ROALD DAHL

THE LAST ACT

ANNA was in the kitchen washing a head of Boston lettuce for the family supper when the doorbell rang. The bell itself was on the wall directly above the sink, and it never failed to make her jump if it rang when she happened to be near. For this reason, neither her husband nor any of the children ever used it. It seemed to ring extra loud this time, and Anna jumped extra high.

When she opened the door, two policemen were standing outside. They looked at her out of pale waxen faces, and she looked back at them, waiting for them to say something.

She kept looking at them, but they didn't speak or move. They stood so still and so rigid that they were like two wax figures somebody had put on her doorstep as a joke. Each of them was holding his helmet in front of him in his two hands.

"What is it?" Anna asked.

They were both young, and they were wearing leather gauntlets up to their elbows. She could see their enormous motor-cycles propped up along the edge of the sidewalk behind them, and dead leaves were falling around the motor-cycles and blowing along the sidewalk and the whole of the street was brilliant in the yellow light of a clear, gusty September evening. The taller of the two policemen shifted uneasily on his feet.

Then he said quietly, "Are you Mrs Cooper, ma'am?"

"Yes, I am."

The other said, "Mrs Edmund J. Cooper?"

"Yes." And then slowly it began to dawn upon her that these men, neither of whom seemed anxious to explain his presence, would not be behaving as they were unless they had some distasteful duty to perform.

"Mrs Cooper," she heard one of them saying, and from the way he said it, as gently and softly as if he were comforting a sick child, she knew at once that he was going to tell her something terrible. A great wave of panic came over her, and she said, "What happened?"

"We have to inform you, Mrs Cooper.

The policeman paused, and the woman, watching him, felt as though her whole body were shrinking and shrinking and shrinking inside its skin. that your husband was involved in an accident on the Hudson River Parkway at approximately five forty-five this evening, and died in the ambulance… The policeman who was speaking produced the crocodile wallet she had given Ed on their twentieth wedding anniversary, two years back, and as she reached out to take it, she found herself wondering whether it might not still be warm from having been close to her husband's chest only a short while ago.

"If there's anything we can do," the policeman was saying, "like calling up somebody to come over…some friend or relative maybe…

Anna heard his voice drifting away, then fading out altogether, and it must have been about then that she began to scream. Soon she became hysterical, and the two policemen had their hands full trying to control her until the doctor arrived some forty minutes later and injected something into her arm.

She was no better, though, when she woke up the following morning. Neither her doctor nor her children were able to reason with her in any way at all, and had she not been kept under almost constant sedation for the next few days, she would undoubtedly have taken her own life. In the brief lucid periods between drug-takings, she acted as though she were demented, calling out her husband's name and telling him that she was coming to join him as soon as she possibly could. It was terrible to listen to her. But in defence of her behaviour, it should be said at once that this was no ordinary husband she had lost.

Anna Greenwood had married Ed Cooper when they were both eighteen, and over the time they were together, they grew to be closer and more dependent upon each other than it is possible to describe in words. Every year that went by, their love became more intense and overwhelming, and toward the end, it had reached such a ridiculous peak that it was almost impossible for them to endure the daily separation caused by Ed's departure for the office in the mornings. When he returned at night he would rush through the house to seek her out, and she, who had heard the noise of the front door slamming, would drop everything and rush simultaneously in his direction, meeting him head on, recklessly, at full speed, perhaps halfway up the stairs, or on the landing, or between the kitchen and the hall; and as they came together, he would take her in his arms and hug her and kiss her for minutes on end as though she were yesterday's bride. It was wonderful. It was so utterly unbelievably wonderful that one is very nearly able to understand why she should have had no desire and no heart to continue living in a world where her husband did not exist any more.

Her three children, Angela (twenty), Mary (nineteen) and Billy (seventeen and a half), stayed around her constantly right from the start of the catastrophe. They adored their

mother, and they certainly had no intention of letting her commit suicide if they could help it. They worked hard and with loving desperation to convince her that life could still be worth living, and it was due entirely to them that she managed in the end to come out of the nightmare and climb back slowly into the ordinary world.

Four months after the disaster, she was pronounced “moderately safe’ by the doctors, and she was able to return, albeit rather listlessly, to the old routine of running the house and doing the shopping and cooking the meals for her grown-up children.

But then what happened?

Before the snows of that winter had melted away, Angela married a young man from Rhode Island and went off to live in the suburbs of Providence.

A few months later, Mary married a fairhaired giant from a town called Slayton, in Minnesota, and away she flew for ever and ever and ever. And although Anna’s heart was now beginning to break all over again into tiny pieces, she was proud to think that neither of the two girls had the slightest inkling of what was happening to her. (“Oh, Mummy, isn’t it wonderful!”

“Yes, my darling, I think it’s the most beautiful wedding there’s ever been! I’m even more excited than you are!” etc., etc.) And then, to put the lid on everything, her beloved Billy, who had just turned eighteen, went off to begin his first year at Yale.

So all at once, Anna found herself living in a completely empty house.

It is an awful feeling, after twenty-three years of boisterous, busy, magical family life, to come down alone to breakfast in the mornings, to sit there in silence with a cup of coffee and a piece of toast, and to wonder what you are going to do with the day that lies ahead. The room you are sitting in, which has heard so much laughter, and seen so many birthdays, so many Christmas trees, so many presents being opened, is quiet now and feels curiously cold. The air is heated and the temperature itself is normal, but the place still makes you shiver. The clock has stopped because you were never the one who wound it in the first place. A chair stands crooked on its legs, and you sit staring at it, wondering why you hadn’t noticed it before. And when you glance up again, you have a sudden panicky feeling that all the four walls of the room have begun creeping in upon you very very slowly when you weren’t looking.

In the beginning, she would carry her coffee cup over to the telephone and start calling up friends. But all her friends had husbands and children, and although they were always as nice and warm and cheerful as they could possibly be, they simply could not spare the time to sit and chat with a desolate lady from across the way first thing in the morning. So then she started calling up her married daughters instead.

