

A Father's Heart

Getting back from walking her dog, Fergus, a German Shepard, near the pond, Patty sees from the end of the road that her father is here. Fergus pricks up and runs ahead, and the pond water that had sleeked back his fur sprays out all around him in small, sun-lit beads. Patty lives out here with Brian Smolley.

They haven't been together very long, and she feels, although the evidence is against this, it's still touch and go with them. If Brian didn't look so much younger than he is—eleven years younger than Patty—and if his pale-blond beard didn't look so, well, experimental, Patty might feel a little less embarrassed about the way they appear as a couple. She never thinks it's funny when people she works with look up from their desks and say, "Are you and your boyfriend going steady? You think he might ask you to the prom?"

Brian's a cabinet maker. Patty works at a bank in an office building near the mall, where she's supervisor of the check-clearing department. Brian used to work for a franchise of Mr. Fix-It, but now he's taken over Patty's garage. He had a telephone put in. For the first few weeks of this arrangement, Patty called him from her office every two hours or so, but lately, she cut back to just a few times a day. It's finally beginning to seem to Patty that the curse against happiness which had stricken her family might be lifting.

A deal she has with Brian goes like this: Patty stopped saying, when she called him, "Are you going to stay with me?" And Brian stopped rubbing it in that the way he had met her was by saving her life.

They met at a bar called Davenport's, late on a Friday night. Patty was sitting at a table with some people from the bank. They always went over to Davenport's after work, and they always said, "It's just for the Happy Hour," but the place would be closing and there they'd still be. They never pretended that this was a great way to live their lives, but it felt safe to let the weekends float by, in a slow undulation from beers to shots of tequila, waiting for something to happen, like something might.

That night, they were trying to decide if the ash tray on their table, which someone had wiped with a tissue, was clean enough to put into it the ten small bags of peanuts someone had bought. The peanuts were dinner. Brian was near the jukebox, just standing there looking too young. "You people are grossing me out," he had said, and walked away. Then Patty hadn't been hungry anymore—at least, not for peanuts. A little while later, imagining herself as light as a bubble, she got into someone's car to be driven home. She'd leaned against the car door, which wasn't shut tight. When it opened, she tumbled out backward, head first.

It wasn't immediately clear to the person who was driving that this was happening, and the car kept going for a while, with Patty hanging there. Her hair had grazed the ground; she had found herself looking upside down at Brian Smolley. He was standing in the parking lot with a bottle of beer in his hand. His mouth was where his eyes should have been, all blond and hairy.

He looked good against the sky—the gray sky of late March, it had been, with too many clouds for real darkness. That's where Patty had felt she would fall to. Then Brian was catapulted into motion, spinning and waving and crying out. Things were whirling and fuzzy; things were in pieces and very blurred, but Patty remembers what it had felt

like to understand, as she fell from the car, that her direction would have to be down, not up, and that someone who might have cared what happened to her was running toward her.

When Brian helped her to her feet, Patty acted as if falling out of cars was something she regularly did, like a hobby, but this was what she was doing: suddenly sober, she stood next to Brian Smolley, a new person, with the feel beside her of his arm and elbow and shoulder. For a minute they stood there in a casual way, like two people waiting for a bus. Maybe, Patty had thought, this is the first thing to do when you meet someone you'll perhaps fall in love with: get the hang of where you come up to.

"Patty, Patty, get back in," her friends in the car were saying. But Brian had taken her home, and that was that. Patty discovered later that when the driver of the car saw he'd lost her, he'd reversed, and had almost run her and Brian over. There'd been scrapes on her hands and forehead, but not anything she wouldn't get over.

"Don't feed my dog, he's on a diet," Patty calls to her father across the yard.

Fergus, the traitor, is already leaping toward Bill Murcher's pickup truck to see what's in it for him. Brian is on the porch steps. Patty knows that he's trying to signal something, but they haven't worked it out yet how to talk to each other in secret code, across distances. All he's wearing is a pair of cut-off jeans. His chest is very white; it's almost hairless. It's seven-thirty in the morning, in July.

