

Christine Sneed Roger Weber Would Like To Stay

How it happened isn't clear to her. Roger Weber is possibly the product of a dream that made the leap from her subconscious into her waking life, but his habits are human enough in their predictability. He sticks to a strict schedule, disappearing during the daylight hours into the walls or the cedar chest at the foot of her bed, an heirloom that was a wedding gift from her grandfather to his second wife and had once held lacy, confining undergarments, Irish linen, family snapshots, and picture books purchased in France, the sort that true gentlemen were not supposed to spend time examining.

Roger's presence doesn't scare her, though she isn't sure why. Maybe it's because if he were still alive, he would probably be the handsomest man Merilee has ever seen. His hair is black, his deep-set eyes sapphire, though she cannot know for certain because he appears before her solely in shades of gray. He knows many of her secrets and seems unconcerned that she once used the opera glasses her great aunt Josephina willed to her to spy on the next-door neighbors while they ate dinner in the nude, their long-haired dachshund sitting obediently at their feet. He does not care that her elbows are covered with sandpapery skin, or that she rubs her right knee obsessively when she is nervous, or that sometimes she has trouble concentrating on her job and on her pleasant-enough boyfriend Brian, because she is more intrigued by Roger, who claims he is a concert pianist resembling Glenn Gould, though of course even more handsome and less prone to ingesting dozens of prescription drugs for real or imagined ailments. Her ghost is not a hypochondriac or in the habit of eating one meal a day, usually of scrambled eggs submerged in ketchup.

Roger seems not to have been flashy and vain while still alive, despite his public career. He says that he did not spend frivolously, or waste time on gossip, nor did he grumble about his neighbors when they failed to mow the front lawn before its dandelions turned to puffballs or forgot to take in their garbage cans from the curb. Nor had he been particularly concerned with what others thought of him when he questioned the ruling class's habit of prescribing strenuous work for everyone but themselves. Even now, he does not seem to bear any serious grudges, unlike Brian, who often complains bitterly about noisy children, his richer younger brother, and the clerks at the bank who continue to ask for his ID when he makes a withdrawal, despite the fact he has been a customer there for six and a half goddamn years!

Unlike Roger, Brian also frequently forgets to ask about her day. Though he is only forty-three, four years older than Merilee, he is affably absentminded, as if he were an aging uncle who can't remember what his nieces and nephews do for a living, or whether their children have gone to college. As for herself, she no longer remembers if it was she or Brian who made the first move on the back porch at a mutual friend's birthday party; if it was she who had leaned close for an awkward kiss that had quickly become heated. Afterward, his skin had looked mottled, almost angry.

Her ghost friend, for one, never assumes that she will always end up in bed with him because she has done so in the past. After his first few appearances, he began to confide in her, explaining that during his adolescence, he preferred cloudy days to sunny because he would rather have spent the mornings at the piano without feeling guilty that he wasn't outside, making studious use of the warm air and bright light. The circumstances of his death remain unclear, though she imagines it involved a betrayal of some kind, an ungrateful lover, a violent end. Not suicide, but nonetheless not a death most would wish for.

He has told her this much:

He never learned to drive, fearing that he would fly off a cliff, a scenario that often appeared in his nightmares;

More than once he has walked through a movie screen, straight into the picture;

He has discovered that criminals prefer to bury evidence rather than burn it, and has never understood why this is the case;

If he wishes, he can see behind his life into the distant past, before airplanes or the great massacre of the western buffalo—everything in these depths is blue or green or scarlet;

His brother is still alive in Portland, Oregon, working as a high school drama teacher; the brother never tries to speak to Roger.

There is always this problem, this lack of meaningful communication—the dead to the living, the living to the dead, the living to the living. Merilee thinks she understands what he means when he tells her that no earthly minute escapes the sorrowful confusion induced by what is never said or else is cried out as a feverish jumble of imperatives and pleas.

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To show him she's worthy of these perplexing confidences, she says, "When I wear red three days in a row, people always think it means something other than the fact that I like red. They want me to be a freak, but I'm really not."