They, also, were sweet and kind to her at all times, but Anna detected, very soon, a subtle change in their attitudes toward her. She was no longer number one in their lives. They had husbands now, and were concentrating everything upon them. Gently but firmly, they were moving their mother into the background. It was quite a shock. But she knew they were right. They were absolutely right. She was no longer entitled to impinge upon their lives or to make them feel guilty for neglecting her.

She saw Dr Jacobs regularly, but he wasn't really any help. He tried to get her to talk and she did her best, and sometimes he made little speeches to her full of oblique remarks about sex and sublimation. Anna never properly understood what he was driving at, but the burden of his song appeared to be that she should get herself another man.

She took to wandering around the house and fingering things that used to belong to Ed. She would pick up one of his shoes and put her hand into it and feel the little dents that the ball of his foot and his toes had made upon the sole. She found a sock with a hole in it, and the pleasure it gave her to darn that sock was indescribable. Occasionally, she took out a shirt, a tie, and a suit, and laid them on the bed, all ready for him to wear, and once, one rainy Sunday morning, she made an Irish stew.

It was hopeless to go on.

So how many pills would she need to make absolutely sure of it this time? She went upstairs to her secret store and counted them. There were only nine. Was that enough? She doubted that it was. Oh, hell. The one thing she was not prepared to face all over again was failure the rush to the hospital, the stomach-pump, the seventh floor of the Payne Whitney Pavilion, the psychiatrists, the humiliation, the misery of it all.

In that case, it would have to be the razorblade. But the trouble with the razor-blade was that it had to be done properly. Many people failed miserably when they tried to use the razor-blade on the wrist. In fact, nearly all of them failed. They didn't cut deep enough. There was a big artery down there somewhere that simply had to be reached. Veins were no good. Veins made plenty of mess, but they never quite managed to do the trick. Then again, the razor-blade was not an easy thing to hold, not if one had to make a firm incision, pressing it right home all the way, deep deep down. But she wouldn't fail. The ones who failed were the ones who actually wanted to fail. She wanted to succeed.

She went to the cupboard in the bathroom, searching for blades. There weren't any. Ed's razor was still there, and so was hers. But there was no blade in either of them, and no little packet lying alongside. That was understandable. Such things had been removed from the house on an earlier occasion. But there was no problem. Anyone could buy a packet of razor-blades.

She returned to the kitchen and took the calendar down from the wall. She chose September 23rd, which was Ed's birthday, and wrote r-b (for razor-blades) against the date. She did this on September 9th, which gave her exactly two weeks' grace to put her affairs in order. There was much to be done-old bills to be paid, a new will to be written, the house to be tidied up, Billy's college fees to be taken care of for the next four years, letters to the children, to her own parents, to Ed's mother, and so on and so forth.

Yet, busy as she was, she found that those two weeks, those fourteen long days, were going far too slowly for her liking. She wanted to use the blade, and eagerly every morning she counted the days that were left. She was like a child counting the days before Christmas. For wherever it was that Ed Cooper had gone when he died, even if it were only to the grave, she was impatient to join him.

It was in the middle of this two-week period that her friend Elizabeth Paoletti came calling on her at eight thirty one morning. Anna was making coffee in the kitchen at the time, and she jumped when the bell rang and jumped again when it gave a second long blast.

Liz came sweeping in through the front door, talking non-stop as usual. "Anna, my darling woman, I need your help! Everyone's down with flu at the office. You've got to come! Don't argue with me! I know you can type and I know you haven't got a damn thing in the world to do all day except mope. Just grab your hat and purse and let's get going. Hurry up, girl, hurry up! I'm late as it is!"

Anna said, "Go away, Liz. Leave me alone."

"The cab is waiting," Liz said.

"Please," Anna said, "don't try to bully me now. I'm not coming."

"You are coming," Liz said. "Pull yourself together. Your days of glorious martyrdom are over."

Anna continued to resist, but Liz wore her down, and in the end she agreed to go along just for a few hours.

Elizabeth Paoletti was in charge of an adoption society, one of the best in the city. Nine of the staff were down with flu. Only two were left, excluding herself. "You don't know a thing about the work," she said in the cab, "but you're just going to have to help us all you can…

The office was bedlam. The telephones alone nearly drove Anna mad. She kept running from one cubicle to the next, taking messages that she did not understand.

And there were girls in the waiting room, young girls with ashen stony faces, and it became part of her duty to type their answers on an official form.

“The father’s name?”

“Don’t know.”

“You’ve no idea?”

“What’s the father’s name got to do with it?”

“My dear, if the father is known, then his consent has to be obtained as well as yours before the child can be offered for adoption.”

“You’re quite sure about that?”

“Jesus, I told you, didn’t I?”

At lunchtime, somebody brought her a sandwich, but there was no time to eat it. At nine o’clock that night, exhausted and famished and considerably shaken by some of the knowledge she had acquired, Anna staggered home, took a stiff drink, fried up some eggs and bacon, and went to bed.

“I’ll call for you at eight o’clock tomorrow morning,” Liz had said. “And for God’s sake be ready.” Anna was ready. And from then on she was hooked.

It was as simple as that.

All she’d needed right from the beginning was a good hard job of work to do, and plenty of problems to solve-other people’s problems instead of her own.

The work was arduous and often quite shattering emotionally, but Anna was absorbed by every moment of it, and within about-we are skipping right forward now-within about a year and a half, she began to feel moderately happy once again. She was finding it more and more difficult to picture her husband vividly, to see him precisely as he was when he ran up the stairs to meet her, or when he sat across from her at supper in the evenings. The exact sound of his voice was becoming less easy to recall, and even the face itself, unless she glanced at a photograph, was no longer sharply etched in the memory. She still thought about him constantly, but she discovered that she could do so now without bursting into tears, and when she looked back on the way she had behaved a while ago, she felt slightly embarrassed. She started taking a mild interest in her clothes and in her hair, she returned to using lipstick and to shaving the hair from her legs. She enjoyed her food, and when people smiled at her, she smiled right back at them and meant it. In other words, she was back in the swim once again.

She was pleased to be alive.

It was at this point that Anna had to go down to Dallas on office business.