"I brought chew bones from the store," Patty's dad shouts. He has his work clothes on, with the familiar brown jacket that says, in yellow embroidery, "Murcher's Discount Lumber." From the back of the truck he takes out treats: chew bones in the

shapes of a taco, a red steak, and a shoe. Now Patty won't see Fergus again until night; he runs off with his prizes and forgets that she exists.

She shouts to her father, "He'll get sick again from the stuff they use for coloring."

"It's just food dye, Patty!"

That's how they talk to each other these days: by screaming. Outside or in, it doesn't matter. They talk at the tops of their voices like people with old-fashioned walkie-talkies, or in the days when telephones were brand new.

He isn't used to Brian yet. But it isn't just Patty and her boyfriend. It's everything. It's what happened with him and Patty's mom; it's the bright summer morning; it's the little red house Patty bought on her own; it's the splitting apart of things that used to feel tightly held together; it's the fact that he feels, these days, as weak as the straw of a broom; it's the fact that his daughter is gleaming and intact, and that she has, in her life, what he doesn't.

When Patty's father shouted, "It's just food dye, Patty," his voice rose even louder at the last two words, so it sounded like he was saying, "DIE, PATTY." This isn't something Patty thinks she is imagining.

Patty goes over to Brian. "I wasn't dressed yet when I heard him driving in," Brian whispers. "Don't be mad he dropped by. He told me he's not feeling so good. He had some chest pains last night."

"He should go to a doctor, not to his daughter."

A few weeks ago, at the start of the summer, Patty's father had brought her a bag of tomato plants. His lumber yard runs sales on flats of seedlings around Memorial Day. He'd delivered the leftovers. He wanted her to start gardening. The plants had outgrown

the flats. Her dad had placed them in a grocery bag, which he'd left on her back porch. She had found the plants several days afterward when she went out to the back to see what the smell was.

It had been hot. The tomatoes were rotten, and the whole bag of had been turned to brownish soup. Brian had wanted Patty to get into her car and drive out to a garden supply store and replace them, but she pointed out to him that the dirt on her land was too dusty, and she was happy to get their vegetables from the grocery store. Patty threw the rotten plants away and forgot about them until the morning last week when her dad drove by to see how the garden was coming.

Why he couldn't have planted those tomatoes himself in his own back yard, the way Patty's mom had done, before she left him, he wasn't saying. He had pulled into the driveway, tossed Fergus some treats, and then rolled down his window and screamed, "PATTY WHERE ARE MY TOMATOES?" When she shouted from her kitchen what had happened, the truth, she had seen the hurt look on his face, but she had not invited him in. She did not want him bringing bad luck.

Her father kicks at a stone in the yard where she did not make a garden. Some dirt falls off his boot. Encountering her father feels like watching a burly, heavy man sit down in front of a piano. When he lifts his arms to start playing, and brings them crashing to the keys, you want to hear music, but you know he'll just smash the whole thing. Patty's mom has been living away from him for six months.

"I thought I'd make you some furniture," he calls out in his big voice.

"Gee, that would be great," says Brian. Patty resents it that Brian doesn't believe her when she tells him that her father's hearing is normal.

Her dad shouts, "A coffee table, I was thinking! Hold on a minute, I'll get the design." He starts walking over to his truck, then says over his shoulder, "You got a jigsaw, in case the edges come out a little plain, and need some jazzing? The jazz stuff, I'm not good with."

"Brian has everything!" Patty shouts.

Bill Murcher climbs into the truck, reaches into the glove compartment. Brian nudges Patty so hard she almost loses her balance on the step. "Can't you see he's trying to get along with you?"

"Then why did he wait to make me furniture until I start to live with a carpenter?"

"He wants you to like him."

"You're taking his side?"

"There's no sides."

"There are, Brian."

"Look at him. Every time you see him, his hair's more gray. So is his *face*. If he asks you again to go and talk to your mom for him, I think you should do it."

"Do not even mention my mom."

They're talking in whispers. Patty thinks, here I am, this is what I am, in front of my house, with two men--one I scream to, and one I whisper to, with nothing going on in between.

