

D & C

Caleb Vance sat in the lounge of the hospital's Short Stay Unit waiting for someone on the staff to come out and tell him his wife had returned from recovery. Actually he sat on a hard, backless seat in the hospital foyer that was adjacent to the lounge and formed with it an L around the offices and treatment rooms of the SSU. The foyer section of the L was an atrium of steel and glass, reflecting that scraped-out look of contemporary office architecture and décor.

For several minutes Caleb had been listening to the prattle of two small children and two adults—country people. One was a tall man with a dappled beard draping his blue and white checked shirt. He wore jeans and gray lumberjack socks with red rings sunk in layers over his ankles and bulging inside brown suede Hush Puppy slippers. The man kept talking to one of the two children, a little boy about four years old who kept wandering away from the adults. The man said, "Bubby, get over here. That one extra step's going to get your little hiney set on fire." The boy came back, grinning. When he came close to the man, the man winked at him.

The other adult was a fat woman with stringy black hair and glasses. She was dressed in pink pants and a white blouse and a white sweater. Her blue tennis shoes were dirty, and the flesh of her ankle bones shined like little light bulbs above her socks. Between her fat thighs stood the second child, a girl about two dressed in a bright pink sweat suit that shined against the dullness of the woman's pink pants. The child gurgled incessantly, most of the time with her thumb in her mouth, and the woman talked back to her in sweet tones and now and then wiped saliva from the child's chin with a wadded tissue she had drawn from her sweater pocket.

After a while another woman came in carrying still another child. The new woman said hello to the others then took a seat between them and Caleb. She put a heavy bag down on the seat and then stooped to pick a child's blanket off the floor. Caleb had noticed the blanket before but hadn't thought much about its being there. The new woman looked at the other one and asked, "Is this yours?"

"No," the first woman said.

"Well, I guess somebody just dropped it here then." She looked at Caleb as if she might ask if the blanket were his, out of pure politeness, but apparently she decided even politeness didn't call for anything so ridiculous, so she laid the blanket across a backless seat beside her and then put her little girl on her knee.

"She here to have tubes put in her ears?" the fat woman asked.

"To have them taken out," the new woman said.

"Taken out?" said the bearded man. He seemed completely baffled by this reversal of logic.

"She's had a lot of ear infections lately, and the doctor wants to take them out to see if that's what's causing them. They've been in there since she was three."

"How old is she now?" the fat woman asked.

"She's five and a half."

"Looks like they'd have come out on their own by now. This one's going to have them put in." The fat woman nodded toward the boy.

"Imagine that," said the new woman. "One having them in and one having them out. It's all hard to keep up with sometimes, isn't it?"

"Well, if this don't work I'm going to rent him out to some loggers," the man said. "He sounds like two chain saws a going nights."

The new woman laughed politely.

Caleb felt keenly the differences between himself and all these people. He was wearing one of his several expensive suits, expecting to go into the office later, provided his wife was okay, of course. She was in for a D & C, the first hint of female trouble. They were themselves well past the stage of infected ears. Their own son was away at school in Maryland, and though their daughter was in only the seventh grade, Caleb knew they had passed that unrecrossable bridge between childhood and adolescence, which was a matter of a change in the structure of love as much as anything else. It seemed to him suddenly that they were past a lot of things with which these very different people here in this common room were grappling.

The country family, their voices, their male angularity and female unkempt roundness, their country accents and country humor, their clothes—these were the marks of their difference; and Caleb couldn't help but wonder how they were paying for the boy's operation. Oh, they were just country people, people with bad grammar and bad personal habits who voted against their own best interests in every election because they never understood what their own best interests were.

The receptionist came to the window and stared out into the atrium. "Alts," she said, and then, "Plemmons." Satisfied she had identified the right people, she said, "You can come on back now."

The new woman rose with her child and her large bag and started immediately for the wide brown door beside the receptionist's window. The fat woman gave the little girl to the bearded man and took the boy by the hand. The man rose and gathered a cloth bag and two books—a Bible and a thick book that looked to be one of those Bible commentaries. "You want to take these?" the man asked the fat woman. She reached for the bag and said, "You hold on to those," meaning the books. The man reached down and scooped up the little girl, who was just darting away, and the woman carried the boy through the brown door. The man sat back down, thrust forward his long thin legs, threw one ankle over the other, then slipped the little girl between his legs like a piece of cloth through scissors.