Liz's office did not normally operate beyond state lines, but in this instance, a couple who had adopted a baby through the agency had subsequently moved away from New York and gone to live in Texas. Now, five months after the move, the wife had written to say that she no longer wanted to keep the child. Her husband, she announced, had died of a heart attack soon after they'd arrived in Texas. She herself had remarried almost at once, and her new husband found it impossible to adjust to an adopted baby.

Now this was a serious situation, and quite apart from the welfare of the child itself, there were all manner of legal obligations involved.

Anna flew down to Dallas in a plane that left New York very early, and she arrived before breakfast. After checking in at her hotel, she spent the next eight hours with the persons concerned in the affair, and by the time she had done all that could be done that day, it was around four thirty in the afternoon and she was utterly exhausted. She took a cab back to the hotel, and went up to her room. She called Liz on the phone to report the situation, then she undressed and soaked herself for a long time in a warm bath. Afterwards, she wrapped up in a towel and lay on the bed, smoking a cigarette.

Her efforts on behalf of the child had so far come to nothing. There had been two lawyers there who had treated her with absolute contempt. How she hated them. She detested their arrogance and their softly spoken hints that nothing she might do would make the slightest difference to their client. One of them kept his feet up on the table all the way through the discussion, and both of them had rolls of fat on their bellies, and the fat spilled out into their shirts like liquid and hung in huge folds over their belted trouser-tops.

Anna had visited Texas many times before in her life, but until now she had never gone there alone. Her visits had always been with Ed, keeping him company on business trips; and during those trips, he and she had often spoken about the Texans in general and about how difficult it was to like them. One could ignore their coarseness and their vulgarity. It wasn't that. But there was, it seemed, a quality of ruthlessness still surviving among these people, something quite brutal, harsh, inexorable, that it was impossible to forgive. They had no bowels of compassion, no pity, no tenderness. The only so-called virtue they possessed-and this they paraded ostentatiously and endlessly to strangers-was a kind of professional benevolence. It was plastered all over them. Their voices, their smiles, were rich and syrupy with it. But it left Anna cold. It left her quite, quite cold inside.

"Why do they love acting so tough?" she used to ask.

“Because they’re children,” Ed would answer. “They’re dangerous children who go about trying to imitate their grandfathers. Their grandfathers were pioneers. These people aren’t.”

It seemed that they lived, these present-day Texans, by a sort of egotistic will, push and be pushed. Everybody was pushing. Everybody was being pushed. And it was all very fine for a stranger in their midst to step aside and announce firmly, “I will not push, and I will not be pushed.” That was impossible. It was especially impossible in Dallas. Of all the cities in the state, Dallas was the one that had always disturbed Anna the most. It was such a godless city, she thought, such a rapacious, gripped, iron, godless city. It was a place that had run amok with its money, and no amount of gloss and phony culture and syrupy talk could hide the fact that the great golden fruit was rotten inside.

Anna lay on the bed with her bath towel around her. She was alone in Dallas this time. There was no Ed with her now to envelop her in his incredible strength and love; and perhaps it was because of this that she began, all of a sudden, to feel slightly uneasy. She lit a second cigarette and waited for the uneasiness to pass. It didn’t pass; it got worse. A hard little knot of fear was gathering itself in the top of her stomach, and there it stayed, growing bigger every minute. It was an unpleasant feeling, the kind one might experience if one were alone in the house at night and heard, or thought one heard, a footstep in the next room.

In this place there were a million footsteps, and she could hear them all.

She got off the bed and went over to the window, still wrapped in her towel. Her room was on the twenty-second floor, and the window was open. The great city lay pale and milkyyellow in the evening sunshine. The street below was solid with automobiles. The sidewalk was filled with people. Everybody was hustling home from work, pushing and being pushed. She felt the need of a friend. She wanted very badly to have someone to talk to at this moment. She would have liked a house to go to, a house with a family-a wife and husband and children and rooms full of toys, and the husband and wife would fling their arms around her at the front door and cry out, “Anna! How marvellous to see you! How long can you stay? A week, a month, a year?”

All of a sudden, as so often happens in situations like this, her memory went click, and she said aloud, “Conrad Kreuger! Good heavens above! He lives in Dallas…at least he used to… She hadn’t seen Conrad since they were classmates in high school, in New York. They were both about seventeen then, and Conrad had been her beau, her love, her everything. For over a year they had gone around together, and each of them had sworn eternal loyalty to the other, with marriage in the near future. Then suddenly Ed Cooper had flashed into her life, and that, of course, had been the end of the romance with Conrad. But Conrad did not seem to have taken the break too badly. It certainly

couldn’t have shattered him, because not more than a month or two later he had started going strong with another girl in the class.

Now what was her name?

A big handsome bosomy girl she was, with flaming red hair and a peculiar name, a very oldfashioned name. What was it? Arabella? No, not Arabella. Ara-something, though. Araminty? Yes! Araminty it was! And what is more, within a year or so, Conrad Kreuger had married Araminty and had carried her back with him to Dallas, the place of his birth.

Anna went over to the bedside table and picked up the telephone directory.

Kreuger, Conrad P., M. D.

That was Conrad all right. He had always said he was going to be a doctor. The book gave an office number and a residence number.

Should she phone him?

Why not?

She glanced at her watch. It was five twenty. She lifted the receiver and gave the number of his office.

“Doctor Kreuger’s surgery,” a girl’s voice answered.

“Hello,” Anna said. “Is Doctor Kreuger there?”

“The doctor is busy right now. May I ask who’s calling?”

“Will you please tell him that Anna Greenwood telephoned him.”

“Who?”

“Anna Greenwood.”

“Yes, Miss Greenwood. Did you wish for an appointment?”

“No, thank you.”

“Is there something I can do for you?”

Anna gave the name of her hotel, and asked her to pass it on to Dr Kreuger.

“I’ll be very glad to,” the secretary said. “Goodbye, Miss Greenwood.”