"Ma chère Merilee," he says in the very soft voice he uses to flirt with her, reaching out to touch her shoulder; but his hand, as it always sadly does, dissolves into her flesh. She feels nothing, not the faintest shiver or tingle, and it depresses her. She hopes that at some point they'll figure out a way for him to reach through his dimension into hers. Or else the opposite, though she worries that to enter his sphere, she would have to die, and though she adores him, she loves her life more. "All you can do is suffer fools. That's the worst of it. You know what Sartre said, *L'Enfer, c'est . . .* and all of that bad news. He's right, and he certainly likes to lord it over the rest of us hapless souls." Roger chuckles. "Kind of ironic, isn't it, fulfilling his own most dire prophecy. Blowhard ghosts like him keep me loitering around here as much as possible, if you want to know the truth."

This disappoints her and he sees it. "Don't worry," he says hastily. "I really do want to be here with you. Out of all of the others I could be with, it's you who's most kind and welcoming."

On a different night, she confesses, "I feel a little embarrassed about having Brian come here after our dates, but his place is so dusty that I never sleep well there." She pauses, turning red. "I hate to think of you having to see us. I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

Roger shakes his head. "You have your needs. Don't cheat yourself on my account. Once you're dead, that's it, so take all you can now. I wish I'd done more of that when I was still alive. Gather ye rosebuds, etc., etc. The poets were right." He smiles. "You don't have an audience when Mr. Dunn is here anyway. I can go back through those walls, easy as shoo-fly pie." He smiles, touching and not touching

her again. “There is one thing though. Forgive me, but the times I have seen your friend, I’ve wondered why he doesn’t put a little more effort into his wardrobe. His shoes are so scuffed and his pants could stand to be at least an inch or two longer. I would think that he might try a little harder for someone like you.”

Brian does not know about Roger Weber. Merilee tells no one about him except for her journal. Roger thinks it’s best that way too, not wanting her to be laughed at or scorned and labeled a lunatic, or, worst of all, taken to a mental hospital, a place he has no interest in setting his proverbial foot in, he has made clear, all apologies but nonetheless earnest. He realizes that being in such close contact with a ghost is not necessarily good for her grasp on the material realm in which she so capably dwells, despite her recent feelings of dissatisfaction.

They have been friends for close to two months when he begins his commentary on Brian’s shortcomings. His opinion matters to her, more than anyone else’s, she immediately realizes. She finds herself passing on his advice to her boyfriend, who listens patiently but then goes on to ignore most everything she says. His pants stay flood-length and are sometimes appallingly wrinkled; his hair is still cut by the same inept barber; he often lets her split the check. But worst of all is that he keeps a photo of his ex-wife tucked behind the obsolete business cards in his wallet—something Merilee isn’t aware of until Roger fills her in one evening after Brian has stepped out to buy them a quart of vanilla ice cream to eat with the chocolate cake she has made for his forty-fourth birthday. The evening is one of their best until Roger slips soundlessly through the wall with his disappointing revelation only a minute or two after Brian has left for the all-night grocery store two miles away.

“Please don’t be so upset, Meri darling,” he murmurs, giving her a contrite look. “I shouldn’t have opened my mouth, especially because I know better than anyone that we all have our pasts. Maybe Brian doesn’t remember that he’s carrying around this picture. We can agree that he isn’t the tidiest fellow on earth.”

Leave me alone, she wants to say, this unfriendly thought startling her. If Roger can read her mind, he hasn’t yet let on. She feels so tired now and would like to close her eyes for a catnap while Brian is at the store. “Maybe we shouldn’t talk about him anymore,” she finally says. “It doesn’t seem fair since he’s not here to defend himself.”

Roger hesitates but then nods. “You’re a better person than I am,” he says mildly, passing a long-fingered hand over his brow. “I’m sorry for being so tactless. I’ll leave you to your evening now.” He drifts backward in his pressed pinstripe suit, his luxurious dark hair perfectly combed, and dissolves into the same wall he has

just sprung from, his handsome, sheepish face the last part of him to disappear.