"You OK over there, Mr. Murcher?" Brian says. It's suddenly very quiet. The chill that comes over Patty makes her shiver, and she understands why people use the expression, for times such as these, "My blood ran cold."

What does she see? Her father with his hand on the door of the truck, half in and half out. His body seems doubled over. His hands are clutching at his chest as if he's trying to pull off his jacket and shirt without unbuttoning them. Perhaps he's joking, to stir up some sympathy, Patty thinks. Patty feels like saying to Brian, "Falling out of vehicles must be something I inherited."

"Mr. Murcher?" Brian runs past her down the steps, and then a strange thing happens. It's not a hallucination. Patty sees a man she used to know, by the name of Harry Paulson. He looks as real as if he'd walked over to her from a ray of yellow sunlight.

Harry Paulson is as old as the last time Patty saw him. He's dressed in an old tweed coat; his face is brownish and wrinkled, like a walnut shell. He also wears a red wool cap, and seems to be thinking about something very deeply. His mouth is scrunched to one side. He has powerful upper arms that are out of proportion to the rest of his body—he looks, as he had looked to Patty always, like Popeye.

Harry Paulson had been a paper cutter in the mill not far from the Murchers' house. He had lived at the end of their street. Sometimes on a Friday night when Bill Murcher had a poker game going with guys from the lumber yard, Harry came walking down the sidewalk, as slowly and patiently as a barge.

"Here comes Harry," someone glancing out the window would say. Five or six hands later he'd appear in the doorway to join the game. Patty's mom had always put her to bed hours earlier, but after she'd gone into the big bedroom across the hall from Patty's, and after she'd turned on her television set, loud enough to drown out the men, down Patty went to be with her dad, looking over his shoulder at his cards, learning everything

she could. She fetched beers and opened them, and asked questions which the men couldn't answer. "If poker is fun, why is no one laughing?" "Why is the thing you opened beers with called a church key?"

One night, in a strange voice, Harry Paulson said, "I have to go to the bathroom real bad." He put his cards on the table face up. Patty knew that this was a terrible thing to do, and quickly turned them over for him. Then Harry Paulson pushed back his chair, slowly, slowly. "Oh, my gut," he said.

He had clear gray kind eyes. But instead of getting up, he just sat there and looked at Patty. Their eyes, with him sitting and Patty standing, were exactly level. When he blinked, it was exactly like a light going out. The men at the table were jumping up, crying out. Patty knew, solemnly and calmly, without being told, what had happened to him. She also knew that she would now forever have a claim on him. She was only a child, but she knew that she was the last human being Harry Paulson laid eyes on.

She must have been allowed to watch the ambulance take Harry away. She remembers standing on the porch with her mother and father, with cold, white winter stars overhead. She remembers the way the ambulance light lit their faces and clothes, and what it had felt like to stand between parents who were as solid to her as two fence posts. "I saw Harry Paulson's soul, just before it went out of his body," Patty had told them.

Now, in the yellow light of a summer morning, he inclines his ear to Patty to hear what she wants to say. She tells him, "You can't have him, Harry." Then she looks again at her father and feels that her own heart might be stopping in her chest, as still as a fist.

She doesn't expect Harry to answer her, and in the manner of ghosts, he does not. His eyes are his same old eyes, as gray as the buds of a pussywillow, as bright as a cat's. Harry Paulson! Patty must have always known that she would see him again. When he vanishes, it's as simple and natural as if a cloud had covered the sun.

Bill Murcher is leaning against his truck. "I'm fine, I'm fine," he's saying to Brian.

"IF YOU DON'T GO SEE A DOCTOR RIGHT NOW YOU ARE NEVER COMING BACK ON MY PROPERTY, DAD," Patty screams. From the back of her house she hears the barking of her dog. She knows he's running toward the front, and will appear any moment, bounding and yelping and happy to see her; and then the world will be back to normal again, just spinning again in its usual way.