“Goodbye,” Anna said. She wondered whether Dr Conrad P. Kreuger would remember her name after all these years. She believed he would. She lay back again on the bed and began trying to recall what Conrad himself used to look like. Extraordinarily handsome, that he was. Tall…lean…big-shouldered…with almost pure-black hair…and a marvellous face a strong carved face like one of those Greek heroes, Perseus or Ulysses. Above all, though, he had been a very gentle boy, a serious, decent, quiet, gentle boy. He had never kissed her much -only when he said goodbye in the evenings. And he’d never gone in for necking, as all the others had. When he took her home from the movies on Saturday nights, he used to park his old Buick outside her house and sit there in the car beside her, just talking and talking about the future, his future and hers, and how he was going to go back to Dallas to become a famous doctor. His refusal to indulge in necking and all the nonsense that went with it had impressed her no end. He respects me, she used to say. He loves me. And she was probably right. In any event, he had been a nice man, a nice good man. And had it not been for the fact that Ed Cooper was a super-nice, super-good man, she was sure she would have married Conrad Kreuger.

The telephone rang. Anna lifted the receiver. “Yes,” she said. “Hello.”

“Anna Greenwood?”

“Conrad Kreuger!”

“My dear Anna! “What a fantastic surprise. Good gracious me. After all these years.”

“It’s a long time, isn’t it.”

“It’s a lifetime. Your voice sounds just the same.”

“So does yours.”

“What brings you to our fair city? Are you staying long?”

“No, I have to go back tomorrow. I hope you didn’t mind my calling you.”

“Hell, no, Anna. I’m delighted. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m fine now. I had a bad time of it for a bit after Ed died “What!”

“He was killed in an automobile two and a half years ago.”

“Oh gee, Anna, I am sorry. How terrible. I I don’t know what to say “Don’t say anything.”

“You’re okay now?”

“I’m fine. Working like a slave.”

“That’s the girl.

“How’s…how’s Araminty?”

“Oh, she’s fine.”

“Any children?”

“One,” he said. “A boy. How about you?”

“I have three, two girls and a boy.”

“Well, well, what d’you know! Now listen, Anna.

“I’m listening.”

“Why don’t I run over to the hotel and buy you a drink? I’d like to do that. I’ll bet you haven’t changed one iota.”

“I look old, Conrad.”

“You’re lying.”

“I feel old, too.”

“You want a good doctor?”

“Yes. I mean no. Of course I don’t. I don’t want any more doctors. All I need is well… “Yes?”

“This place worries me, Conrad. I guess I need a friend. That’s all I need.”

“You’ve got one. I have just one more patient to see, and then I’m free. I’ll meet you down in the bar, the something room, I’ve forgotten what it’s called, at six, in about half an hour. Will that suit you?”

“Yes,” she said. “Of course. And…thank you, Conrad.” She replaced the receiver, then

got up from the bed, and began to dress.

She felt mildly flustered. Not since Ed's death had she been out and had a drink alone with a man. Dr Jacobs would be pleased when she told him about it on her return. He wouldn't congratulate her madly, but he would certainly be pleased. He'd say it was a step in the right direction, a beginning. She still went to him regularly, and now that she had gotten so much better, his oblique references had become far less oblique and he had more than once told her that her depressions and suicidal tendencies would never completely disappear until she had actually and physically "replaced' Ed with another man.

"But it is impossible to replace a person one has loved to distraction," Anna had said to him the last time he had brought up the subject. "Heavens above, doctor, when Mrs CrummlinBrown's parakeet died last month, her parakeet, mind you, not her husband, she was so shook up about it, she swore she'd never have another bird again!"

"Mrs Cooper," Dr Jacobs had said, "one doesn't normally have sexual intercourse with a parakeet."

"Well…no…

"That's why it doesn't have to be replaced. But when a husband dies, and the surviving wife is still an active and a healthy woman, she will invariably get a replacement within three years if she possibly can. And vice versa."

Sex. It was about the only thing that sort of doctor ever thought about. He had sex on the brain.

By the time Anna had dressed and taken the elevator downstairs, it was ten minutes after six. The moment she walked into the bar, a man stood up from one of the tables. It was Conrad. He must have been watching the door. He came across the floor to meet her. He was smiling nervously. Anna was smiling, too. One always does.

"Well, well," he said. "Well well well," and she, expecting the usual peck on the cheek, inclined her face upward toward his own, still smiling. But she had forgotten how formal Conrad was. He simply took her hand in his and shook it once. "This is a surprise," he said. "Come and sit down."

The room was the same as any other hotel drinking-room. It was lit by dim lights, and filled with many small tables. There was a saucer of peanuts on each table, and there were leather bench-seats all around the walls. The waiters were rigged out in white jackets and maroon pants. Conrad led her to a corner table, and they sat down facing each other. A waiter was standing over them at once.

“What will you have?” Conrad asked.

“Could I have a martini?”

“Of course. Vodka?”

“No, gin, please.”

“One gin martini,” he said to the waiter. “No. Make it two. I’ve never been much of a drinker, Anna, as you probably remember, but I think this calls for a celebration.”

The waiter went away. Conrad leaned back in his chair and studied her carefully. “You look pretty good,” he said.

“You look pretty good yourself, Conrad,” she told him. And so he did. It was astonishing how little he had aged in twenty-five years. He was just as lean and handsome as he’d ever been-in fact, more so. His black hair was still black, his eye was clear, and he looked altogether like a man who was no more than thirty years old.

“You are older than me, aren’t you?” he said.

“What sort of a question is that?” she said, laughing. “Yes Conrad, I am exactly one year older than you. I’m forty-two.”

“I thought you were.” He was still studying her with the utmost care, his eyes travelling all over her face and neck and shoulders. Anna felt herself blushing.

“Are you an enormously successful doctor?” she asked. “Are you the best in town?”

He cocked his head over to one side, right over, so that the ear almost touched the top of the shoulder. It was a mannerism that Anna had always liked. “Successful?” he said. “Any doctor can be successful these days in a big city-financially, I mean. But whether or not I am absolutely first rate at my job is another matter. I only hope and pray that I am.”

The drinks arrived and Conrad raised his glass and said, “Welcome to Dallas, Anna. I’m so pleased you called me up. It’s good to see you again.”

“It’s good to see you, too, Conrad,” she said, speaking the truth.