She knows there is no logical way for Brian to compete with him. In her case, the unfortunate clichés are true—“You’re seeing ghosts . . . dreaming of someone who isn’t there . . . chasing after phantoms.” How preposterous but sad: she has become an heir to Mrs. Muir’s peculiar romantic angst.

For the next few nights Roger doesn’t appear, lamentable timing because Brian is out of town for business, leaving her with plenty of nighttime hours to lavish on her dashing specter-guest, who seems to be punishing her for her loyalty to a flesh-and-blood suitor, his *carpe diem* speech from the other day an obvious load of hooley. She glumly tries to read, to watch television, to exercise, but only feels boredom along with the chill of his absence. He once tried to describe for her where he sometimes goes when he isn’t with her, explaining it as a simple state of non-being, a suspension of thought and all of the senses.

“Like sleep?” she asked, this the only thing she could imagine, other than the white clouds and harps of heaven or the voracious demons and bonfires of hell.

“No, not really,” he said, shaking his head. “Just death, the eleventh dimension. The biggest black hole of any out there, but no living thing has discovered it yet, and I daresay, no living thing ever will. You have the enlightened people of Hollywood to imagine everything for you, and I suppose they do come close, but I have a hard time seeing what good it does. Two world wars and others on the way, if you have to know.”

She has begun to worry that he is a trick she won’t ever understand, his lucidity and good advice and unpredictable disappearances a projection of some bizarre, buried trauma from her past. But the real mystery is why he bothers with her at all when presumably he can go anywhere—to her mind, a destination that becomes truly abstract when applied to ghosts. Why doesn’t he want to hobnob with Sartre, even if the famed existentialist really is a boor? And if Roger used to be a pianist, why doesn’t he listen to Bach or Gershwin or Beethoven or Liszt play a few new compositions, since they must be doing something with all of their free time? Why not discuss the largest conceivable Whys with the likes of Hegel or Kierkegaard or even Nietzsche if his mind was put back in place when he died? To have the possibilities of this world and the next wide open to you—it is indeed a stunning, intoxicating notion, the very richest material of the moviemakers he professes to disdain.

The answer is obvious when he tells her: “I have forever to do those things. I’d rather be here right now. The earth is even better than you can guess, corny as it sounds. I love all of the water, for one—that wonderful buoyancy you don’t have on

land or even in space. And the coral reefs off of Australia, I'm enjoying them while I can. Spirits really are attracted to water, like the clairvoyants have long been claiming. It's the only place where we can hope to find our reflection, believe it or not."

"I want you to tell me how you died," she says snappishly when he returns from his three-night snit over Brian's birthday bash *à deux*, as Roger calls it, with a slight but wounding trace of scorn. "You know everything about me, probably even things I don't know, but I'm glad you're not telling them to me."

He gives her a strange look, hollow-eyed, possibly looking through her. She wonders if he can take his eyeballs out like the ghouls in B-movies and still see with them, but doesn't dare to ask. She is turning her beautiful ghost-visitor into a clown with these ridiculous thoughts. If he can read her mind, he must be very insulted. "Do you mean like when you're going to die? Or how it'll happen?"

His words send a bruising shudder through her body, all mutinous thoughts fleeing. "Don't say things like that," she says quietly. "To you it might be nothing, but that's the last thing I want to know. You won't talk about your own death, so you should know how I feel about mine."

"A car," he says. "I was hit by a car. But you'll die in your sleep. One of the very lucky ones, so to speak."

"Stop," she cries, putting her hands over her ears. "I don't want to know! How would you even know that?"

His mouth twitches. "Actually I don't, it's just a hunch, but I'm often right. You should just be glad that you don't have to be afraid of flying anymore or of riding in trains and cars. The speed of life is what kills most of us, one way or another."

"Do you know who was driving the car that killed you?"