Later that morning, on an early lunch hour, Patty drives into town to the A.N.I.C. house. It's run by the county. It's a two-story, faded green-shingled building off Main Street, not far from the downtown shops. The road is a dead end, and the only other thing on it, sprawling the length of the block, is an auto body shop. "Anick" is what it's called, for "Association of Non-Independent Citizens." The day supervisor is Ann Murcher, Patty's mom, who's been living for the last half year in the spare room of a social worker she knows.

Nothing about the Anick would ever change its unhomeyness. It's one step away from institutions. The living room has too many mismatched chairs; the pictures on the walls could have hung at a Howard Johnson's. In the kitchen, where the clutter of ordinary life would have gathered, names on index cards are taped to the backs of the chairs around the table: Roger, Didi, Gary, Mary Jean, John.

Patty's mom is in the living room at the desk. She peers at Patty over the tops of her bifocals. "I know he went to the hospital, and I know how much he scared you, and I also know that he's all right," she says. "Marjorie called me." Marjorie Gresky is the assistant manager of the lumber yard. Patty feels sure that Marjorie must have spelled out to her mom many intricate, exaggerated details of what had happened. The people at the lumber yard want Patty's parents to be married again as much as she does. They probably have the same reason: living apart from each other, Bill and Ann Murcher's moods on a daily basis are even worse than all the years they'd been together. A "trial separation" is what everyone is calling this, but it seems to Patty that the trial part must be over.

"Brian's with him," Patty says. "It was a minor one, a little shock, but no one is saying it won't happen again."

Patty's mom is doing paperwork. She's copying, from a notebook to an official-looking form, phrases that had been uttered that week by one of her people, Didi, who's fifty years old. Patty looks over her mother's shoulder. "Oh my little cupcake, oh I love this cupcake so much," her mom writes. When Patty was a child, and had come here sometimes on school vacations, her mom had seemed to her as amazing as an Annie Sullivan. Patty wonders if it used to amuse her mother that she'd tied a bandana on her eyes, and had talked with her voice low and guttural, playing Helen Keller. Perhaps this was something her mom had worried about.

"Brian is the person who moved into my house, in case you've forgotten what's going on with me," Patty says.

"Patty, I know about your boyfriend."

"He's more than just a boyfriend." It sounds vague, but Patty doesn't know a way to convey to her mother how extraordinary it feels to her that this man has walked into her life.

Patty's mom says, "Remember I told you last week that I didn't think Roger would make it in the sheltered workshop? I was wrong. He had a rough start, but he's going there every day now." "I know you're worried. Mom, go and see him. He only has one heart, Mom. You don't have to talk to him. Just sit there."

"I sat there for thirty-six years," says Ann Murcher. She doesn't say this with any bitterness; it's just a fact.

"I think he's trying to learn how to say things."

"Is he still screaming at you?"

"No," says Patty. "He stopped."

"Do me a favor. Go stand in the doorway so Gary can see you."

Gary is a big, white-haired man, with a body like a polar bear's. Patty's mom had got him released from the state hospital a couple of years ago, and now he's working at the auto body shop across the street. He's a painter of cars, a sort of miracle. At half-hour intervals through the day he has to look out at the window and see Ann. He's just like a ship out there, needing sight of a lighthouse.

Patty goes over to the doorway and stands there in profile. She and her mom look alike. After a moment, she sees Gary's head at the dusty glass. Patty waves to him. If it happens that he looks for her mom and doesn't see her, he'll come barrelling across the street with a sprayer in his hands, noisy and baffled and worried. This, Patty knows, is something he would think of as "love."

Patty says to her mom, "If you go and see Dad, I'll take all your people out for a drive. We'll go to the mall, to a movie."

"I remember the last time, so never mind," says Ann. She's right. Patty's no good with this sort of thing. Last summer, she had taken Roger, Didi, and Gary one night to the Dairy Bar for ice cream, and Roger got away from her and tried to enter a station wagon of a family he liked the looks of; then, on the way back, the three of them hung out the windows of Patty's car and shouted at people on the sidewalks. They said things like, "Hey, look at that retard," and, "Your mother sure dresses you funny!"