He looked at her glass. She had taken a huge first gulp, and the glass was now half empty. “You prefer gin to vodka?” he asked.

“I do,” she said, “yes.”

“You ought to change over.”

“Why?”

“Gin is not good for females.”

“It’s not?”

“It’s very bad for them.”

“I’m sure it’s just as bad for males,” she said.

“Actually, no. It isn’t nearly so bad for males as it is for females.”

“Why is it bad for females?”

“It just is,” he said. “It’s the way they’re built. What kind of work are you engaged in, Anna? And what brought you all the way down to Dallas? Tell me about you.”

“Why is gin bad for females?” she said, smiling at him.

He smiled back at her and shook his head, but he didn’t answer.

“Go on,” she said.

“No, let’s drop it.”

“You can’t leave me up in the air like this,” she said. “It’s not fair.”

After a pause, he said, “Well, if you really want to know, gin contains a certain amount of the oil which is squeezed out of juniper berries. They use it for flavouring.”

“What does it do?”

“Plenty.”

“Yes, but what?”

“Horrible things.”

“Conrad, don’t be shy. I’m a big girl now.”

He was still the same old Conrad, she thought, still as diffident, as scrupulous, as shy

as ever. For that she liked him. “If this drink is really doing horrible things to me,” she said, “then it is unkind of you not to tell me what those things are.”

Gently, he pinched the lobe of his left ear with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. Then he said, “Well, the truth of the matter is, Anna, oil of juniper has a direct inflammatory effect upon the uterus.”

“Now come on!”

“I’m not joking.”

“Mother’s ruin,” Anna said. “It’s an old wives’ tale.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“But you’re talking about women who are pregnant.”

“I’m talking about all women, Anna.” He had stopped smiling now, and he was speaking quite seriously. He seemed to be concerned about her welfare.

“What do you specialize in?” she asked him. “What kind of medicine? You haven’t told me that.”

“Gynaecology and obstetrics.”

“Ah-ha!”

“Have you been drinking gin for many years?” he asked.

“Oh, about twenty,” Anna said.

“Heavily?”

“For heaven’s sake, Conrad, stop worrying about my insides. I’d like another martini, please.”

“Of course.”

He called the waiter and said, “One vodka martini.”

“No,” Anna said, “gin.”

He sighed and shook his head and said, “Nobody listens to her doctor these days.”

“You’re not my doctor.”

“No,” he said. “I’m your friend.”

“Let’s talk about your wife,” Anna said. “Is she still as beautiful as ever?”

He waited a few moments, then he said, “Actually, we’re divorced.”

“Oh, no!”

“Our marriage lasted for the grand total of two years. It was hard work to keep it going even that long.”

For some reason, Anna was profoundly shocked. “But she was such a beautiful girl,” she said. “What happened?”

“Everything happened, everything you could possibly think of that was bad.”

“And the child?”

“She got him. They always do.” He sounded very bitter. “She took him back to New York. He comes to see me once a year, in the summer. He’s twenty years old now. He’s at Princeton.”

“Is he a fine boy?”

“He’s a wonderful boy,” Conrad said. “But I hardly know him. It isn’t much fun.”

“And you never married again?”

“No, never. But that’s enough about me. Let’s talk about you.”

Slowly, gently, he began to draw her out on the subject of her health and the bad times she had gone through after Ed’s death. She found she didn’t mind talking to him about it, and she told him more or less the whole story.

“But what makes your doctor think you’re not completely cured?” he said. “You don’t look very suicidal to me.”

“I don’t think I am. Except that sometimes, not often, mind you, but just occasionally, when I get depressed, I have the feeling that it wouldn’t take such a hell of a big push to send me over the edge.”

“In what way?”

“I kind of start edging toward the bathroom cupboard.”

“What do you have in the bathroom cupboard?”

“Nothing very much. Just the ordinary equipment a girl has for shaving her legs.”

“I see.” Conrad studied her face for a few moments, then he said, “Is that how you were feeling just now when you called me?”

“Not quite. But I’d been thinking about Ed. And that’s always a bit dangerous.”

“I’m glad you called.”

“So am I,” she said.

Anna was getting to the end of her second martini. Conrad changed the subject and began talking about his practice. She was watching him rather than listening to him. He was so damned handsome it was impossible not to watch him. She put a cigarette between her lips, then offered the pack to Conrad.

“No thanks,” he said. “I don’t.” He picked up a book of matches from the table and gave her a light, then he blew out the match and said, “Are those cigarettes mentholated?”

“Yes, they are.”

She took a deep drag, and blew the smoke slowly up into the air. “Now go ahead and tell me that they’re going to shrivel up my entire reproductive system,” she said.

He laughed and shook his head.

“Then why did you ask?”

“Just curious, that’s all.”

“You’re lying. I can tell it from your face. You were about to give me the figures for the incidence of lung cancer in heavy smokers.”

“Lung cancer has nothing to do with menthol, Anna,” he said, and he smiled and took a tiny sip of his original martini, which he had so far hardly touched. He set the glass back carefully on the table. “You still haven’t told me what work you are doing,” he went on, “or why you came to Dallas.”

“Tell me about menthol first. If it’s even half as bad as the juice of the juniper berry, I think I ought to know about it quick.”

He laughed and shook his head.

“Please!”

“No, ma’am.”

“Conrad, you simply cannot start things up like this and then drop them. It’s the second time in five minutes.”

“I don’t want to be a medical bore,” he said.

“You’re not being a bore. These things are fascinating. Come on! Tell! Don’t be mean.”

It was pleasant to be sitting there feeling moderately high on two big martinis, and making easy talk with this graceful man, this quiet, comfortable, graceful person. He was not being coy. Far from it. He was simply being his normal scrupulous self.

“Is it something shocking?” she asked.

“No. You couldn’t call it that.”

“Then go ahead.”

He picked up the packet of cigarettes lying in front of her, and studied the label. “The point is this,” he said. “If you inhale menthol, you absorb it into the bloodstream. And that isn’t good, Anna. It does things to you. It has certain very definite effects upon the central nervous system. Doctors still prescribe it occasionally.”

