to get away at last. It was *such* bliss, Marty—and yet there really was almost nothing to complain of about the man.”

He didn’t want to talk about Sherman. “Did you ever notice,” he asked, “how white Harriet’s teeth were?”

“I *did*. She knew it, too. She used to tell me I was staining my teeth with my cigarettes. Maybe I should have listened. Nobody believed in cancer in those days.”

The word was especially shocking, coming from her. He said, “But it isn’t your lungs …”

“Oh, it’s all related, don’t you think?” Arlene said breezily. “And probably basically psychosomatic. I was too happy, being out from under Sherm. My body couldn’t handle my happiness. It freaked out.”

Fredericks laughed, trying to push up out of his soft, unresisting chair. “Remember how they used to tell us smoking stunted your growth? Listen, Arlene, I must run. Somebody’s expecting me to check in. This has been lovely, though. Maybe I could swing by again.”

“Please do,” the woman said, squinting off as if to read an especially distant prompt card. “I’ll be here.”

But sometimes when he called she was absent—at the art-supplies store, perhaps, or visiting her children, who were adult, and living within a fifty-mile radius. Or else she was too sick to answer the phone. She had ups and downs, but the trend seemed down. Perhaps he saw her six or seven times in the course of the summer; each time, there was something of the initial enchantment—the day changing tone through the big windows, her thin and distant but agile voice evoking those old days, those Fifties and early Sixties when you moved toward your life with an unstressed freedom no one could understand, now, who had not been young then. There was less outside to that world—less money, fewer cars and people and buildings—and more inside, more blood and hopefulness. Nothing, really, had cost much, relative to now, and nothing, not love or politics, was half so hyped as now. There was a look, of Capezios in the slush, that summed up for Fredericks a careless and unpremeditated something, a bland grace, from those years. There were names he had all but forgotten, until Arlene would casually mention them. “And then Brett Helmerich, the section man in Chaucer, he was another Harriet had her eye on.…”

“She did? Brett … Helmerich. Wait. I *do* remember him. Leather elbow patches, and always wore a long red muffler wrapped a couple times around his neck, and a red nose like Punch’s, sort of.”

She softly nodded, looking off in her far-gazing way, her jaundiced face half in window light. Her feet, in thick, striped athletic socks, rested on a pillow, her knees up. Her ankles and wrists and face had been swollen at one phase of her body’s struggles with its invader, and then her frame had subsided toward emaciation. She moved more and more stiffly, hunched over. While he drank whiskey or gin, she sipped at a cup of tea so weak as to be mere water turning tepid. But her mention of Brett Helmerich would conjure up the vanished throngs that once stampeded in and out of the Chaucer lectures, given by a wall-eyed professor who over the decades of teaching this course had become more and more medieval, more gruff and scatological and visionary. “You really think she had her eye on Brett? But he was ten years older than we were, with a wife and babies.”

“Other people’s babies aren’t very real to you, until you’ve had some of your own. Or wives, even, until you’ve been one. Even then … Ex-wives are the worst, the way they hang on to the men’s heads.”

Arlene on the subject of Harriet fascinated Fredericks, as if his former wife could be displayed to him in a whole new light—resurrected, as it were, by a fresh perspective. She who had seemed to him so shy and sexually clumsy in fact had juggled a number of relationships and flirtations in those college years, and in the years of their young marriage had not been entirely preoccupied by him and their dear babies. Fredericks asked, “There really was something between her and Reverend Propper?”

Arlene’s mouth opened wide but her laugh was inaudible, like a bat’s cry. “Oh, I don’t know if it ever got to the physical stage, but didn’t you ever wonder why she would drive twenty-five miles each way to sing in our little off-key choir?”

“I thought it was because of her friendship for you—it gave her a chance to keep in touch with you.”

“She kept in touch with me when it suited her,” Arlene said, and sipped her weak cold tea, and made a small thrusting gesture with her lips as if to register an unquenchable dryness of mouth. “And still does.”

“Harriet’s in touch?”

“She calls. Often enough.”

“Often enough for what?”

“To hear about you.”

“Me? No!”

“Yes.”

“But she’s so happily remarried.”

“I suppose. But a woman is like a spider, Marty. She has her web. She likes to feel the different threads vibrate.”

Her phone rang, on the table a few feet from her head, but Arlene let it ring until, at last, the ringing stopped. He wondered how often he had been the person on the other end, assuming she was out or too sick to reach for the phone. Several times when she did answer, her voice croaked and dragged, and he knew that he had pulled her from a narcotic sleep. He would apologize and offer to call again, but she would say it was *cheery* to hear from him, and her voice would slowly clear into animation.

Just before Labor Day, though, she answered on the ring when he had been about to hang up, and he could hear her gasp for breath after each phrase. The medicine she had been taking had “gone crazy.” Two days ago her daughter had driven in from a far suburb and gotten her to the hospital just in time. “Scary.” Arlene had never before mentioned fear to Fredericks. He asked her if she would like him to swing around for a quick visit.