For a while then Caleb forgot about these people and concentrated on why he himself was there. He felt sorry for his wife for having to go through this. Although he had discovered that apparently it was not so unusual, especially not for a woman forty-eight, the whole ordeal had put him in a peculiar mood. He found his thoughts wandering, and even more unusually and worse, sudden bursts of emotion had come upon him. It hardly seemed possible that she could be that old. Theirs had been a good life, in some ways, but he had always known that she had never been truly happy. He had known when he married her that she was deeply set in her family's country ways. They had gone to high school and then to college together and then he had gone on to graduate school, after a year of which they married. She worked at a clerical job for a drug company while he finished school, and then they moved away from both their families so he

could take a job teaching accounting and finance at a small state college in North Carolina.

It was while they were there that the difference between them was made unmistakably clear, the difference that would keep them forever split in some ways. At a party at the home of his department chair, his wife had fumbled badly through conversations with several members of the faculty and their more sophisticated spouses. After one or two of these verbal embarrassments, Caleb had begun to keep his distance from her. Sometimes he would look back on that night and chastise himself. If only he had stuck by her, if only he had come between her and those damned social vultures. But he had instead denied any interest in her by remaining aloof. Toward her family and his own, toward their backwardness, their sameness in the backwardness, the nasal accents and "ain't" and "hain't" and "I seen it," he had never felt hatred exactly, just the same cold contempt one feels toward the unfortunate member of any family. Oh, Judy had not been that inept, just off guard enough to say "youns" a couple of times. And at one point during the evening, while passing an open bedroom door, Caleb had overheard Professor James Townsend saying to a couple of ladies, "Have you heard her talk about how they're trying to get the bank to *loan* them money to buy a house. To *loan* it to them. Jesus, I think if I hear it one more time I'm going to have to tell the woman the verb is *lend*; *loan* is a noun." James Townsend. Then he was a tall, forty-five-year-old bachelor whose classes were very popular among female English majors, but no one could hold anything like a two-way conversation with him. Caleb wondered if he was still alive. He hoped he was. He hoped that at that very moment Professor Emeritus James Townsend was alive somewhere suffering horrible cirrhotic pain, the bastard. The whole damned world used *loan* as a verb.

Caleb did not know if his wife ever became aware of the sport she had provided that night. She was, after all, and despite having gone to college, still a real country Daisy in those days. She had known nothing about how to estimate a sour face or a raised eyebrow. But she must have known something, for thereafter whenever they were invited to parties, always the departmental parties, never smaller, more intimate gatherings, it was she who first suggested a reason they should decline the invitation. And he always agreed. Sometimes he steeled himself against his colleagues' not-so-secret pity by his secret knowledge of her extraordinary abilities in bed, but in truer moments he had to admit that she was not so extraordinary—certainly adequate, and quick to learn and perform what she learned. But, no, not extraordinary.

Except for the holidays, when they went back to Kentucky, they spent most of that year alone in a small house they rented in an older, decaying neighborhood. Convinced that it was time to start again, the next year Caleb resigned his position, borrowed money, and entered law school. Judy worked a number of jobs to put food on the table and gave birth to their son. Things were changing.

The doors of the hospital slid open and a young woman, perhaps a girl, really, entered. She was a well-made girl, blonde, tight jeans, firm thighs, nice chest, but a face too hard for a girl, and too much made up the way country girls do to try to soften the hardness. She had either been married or had one or more steady lovers, Caleb guessed.

"Why lookie here," the bearded man said. "Told you Aunt Suzie was coming." The little girl looked up at Aunt Suzie and shrieked and struggled to escape the bearded man's scissors hold on her. The man released her, and she fell immediately into Aunt Suzie's arms.

"They already went back?" Aunt Suzie asked the bearded man as she put the little girl over her shoulder. Caleb winced at the rock-hardness of the words coming out of her firm little mouth.