“I know that,” she said. “Nose-drops and inhalations.”

“That’s one of its minor uses. Do you know the other?”

“You rub it on the chest when you have a cold.”

“You can if you like, but it wouldn’t help.”

“You put it in ointment and it heals cracked lips.”

“That’s camphor.”

“So it is.”

He waited for her to have another guess.

“Go ahead and tell me,” she said.

“It may surprise you a bit.”

“I’m ready to be surprised.”

“Menthol,” Conrad said, “is a well-known anti-aphrodisiac.”

“A what?”

“It suppresses sexual desire.”

“Conrad, you’re making these things up.”

“I swear to you I’m not.” uses it?”

“Very few people nowadays. It has too strong a flavour. Saltpetre is much better.”

“Ah yes. I know about saltpetre.”

“What do you know about saltpetre?”

“They give it to prisoners,” Anna said. “They sprinkle it on their cornflakes every morning to keep them quiet.”

“They also use it in cigarettes,” Conrad said.

“You mean prisoners’ cigarettes?”

“I mean all cigarettes.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“Is it?”

“Of course it is.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Nobody would stand for it,” she said.

“They stand for cancer.”

“That’s quite different, Conrad. How do you know they put saltpetre in cigarettes?”

“Have you never wondered,” he said, “what makes a cigarette go on burning when you lay it in the ashtray? Tobacco doesn’t burn of its own accord. Any pipe smoker will tell you that.”

“They use special chemicals,” she said.

“Exactly; they use saltpetre.”

“Does saltpetre burn?”

“Sure it burns. It used to be one of the prime ingredients of old-fashioned gunpowder. Fuses, too. It makes very good fuses. That cigarette of yours is a first-rate slow-burning fuse, is it not?”

Ann looked at her cigarette. Though she hadn’t drawn on it for a couple of minutes, it was still smouldering away and the smoke was curling upward from the tip in a slim blue-grey spiral.

“So this has menthol in it and saltpetre?” she said.

“Absolutely.”

“And they’re both anti-aphrodisiacs?”

“Yes. You’re getting a double dose.”

“It’s ridiculous, Conrad. It’s too little to make any difference.”

He smiled but didn’t answer this.

“There’s not enough there to inhibit a cockroach,” she said.

“That’s what you think, Anna. How many do you smoke a day?”

“About thirty.”

“Well,” he said, “I guess it’s none of my business.” He paused, and then he added, “But you and I would be a lot better off today if it was.”

“Was what?”

“My business.”

“Conrad, what do you mean?”

“I’m simply saying that if you, once upon a time, hadn’t suddenly decided to drop me, none of this misery would have happened to either of us. We’d still be happily married to each other.”

His face had suddenly taken on a queer sharp look.

“Drop you?”

“It was quite a shock, Anna.”

“Oh dear,” she said, “but everybody drops everybody else at that age, don’t they?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Conrad said.

“You’re not cross with me still, are you, for doing that?”

“Cross!” he said. “Good God, Anna! Cross is what children get when they lose a toy! I lost a wife!”

She stared at him, speechless.

“Tell me,” he went on, “didn’t you have any idea how I felt at the time?”

“But Conrad, we were so young.”

“It destroyed me, Anna. It just about destroyed me.”

“But how… “How what?”

“How, if it meant so much, could you turn right around and get engaged to somebody else a few weeks later?”

“Have you never heard of the rebound?” he asked.

She nodded, gazing at him in dismay.

“I was wildly in love with you, Anna.”

She didn’t answer.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was a silly outburst. Please forgive me.”

There was a long silence.

Conrad was leaning back in his chair, studying her from a distance. She took another cigarette from the pack, and lit it, Then she blew out the match and placed it carefully in the ashtray. When she glanced up again, he was still watching her. There was an intent, far look in his eyes.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

He didn’t answer.

“Conrad,” she said, “do you still hate me for doing what I did?”

“Hate you?”

“Yes, hate me. I have a queer feeling that you do. I’m sure you do, even after all these years.”

“Anna,” he said.

“Yes, Conrad?”

He hitched his chair closer to the table, and leaned forward. “Did it ever cross your mind.

He stopped.

She waited.

He was looking so intensely earnest all of a sudden that she leaned forward herself.

“Did what cross my mind?” she asked.

“The fact that you and I…that both of us have a bit of unfinished business.”

She stared at him.

He looked back at her, his eyes as bright as two stars. “Don’t be shocked,” he said, “please.”

“Shocked?”

“You look as though I’d just asked you to jump out of the window with me.”

The room was full of people now, and it was very noisy. It was like being at a cocktail party. You had to shout to be heard.

Conrad’s eyes waited on her, impatient, eager.

“I’d like another martini,” she said.

“Must you?”

“Yes,” she said, “I must.”

In her whole life, she had been made love to by only one man-her husband, Ed.

And it had always been wonderful.

Three thousand times?

She thought more. Probably a good deal more. Who counts?

Assuming, though, for the sake of argument, that the exact figure (for there has to be an exact figure) was three thousand six hundred and eighty and knowing that every single time it happened it was an act of pure, passionate, authentic lovemaking between the same man and the same woman then how in heaven’s name could an entirely new man, an unloved stranger, hope to come in suddenly on the three thousand, six hundred and eighty-first time and be even halfway acceptable?

He’d be a trespasser.

All the memories would come rushing back. She would be lying there suffocated by memories.

She had raised this very point with Dr Jacobs during one of her sessions a few months back, and old Jacobs had said, “There will be no nonsense about memories, my dear Mrs Cooper. I wish you would forget that. Only the present will exist.”

“But how do I get there?” she had said. “How can I summon up enough nerve suddenly to go upstairs to a bedroom and take off my clothes in front of a new man, a stranger, in cold blood…?”

“Cold blood!” he had cried. “Good God, woman, it’ll be boiling hot!” And later he had said, “Do at any rate try to believe me, Mrs Cooper, when I tell you that any woman

who has been deprived of sexual congress after more than twenty years of practice of uncommonly frequent practice in your case, if I understand you correctly-any woman in those circumstances is going to suffer continually from severe psychological disturbances until the routine is reestablished. You are feeling a lot better, I know that, but it is my duty to inform you that you are by no means back to normal… To Conrad, Anna said, “This isn’t by any chance a therapeutic suggestion, is it?”