"Well, you could come to my house and have dinner," says Patty. "I think it's time you met Brian."

The phone rings. There's a sound upstairs of thumping, as if someone has fallen to the floor. "I'll get it, Mrs. M.," a young man shouts. This is John, who has cerebral palsy, and who refuses to use his crutches indoors. Patty hears him scooting along the upstairs hall on his bum, with his hard plastic braces clumping. The upstairs phone is on a table in the hall; the way John answers it is by taking hold of a leg of the table, shaking it, and knocking down the phone. If it works right, the handpiece falls into his grasp. But then it's too quiet. Ann gets up, goes over to the bottom of the stairs. "John?"

"It's all taken care of, Mrs. M."

"Who was it?"

"It was the riding stable. The horses have hoof disease! I'll guess we'll have to only go to the video store!"

Ann sighs. "He has a horseback lesson at three, and he hates it because he can't believe he won't fall off."

Another voice, a woman's, high-pitched and girlish, says, from around the corner at the top of the stairs, "There's no sick horses, Mrs. M. It was your lawyer." This is Mary Jean, who never comes into the public rooms if someone's with Ann, especially if the someone is Patty.

"You have a lawyer?" says Patty.

"Mary Jean thinks that everyone who calls me here is one. She wants me to get a divorce and move in here with them," says Ann, with a sigh.

What kind of a second chance does Patty's father have, against this? From his point of view, Patty realizes, her mother's people must seem as tightly knotted around her as the Seven Dwarfs. Patty remembers what her mom had said when she'd moved out. "It's better to be lonely alone and call it solitude, than be lonely with someone else, and call it marriage." Until Patty met Brian, this was something she had believed herself.

Ann says, "Do you want to stay and have lunch with us?" Patty shakes her head. She imagines her mom writing "PATTY" on a card and taping it to a kitchen chair, then handing her a plate containing carrot sticks and a peanut butter sandwich. Patty looks out at the street at yellow sunlight, at the green leafy elms, at the shiny glints of cars. She looks down at the stripes of her light summer dress, and feels happy and proud that her eyes can see colors.

"I'd better get to my office," Patty says. Her mom walks her to the door. "Aren't you sick of not being with him, Mom?"

She looks away, and Patty says, "People change. Maybe you could ask him out on a date."

"Oh, Patty," says her mom. But she doesn't sound like this would be out of the question.

"I probably shouldn't mention this, but something fell out of Dad's truck." Patty takes from the pocket of her dress a sheet of paper--it's got the letterhead from the lumber yard, and on it is the pencilled diagram her dad had drawn. Patty doesn't say, "This is a coffee table he wants to make me." She says instead, "What do you think this looks like?"

The correct answer would have been, "A coffin."

"A box," says Ann. But the lines of her face have tightened; she knows how to read signs.

"He's probably not trying to tell us anything. It's probably just something he doodled." Patty puts the paper back in her pocket. She's tempted to tell her mom that she saw Harry Paulson, but decides to keep it to herself. Upstairs, someone has turned on a radio; they hear the dull, booming sound of too much bass. "If you want to come out and walk Fergus around the pond with me and Brian tonight, I'd love it, Mom," Patty tells her. It feels good to say the word. She says it again. "I'd really love it."

"Patty, you met this guy at a bar. How can anything that's any good come out of a bar?"

"It did," says Patty. She sees her mother looking up, to where enormous white clouds are floating by slowly, in the clear blue sheet of the sky, high above the roof of the auto body shop. Ann says in a quiet voice, "John told me this morning that the clouds look like dinosaurs, like ghosts of the dinosaurs. He says they're watching over us."

"I'm glad to know someone is," Patty says. She and her mother touch the sides of their cheeks, and hold them there for a minute, and Patty kisses her.

When Patty walks down the steps, then down the sidewalk to the road, she likes the way it feels to know that her mom is watching her. Then the phone starts ringing again. Maybe, Patty hopes, no one upstairs will get it this time, and her mom will have to answer it herself. "That better be you, Dad," Patty's thinking.