"Yeah, they went back just a few minutes ago," the man said. He was rising, picking up the Bible and the book of Bible commentary, if that's what it was. "I'm going to go check on them and take these back there." The man started strolling toward the brown door, tucking the books under his arms school-girl fashion and striding like Abe Lincoln across the tile floor. He would be a shouter in church, Caleb was sure of it. In a few minutes he might have every nurse, patient, and doctor in the SSU down on their knees blessing the tubes that were about to go into the little boy's ears. Jesus, they even called him Bubba, like a bad hick joke.

Caleb was a mountain man's name.

Just as the bearded man went through the brown door a woman came out of it and immediately began looking around for something. She spied the child's blanket that the other woman had picked up off the floor and laid across the seat not far from Caleb. She came toward it, smiling at Caleb. "There it is," she said. "Got to have that. Security, you know." Caleb smiled back at her politely. For the first time he thought about that blanket for what it really was. Security, the woman had said. Caleb had thought the other woman had picked up the blanket only because someone had paid money for it. But now he believed she had picked it up because she knew something he didn't about the importance of blankets.

This new and apparently more sophisticated woman picked up the blanket and carried it with her back through the brown door. Caleb needed to go to the bathroom, but he was afraid they would come and tell him that his wife had come back from recovery. It was important, he thought, for him to be right there

and ready, even though he had talked to the doctor less than an hour before and been assured that the news was all good. The doctor was a friend of theirs from church. He and Caleb served on the church treasury board together. After he had finished explaining to Caleb everything he had done to his wife and what she shouldn't do for the next day or two and then what she shouldn't do for the next week or two, he winked at Caleb and said, "You'll probably want to wait outside in the lounge. A lot of children are having tubes put in their ears this morning and it's going to be noisy back here."

Caleb had come out of the meeting room then. He had gone directly to the hospital cafeteria for a cup of coffee and then returned here to sit on this uncomfortable seat in this awfully exposed atrium and wait for them to come and tell him his wife was back from recovery. He began to realize now that he and the people he had been watching that morning were like figures on display for anyone coming into the hospital. *They*, he felt, could see the difference, all of them—the white-coated technicians and smartly dressed clerical women carrying computer programs and manuals who paused just beyond them to slide their hospital ID cards through the electronic time clock. There were also visitors who passed them to go deeper into the hospital than the SSU for some more serious business, and the weary ones who were coming out after an all-night vigil, perhaps at the bedside of a terminal case.

Soon Caleb would have to return to Kentucky to keep such a vigil at the bedside of his widowed father, whom he saw three or four times a year, a thin old man with bad teeth and a crooked back who walked one year with a cane, the next with a walker, and now was spending his last months in a nursing home being pushed around in a wheelchair by the paid hands of a stranger. What was the name of that sweet young woman he had met during his visit last spring? Margaret. Margaret had been pushing

his father around and talking to him as if he were a little child. She had shown Caleb around the place. Judy hadn't come with him. Margaret took her time, as if there wasn't anything else in the world she needed to do. Women like Margaret worked to earn enough money to feed their kids, or to put their husbands through college. It suddenly struck Caleb how long it had been since last spring. Had he taken too much comfort in Margaret? Could you let a woman like Margaret do everything for you—even feel—just because she needed your money? But, no, Margaret was Margaret.

She was not like Judy, not like she was now anyway. His wife worked for a florist now, arranging flowers and hand painting vases and pen stands and paperweights. Earlier that year Caleb had looked at her while he was working on their 1040 and said, "Why the hell do you keep working? It's just more taxes."

"I work to keep up with who I am," she had said.

"Well, just who the hell are you?" Caleb had said.

He regretted saying it. There was much he wished he had not said and done over the years, or failed to say or do. He wished that he had not gotten into the seemingly unbreakable habit years ago of making himself a highball each evening and retiring to his study to read while his wife read the newspaper in the living room and their daughter went to her room to do her homework or talk to her friends on the phone. In recent years his wife had taken to brandy in the evenings, starting before dinner and drinking well into the evening, drinking into an ever deeper, profound, and grammarless silence. He wished that every Wednesday evening when his wife called their son up in Maryland that he had more to say to him than how are your classes and how is your money. He wished that their lives had not gone the way they had, but, Christ, would it have been better to have stayed up there in Kentucky and have what those people there had and what these people here this morning having tubes

put into their children's ears had, and to talk the way they did? Would it have been better to have spent their lives in all that poverty, all that ignorance? Two weeks ago at church their friend the doctor who had just a littler earlier scraped out his wife's insides to make her regular again had taught a Sunday school lesson trying to make all their kind feel sorry for themselves for the way they'd lost their rural values, like it was the world's fault or something. He hadn't done it, but Caleb kept wanting to say Why don't you give up that two-hundred and seventy thousand dollar house and take your children out of that school and chuck your six-digit income and head on back to the hills?