“A what?”

“A therapeutic suggestion.”

“What in the world do you mean?”

“It sounds exactly like a plot hatched up by my Dr Jacobs.”

“Look,” he said, and now he leaned right across the table and touched her left hand with the tip of one finger. “When I knew you before, I was too damn young and nervous to make that sort of proposition, much as I wanted to. I didn’t think there was any particular hurry then, anyway. I figured we had a whole lifetime before us. I wasn’t to know you were going to drop me.”

Her martini arrived. Anna picked it up and began to drink it fast. She knew exactly what it was going to do to her. It was going to make her float. A third martini always did that. Give her a third martini and within seconds her body would become completely weightless and she would go floating around the room like a wisp of hydrogen gas.

She sat there holding the glass with both hands as though it were a sacrament. She took another gulp. There was not much of it left now. Over the rim of her glass she could see Conrad watching her with disapproval as she drank. She smiled at him radiantly.

“You’re not against the use of anaesthetics when you operate, are you?” she asked.

“Please, Anna, don’t talk like that.”

“I am beginning to float,” she said.

“So I see,” he answered. “Why don’t you stop there?”

“What did you say?”

“I said, why don’t you stop?”

“Do you want me to tell you why?”

“No,” he said. He made a little forward movement with his hands as though he were going to take her glass away from her, so she quickly put it to her lips and tipped it high, holding it there for a few seconds to allow the last drop to run out. When she looked at Conrad again, he was placing a ten-dollar bill on the waiter’s tray, and the waiter was saying, “Thank you, sir. Thank you indeed,” and the next thing she knew she was floating out of the room and across the lobby of the hotel with Conrad’s hand cupped lightly under one of her elbows, steering her toward the elevators. They floated up to the twenty-second floor, and then along the corridor to the door of her bedroom. She fished the key out of her purse and unlocked the door and floated inside. Conrad followed, closing the door behind him. Then very suddenly, he grabbed hold of her and folded her up in his enormous arms and started kissing her with great gusto.

She let him do it.

He kissed her all over her mouth and cheeks and neck, taking deep breaths in between the kisses. She kept her eyes open, watching him in a queer detached sort of way, and the view she got reminded her vaguely of the blurry close-up view of a dentist’s face when he is working on an upper back tooth.

Then all of a sudden, Conrad put his tongue into one of her ears. The effect of this upon her was electric. It was as though a live two-hundred-volt plug had been pushed into an empty socket, and all the lights came on and the bones began to melt and the hot molten sap went running down into her limbs and she exploded into a frenzy. It was the kind of marvellous, wanton, reckless, flaming frenzy that Ed used to provoke in her so very often in the olden days by just a touch of the hand here and there. She flung her arms around Conrad’s neck and started kissing him back with far more gusto than he had ever kissed her, and although he looked at first as though he thought she was going to swallow him alive, he soon recovered his balance.

Anna hadn’t the faintest idea how long they stood there embracing and kissing with such violence, but it must have been for quite a while. She felt such happiness, such…such confidence again at last, such sudden overwhelming confidence in herself that she wanted to tear off her clothes and do a wild dance for Conrad in the middle of the room. But she did no such foolish thing. Instead, she simply floated away to the edge of the bed and sat down to catch her breath. Conrad quickly sat down beside her. She leaned her head against his chest and sat there glowing all over while he gently stroked her hair. Then she undid one button of his shin and slid her hand inside and laid it against his chest. Through his ribs, she could feel the beating of his heart.

“What do I see here?” Conrad said.

“What do you see where, my darling?”

“On your scalp. You want to watch this, Anna.”

“You watch it for me, dearest.”

“Seriously,” he said, “you know what this looks like? It looks like a tiny touch of androgenic alopecia.”

“Good.”

“No, it is not good. It’s actually an inflammation of the hair follicles, and it causes baldness. It’s quite common on women in their later years.”

“Oh shut up, Conrad,” she said, kissing him on the side of the neck. “I have the most gorgeous hair.”

She sat up and pulled off his jacket. Then she undid his tie and threw it across the room.

“There’s a little hook on the back of my dress,” she said. “Undo it, please.”

Conrad unhooked the hook, then unzipped the zipper and helped her to get out of the dress. She had on a rather nice pale-blue slip. Conrad was wearing an ordinary white shin, as doctors do, but it was now open at the neck, and this suited him. His neck had a little ridge of sinewy muscle running up vertically on either side, and when he turned his head the muscle moved under the skin. It was the most beautiful neck Anna had ever seen.

“Let’s do this very very slowly,” she said. “Let’s drive ourselves crazy with anticipation.”

His eyes rested a moment on her face, then travelled away, all the way down the length of her body, and she saw him smile.

“Shall we be very stylish and dissipated, Conrad, and order a bottle of champagne? I can ask room service to bring it up, and you can hide in the bathroom when they come in.”

“No,” he said. “You’ve had enough to drink already. Stand up, please.”

The tone of his voice caused her to stand up at once.

“Come here,” he said.

She went close to him. He was still sitting on the bed, and now, without getting up, he reached forward and began to take off the rest of her clothes. He did this slowly and deliberately. His face had become suddenly rather pale.

“Oh, darling,” she said, “how marvellous! You’ve got that famous thing! A real thick clump of hair growing out of each of your ears! You know what that means, don’t you? It’s the absolutely positive sign of enormous virility!” She bent down and kissed him on the ear. He went on taking off her clothes-the bra, the shoes, the girdle, the pants, and finally the stockings, all of which he dropped in a heap on the floor, The moment he had peeled off her last stocking and dropped it, he turned away. He turned right away from her as though she didn’t exist, and now he began to undress himself.