She said, almost scoldingly, “Marty, I just can’t do Harriet for you today. I’m too tired and full of pills. I’m worn out.”

*Do* Harriet? Hanging up, he marvelled that that was what he had been having her do. Harriet when young, and that whole vast kingdom of the dead, including himself when young. His face felt hot with embarrassment, and a certain anger at Arlene’s rebuff and its tone. It was not as if he had nothing else to do but pay sick calls.

It was Harriet who told him, over the phone, that Arlene had had a stroke and was in the hospital.

“For good?”

“It looks like for that.”

“Have you seen her?”

“Once. I should go in more, but …” She didn’t need to explain; he understood. She lived too far away, the living are busier than the dying, it was scary.

He, too, did not want to visit Arlene in the hospital; her apartment—its air of shadowy expectant luxury, like a theatre where a performance was arranged for him—had been one of the attractions. But Harriet urged him to go, “for the both of us,” and so he found himself making his way out of a great damp concrete edifice full of inclined ramps and parked cars. He rode down in an elevator whose interior was painted red, and followed yellow arrows through murky corridors of cement and tile. Emerging briefly aboveground, he recognized that curved stretch of side street to which, six months ago, Arlene had guided his Karmann-Ghia. The car since then had fallen apart, its body so rusted he could see the asphalt skimming by beneath his feet, but the cavernous hospital lobby still radiated its look of sanitary furor, of well-lit comings and goings, of immigrants arriving on a bustling shore.

Fredericks pushed through the glass doors, made inquiries, and tried to follow directions. He threaded his way through corridors milling with pale spectres—white-clad nurses in thick-soled shoes, doctors with cotton lab coats flapping, unconscious patients pushed on gurneys like boats with IV poles for masts, stricken visitors clinging to one another in family clumps and looking lost and pasty in the harsh fluorescent light. *There beset me ten thousand seely ghosts, crying inhumanly*. Though the hospital was twelve stories tall, it all felt underground, mazelike. He passed flower shops, stores stocking magazines and candy and droll get-well cards, a cafeteria entrance, endless numbered doors, and several sighing, clanking elevator banks. He entered an elevator, and was crushed against his fellow-passengers by the entry, at the next floor, of a person in a wheelchair, a shrivelled man with a tube in his nose, pushed by an obese orderly. On the eleventh floor, stepping into a bewildering confusion of desks, he asked for Arlene. He was told a number and pointed in a direction.

The door was ajar. He pushed it open lightly, and saw first an empty bed and a big metal-framed window overlooking the city from a height even greater than that of the artist’s loft many months ago. But the prospect was dominated by a great ugly iron bridge spotted with red rustproofing paint and crawling with cars.

She was around the edge of the door, sitting in a chair by the bed. Her close-cut hair seemed mostly white, and a catastrophe had overtaken her face: one side of it, eyelid and mouth-corner, had been pulled sharply down. Her Macedonian eyes burned at him from within a startled, stony fury. She could not speak. The stroke had taken away her nimble power of speech. In her lap and scattered on the bed were a number of children’s books and some handmade cards each holding a letter of the alphabet.

Fredericks understood. She was trying to learn to read, to express herself. Her children—parents, now, with children of their own—had lovingly made the alphabet cards, and provided the books. He understood all this but he could not speak, either. His tongue froze after a few words, much too loud, of greeting, and when she held up some of the letters as if to indicate words, he could not make out what she was spelling.

Frantically he tried to make conversation for them both. “Harriet told me you were here. I’m so sorry. It must be—it must be hard. When will you be getting out? You have a terrific view.”

In an attempt to respond to his question—he blushed at his own stupidity in asking a question she must try to answer—she pointed at the clock on her bedside table, and then shuffled the cards in her lap, looking for one she could not find. She held one up the wrong way around, and then with a grimace on the side of her mouth that was not dead she flipped it away. He remembered the gesture. *Phooey*.

In a virtual panic, blushing and stammering, he talked inanely, finding, when he reached into himself for a subject that he and Arlene had in common, only the hospital itself, its complexity and strangeness to him, and the grim comedy of being crushed in the elevator by the wheelchair and the pushing fat man. “We all could have been squeezed to death. One girl had a cardboard tray full of coffee cups and had to hold it up toward the ceiling.” He imitated the heroic, Statue of Liberty–like pose, and then lowered his arm, shamed by the shining unblinking fury of Arlene’s eyes, one eye half shut. The dead hate us, and we hate the dead. *I went pale with fear, lest awful Persephone send me from Hades the Gorgon’s head, that fabulous horror*. Standing, he felt some liquid otherworldly element spill from him rapidly, cooling the skin of his legs. “I’m afraid I have to, as they say, split.” Fredericks wondered if she would remember his saying that long ago, with faint sarcasm, and try to smile. Arlene unsmilingly stared. *None of your sudden stops and starts*. He promised, insincerely, to come again, and, like heroes before him, fled.