They made him sick—people who thought roughing it meant living in a town without a mall that boasted four major department stores. There was nothing about slaughtering hogs that was good for the soul, there was nothing in ignorance that bred goodness, and there was nothing in poverty that made you independent. That was all a lot of trash. Caleb, having been one when it was still possible to really be one, knew that country people were no better than other people.

But then he thought if the people passing him and the others in this atrium now could see what was at that nursing home in Kentucky, they might be less sure of the differences. The suit, the shoes, even the posture, might not adequately conceal the past. What if someone he had known in boyhood should come through those sliding doors and recognize him?

But nothing like that was going to happen, of course. Instead the fat woman came back through the brown door smiling at Aunt Suzie and the little girl.

"He's just a having a good time waiting for them to come and get him," the fat woman said. She took the little girl, and the younger woman went through the brown door. That was odd, Caleb thought. Why would Bubba's mother stay out here while another woman went back into the SSU to be with him? But

maybe the fat woman wasn't really Bubba's mother as he had assumed. That was another thing about country people, you could never be sure how old they were or how they were related. For them it wasn't a problem most of the time because they all knew each other up in those narrow, country hollows, but you might assume a man was a grandpa to his wife if you didn't know them.

The fat woman started gurgling sweetly with the little girl all over again, bouncing the child on her round thighs all the while.

Shortly, another fat woman, accompanied by a chubby little boy about ten years old, came through the hospital doors. "Looky," the woman with the little girl said. She held the little girl up to face the new fat woman and the chubby little boy. The little girl cooed, and the woman and the little boy made identical faces of mock surprise. The new fat woman was holding a plastic shopping bag toward the other woman. "Brought you some doughnuts," she said.

Suddenly a child began screaming behind the brown door, a siren-like scream that strangely reminded Caleb of the cry his cousin Teddy had made one afternoon over forty years ago when Caleb had knocked him down and gone after his teeth with a pair of hoof nippers. The little girl in pink thrust her saliva-slick hand toward the brown door. "Bubba," she said. "Bubba." She looked from one fat woman to the other. "Bubba," she said again, and she pointed again to the door.

"No, that's not Bubba, honey," the first fat woman said.

"Bubba, Bubba," the child repeated insistently.

"No, baby, that's not Bubba," the fat woman said again, and both the women laughed at the little girl.

Then the fat woman took the proffered doughnuts, just as the younger woman came out through the brown door again. The

chubby little boy saw her and said, "There's Suzie." Suzie was apparently a favorite among the children.

The three women talked in a circle for a few minutes about what was going on with Bubba, but not exclusively about Bubba for Caleb heard a few details about their plans for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving was the following week. Caleb had hardly given it a thought.

While Judy's parents still lived, Caleb's family had driven to Kentucky every year for Thanksgiving. There were forty or fifty relatives to visit over the course of three days, all seemingly jolly people who talked about nothing except people they knew and the jobs they had. They also visited with Caleb's people, but at Caleb's parents' house there was little of such jollity. There was instead a quiet and desperate wish for the visit to end. And then Caleb's mother died and then his wife's father and then his wife's mother. They hadn't been to Kentucky for the holidays in seven or eight years. Caleb wondered if the next time he saw his father the old man would know who he was.

Suddenly, the little girl broke away from the circle of women and went flying toward the brown door. The chubby boy went rolling after her. "No, Chelsea, no," he was saying. He could barely speak for laughing. "Bubba, Bubba," the little girl was screaming.

The boy caught her just at the door, which she could not have opened anyway, and turned her by her shoulders back toward the grownups. The boy's face gleamed with the excitement of familial guilt, as if they were all implicated by the little girl's mischief. Strangely, Caleb felt a wicked rush of responsibility himself, as if he participated in the scandal just because had been sitting among them so long now.