It was rather odd to be standing so close to him in nothing but her own skin and him not even giving her a second look. But perhaps men did these things. Ed might have been an exception. How could she know? Conrad took off his white shirt first, and after folding it very carefully, he stood up and carried it to a chair and laid it on one of the arms. He did the same with his undershirt. Then he sat down again on the edge of the bed and started removing his shoes. Anna remained quite still, watching him. His sudden change of mood, his silence, his curious intensity, were making her a bit afraid. But they were also exciting her. There was a stealth, almost a menace in his movements, as though he were some splendid animal treading softly toward the kill. A leopard.

She became hypnotized watching him. She was watching his fingers, the surgeon’s fingers, as they untied and loosened the laces of the left shoe, easing it off the foot, and placing it neatly half under the bed. The right shoe came next. Then the left sock and the right sock, both of them being folded together and laid with the utmost precision across the toes of the shoes. Finally the fingers moved up to the top of the trousers, where they undid one button and then began to manipulate the zipper. The trousers, when taken off, were folded along the creases, then carried over to the chair. The underpants followed.

Conrad, now naked, walked slowly back to the edge of the bed, and sat. Then at last, he turned his head and noticed her. She stood waiting…and trembling. He looked her slowly up and down. Then abruptly, he shot out a hand and took her by the wrist, and with a sharp pull he had her sprawled across the bed.

The relief was enormous. Anna flung her arms around him and held on to him tightly, oh so tightly, for fear that he might go away. She was in mortal fear that he might go away and not come back. And there they lay, she holding on to him as though he were the only thing left in the world to hold on to, and he, strangely quiet, watchful, intent, slowly disentangling himself and beginning to touch her now in a number of different places with those fingers of his, those expert surgeon’s fingers. And once again she flew into a frenzy.

The things he did to her during the next few moments were terrible and exquisite. He was, she knew, merely getting her ready, preparing her, or as they say in the hospital, prepping her for the operation itself, but oh God, she had never known or experienced anything even remotely like this. And it was all exceedingly quick, for in what seemed to her no more than a few seconds, she had reached that excruciating point of no return where the whole room becomes compressed into a single tiny blinding speck of light that is going to explode and tear one to pieces at the slightest extra touch. At this stage, in a swift rapacious parabola, Conrad swung his body on top of her for the final act.

And now Anna felt her passion being drawn out of her as if a long live nerve were being drawn slowly out of her body, a long live thread of electric fire, and she cried out to Conrad to go on and on and on, and as she did so, in the middle of it all, somewhere above her, she heard another voice, and this other voice grew louder and louder, more and more insistent, demanding to be heard: “I said are you wearing something?” the voice wanted to know.

“Oh darling, what is it?”

“I keep asking you, are you wearing something?”

“Who, me?”

“There’s an obstruction here. You must be wearing a diaphragm or some other appliance.”

“Of course not, darling. Everything’s wonderful. Oh, do be quiet.”

“Everything is not wonderful, Anna.”

Like a picture on the screen, the room swam back into focus. In the foreground was Conrad’s face. It was suspended above her, on naked shoulders. The eyes were looking directly into hers. The mouth was still talking.

“If you’re going to use a device, then for heaven’s sake learn to introduce it in the proper manner. There is nothing so aggravating as careless positioning. The diaphragm has to be placed right back against the cervix.”

“But I’m not wearing anything!”

“You’re not? Well, there’s still an obstruction.”

Not only the room but the whole world as well seemed slowly to be sliding away from

under her now.

“I feel sick,” she said.

“You what?”

“I feel sick.”

“Don’t be childish, Anna.”

“Conrad, I’d like you to go, please. Go now.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Go away from me, Conrad!”

“That’s ridiculous, Anna. Okay, I’m sorry I spoke. Forget it.”

“Go away!” she cried, “Go away! Go away! Go away!”

She tried to push him away from her, but he was huge and strong and he had her pinned.

“Calm yourself,” he said. “Relax. You can’t suddenly change your mind like this, in the middle of everything. And for heaven’s sake, don’t start weeping.”

“Leave me alone, Conrad, I beg you.”

He seemed to be gripping her with everything he had, arms and elbows, hands and fingers, thighs and knees, ankles and feet. He was like a toad the way he gripped her. He was exactly like an enormous clinging toad, gripping and grasping and refusing to let go. She had seen a toad once doing precisely this. It was copulating with a frog on a stone beside a stream, and there it sat, motionless, repulsive, with an evil yellow gleam in its eye, gripping the frog with its two powerful front paws and refusing to let go “Now stop struggling, Anna. You’re acting like a hysterical child. For God’s sake, woman, what’s eating you?”

“You’re hurting me!” she cried.

“Hurting you?”

“It’s hurting me terribly!”

She told him this only to get him away.

“You know why it’s hurting?” he said.

“Conrad! Please!”

“Now wait a minute, Anna. Allow me to explain.

“No!” she cried. “I’ve had enough explaining!”

“My dear woman.

“No!” She was struggling desperately to free herself, but he still had her pinned.

“The reason it hurts,” he went on, “is that you are not manufacturing any fluid. The mucosa is virtually dry.

“Stop!”

“The actual name is senile atrophic vaginitis. It comes with age, Anna. That’s why it’s called senile vaginitis. There’s not much one can do…”

At that point, she started to scream. The screams were not very loud, but they were screams nevertheless, terrible, agonized stricken screams, and after listening to them for a few seconds, Conrad, in a single graceful movement, suddenly rolled away from her and pushed her to one side with both hands. He pushed her with such force that she fell on to the floor.

She climbed slowly to her feet, and as she staggered into the bathroom, she was crying “Ed!…Ed!…Ed!… ” in a queer supplicating voice. The door shut.

Conrad lay very still listening to the sounds that came from behind the door. At first, he heard only the sobbing of the woman, but a few seconds later, above the sobbing, he heard the sharp metallic click of a cupboard being opened. Instantly, he sat up and vaulted off the bed and began to dress himself with great speed. His clothes, so neatly folded, lay ready at hand, and it took him no more than a couple of minutes to put them on. When that was done, he crossed to the minor and wiped the lipstick off his face with a handkerchief. He took a comb from his pocket and ran it through his fine black hair. He walked once round the bed to see if he had forgotten anything, and then, carefully, like a man who is tiptoeing from a room where a child is sleeping, he moved out into the corridor, closing the door softly behind him.