"My wife," he murmurs, smiling morosely. "The neighbors saw everything, though they usually did. She went to jail and they gave her the chair eight years later. As you can imagine, we avoid each other now."

Merilee stares. "She's not in hell?" But as soon as she says it, she knows it's a naïve question; still, the severe and bug-eyed Miss Sather and her catechism classes from thirty years ago have not yet lost their hold over Merilee.

He shakes his head, his expression wry. "I've told you there isn't any hell. Not the kind you're picturing. As I've said, that weasely Frenchman was right." He gives

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her a plaintive look. “May I stay with you tonight? I barely rested while I was away.”

She regards him. “You didn’t have to run off like that. We would have had the house all to ourselves. Brian’s been out of town, but he comes back tomorrow morning.”

“I know,” he says, avoiding her eyes.

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In this terse response, she immediately senses his guilt—a colossal jealous force of hot, anxious air that she had no idea before now that he could become. It is suddenly clear to her that Roger the ghost has been tailing Brian the human being, playing the private eye she had no desire or reason to hire. Brian Leonard Dunn, her boyfriend of ten months—a good accountant, a decent tennis player, a divorced father of a grown son, who lives in San Diego and works the midnight to seven AM shift at a gym that never closes, even for Christmas. Her lover may be a bit grouchy at times but he is still a likeable man: well-meaning on the whole, prone to telling corny jokes about golfers and talking frogs, a little thick in the waist in his early-middle age, reliable and frugal but not

to a fault, a circumspect driver and investor, a person who tries more than most people she knows (though in her opinion, he tends to get much too embarrassed about eating bananas in public). She is lucky to have him, she recognizes, to share his bed and a part of his life.

“You’re in love with him?” says Roger, disbelieving.

So he can read her mind. She winces, hoping he can’t see her thoughts, too, the pornographic imaginings that sometimes flood in. She does have her libido, but of course there’s no shame in that—it’s the coal that keeps the furnace glowing, provided it doesn’t get out of hand.

“I don’t know,” she says, almost shouting at him. “Am I?”

His face is somber. “It seems so.”

“Have you been spying on him in Phoenix?”

“I don’t spy,” he says, offended. “I observe, and that’s my peculiar curse. I’d rather not have to be on watch for all of eternity, but it’s one of the few choices available to a ghost.”

“No one asked you to observe him. Aren’t there at least six billion other people you could be keeping an eye on instead?”

He is quiet for a long second; he hovers in front of her, arms akimbo. “Then you don’t want to know what I found out.”

She sighs, tempted to run out of the house where he can’t effectively follow her. Outdoors, he can’t stay in a recognizable form. The night air envelops him, makes him its hostage, as it does all spirits, he claims. It is the afterlife’s truest form of anarchy, he has told her—the outside world has none of the defined edges and boundaries of human rooms, and so each cell of his otherworldly energy is sucked into the overwhelming nothingness of the universe. (“I’m writing a book about this,” he once confided, “*Being in Nothingness*. That old French egomaniac might try to sue me over the title, but one of the perks of being dead is that there are no courts anymore.”)

Yes, she does want to know if Brian behaved himself in Phoenix, but she also feels a sudden ferocious anger at being offered this perverse opportunity. Along with his earthly form, Roger seems to have shed in death any previous concerns about behaving ethically.

He takes no notice of this unvoiced criticism. “Your paramour was a saint,” he mutters. “You have no reason to doubt his devotion. Early to bed, early to rise. He ate salads at lunch and dinner and only let himself have two margaritas at happy hour. He woke up at six every morning and went for a swim in the hotel pool, pleased himself in the shower afterward and then went to his meetings like a very proper adult boy.”

This is exactly what Brian told her over the phone, except for the shower part. She tries not to look relieved but Roger knows and is miffed.