After a moment the two fat women headed for the brown door together. The chubby boy started after them, but the young

woman, Suzie, who had taken the little girl and sat down, said, "No, Marvin. Can't but two be back there at a time."

"Well, Ralph's back there," Marvin protested.

"He'll be coming out soon as they get back there. Anyway, children ain't allowed."

Marvin's face fell, but it wasn't long before the bearded man came out and went directly to him and gave him a noogie. That seemed to restore the boy's disposition, and Caleb found himself mildly happy for that.

Caleb wondered why it was taking so long for them to come to tell him his wife was back from recovery, but when he looked at his watch, he saw that only forty minutes had passed. The doctor had told him it would probably be an hour. He was going to have to teach himself patience. He thought briefly of something relating to the Frazier case, took a cell phone from his inner coat pocket, and called Janet at his office to leave some instructions. He had been impatient all his life. Impatient with people and impatient with systems. He had taught himself to read French because he was too impatient to take another foreign language after finishing Latin in college. His children were like him that way. Each had been and still was an eager learner. But his impatience had cost him their love. Their indifference pained him now. Normally he didn't think about it too much, but his trip to the hospital made it necessary to think about such things. God, his little girl rarely said goodbye to him anymore when he dropped her off at school in the mornings. He thought of how only a few years ago when she got out of the car in the mornings she always said goodbye. And his son before her had gotten out of the car each morning and said, "Bye Daddy I love you." Had said it without pauses, with automatic love. His impatience had made it impossible for that automatic love to become the more mature kind of love. Patience is what he had to teach himself. He had to learn to wait for other people. He had to learn to watch

things, like that blanket on the floor. Patience would have helped him to really *see* it. He had been impatient all his life and all it had ever gotten him was the habit of impatience, and money.

Try to live without it, he corrected himself. But it was harder and harder each year to keep the income up, as there were more and more lawyers in town. Driven, burning, sharp, clear-eyed men, and women too now, who advertised Wal-Mart prices as if their services were, Barbie dolls or antifreeze. Patience would become a necessity; he couldn't keep up with them.

The fat woman who had brought the doughnuts came out again.

"Can I go back there now, Mama?" Marvin asked her immediately.

"No," the woman answered as she slung her purse over an ample shoulder. "We've got to get on to your eye appointment."

Marvin said nothing, then after a moment he turned to the others and cheerfully told them goodbye. The adults exchanged a few words and then as the woman and Marvin were leaving, the bearded man called after them, "Be sure and come ready to eat."

Caleb almost laughed aloud at the idea of instructing those two to prepare themselves to eat. He imagined their table, the skinny bearded man, the good-looking worn-out young woman, and several fat sisters scrunched around a table in a small, disordered kitchen, and at the head, maybe an old man, brown, grizzled, and gaunt. As the laughter rose inside Caleb it hollowed out. For the first time he felt angry with these people. Something hardened him against them.

He wasn't able to feel bitter long, for a tall woman wearing enormous glasses came swiftly through the brown door and, after first nearly passing Caleb, turned on him suddenly smiling as if she were foolish not to recognize who he was. "You're here with Mrs. Vance, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You can come on back now."

The woman directed Caleb through a dozen or so people, parents with the children mainly, including Bubba and the fat woman, until at last she pointed to a curtained cubicle.

When Caleb entered he did not at first recognize the woman on the bed for his wife. He had expected her to be alert, practically ready to dress and leave. Nothing the doctor had said prepared him for this sight. She was asleep; one thin arm was thrown dramatically over her forehead. She was pale, and the apparition that she made suggested exposure and helplessness. Even the stubble in her armpit made him feel sick with pity.

The nurse came in behind him. "She'll be in and out for a while, but she's fine," she said. "Let me know when she wants her things. I'll check on her later."

"Okay, thank you."

Caleb moved to his wife's bedside. His nearness seemed to wake her. She opened her eyes briefly then closed them again. Weakly she said, "Hi," and she lowered her right arm until the hand lay palm upward on the bed's retaining rail. Caleb believed he knew what she wanted, and he put his own hand over hers. It was a small and cold hand. He held it. He wished things were different. He wished somebody loved her.