“I wonder how he can stand himself,” he whines. “Sure, my wife murdered me, but while I had the chance I knew enough to enjoy the world’s sweets. Sometime I’ll tell you about them.” He pauses, noticing her look of distaste. “Most men in my position were no better. The majority were much worse. Celebrity and wealth are the strongest aphrodisiacs, make no mistake. I chose carefully and was always respectful of my lovers. They adored me and I them, as much as I was capable. The stories I might tell you . . . my goodness,” he breathes. “If you were a screenwriter, you’d have enough material for fifty films.”

X-rated ones, she thinks huffily.

“I heard that,” he says, smiling.

“Why do you think I’d be interested in hearing about your escapades?” she says.

“You’re only human.”

“Very funny.”

“Well, it’s true, my dear.”

“I really don’t think I want to know about all of the people you slept with.”

His gaze is piercing but she wills her brain to empty itself, a wave of fatigue and hopelessness overwhelming her.

“As you wish,” he finally says, “but if you change your mind, I’d be happy to oblige.”

“I need to get some rest now,” she says, wanting to sob over how bizarre and possessive this once-gallant and very dear ghost friend has become. “Maybe we should say our goodnights.”

“I’m sorry about Brian and his trip,” he says glumly. “But at least I was honest about his good behavior. I could have lied, but I won’t lie to you, I promise.”

“Fine, but you shouldn’t have been spying on him in the first place. Please don’t do it again.”

“As you wish, Merilee.” He nods and dissolves into the wall without saying goodnight. She feels a tremor of remorse for chasing him off so soon, but for all she knows, he’s still lurking about, spying on her now, biding his time before turning menacing like real ghosts are supposed to be. These thoughts are enough to keep her awake for most of the night, her anxiety and irritation not helped by the fact that the hairbrush and perfume bottles on her bureau twice start to rattle for no obvious reason. The south wall of her bedroom also seems to take on a waterfall effect when she opens her eyes somewhere around three AM, so annoyed by Roger’s antics and her insomnia that the two sleeping pills she took at one AM haven’t had a chance. She takes two more at three-thirty and sleeps through her seven o’clock alarm, not waking until nine-fifteen when she is already forty-five minutes late for work.

Throughout the day, the grisly thought plagues her: she is going crazy. She has survived these same doubts on other occasions, especially when Roger first began his nightly visits from the eleventh dimension to her bedroom at 314 Myrtle Lane, but this time her misgivings are fierce. She knows that if she were to see a doctor, he would probably want to lock her up and medicate her for schizophrenia. And who’s to say she isn’t schizophrenic? This is the real problem! She has no idea anymore if she is, in fact, a sane human being. All of her years as the smart and sturdy (but rather spinsterish, in some people’s ignorant estimation) Merilee Crowley are perhaps about to end because of one jealous, slippery ghost whose womanizing tenden-

cies were not snuffed out by death. Who knew how many other vulnerable women he haunted? Who knew where he spent his daylight hours? On the other side of the world where it is night—maybe in Japan—he might have a favorite geisha girl or a houseful of concubines. She can't put it past him now.

Roger Weber, dead concert pianist and inveterate Romeo, murdered by his wife for breaking her heart a few too many times, must be banished from her home. She wants her sanity and freedom restored as soon as possible. At lunch over her turkey-and-cheese sandwich, she decides that she might even tell him that she will hire a priest to exorcise him if he refuses to go. This is a lie, but she spends the lunch hour convincing herself it isn't so that Roger will not be able to read the truth in her thoughts.

That evening she does not return home until almost eight-thirty, but Roger is there as usual, patiently waiting for her when she comes through the back door, hovering next to the kitchen table where an untidy heap of objects has been dumped. She feels cross, wondering why he is cluttering up her house, but he beams at her, very pleased with his mess.

"Do you recognize this?" he says, pointing to a golden earring of a dolphin on the pile's fringe.

She sets down her grocery bags and peers at the earring. "No," she says. "I don't think so."

"Sixth grade," he says. "You lost it when you got on the bus on May 12, 1979. The back was loose and the earring fell into the gutter. How about this?" His finger pokes through a tattered notebook with a paper cover meant to resemble pink denim.

This she remembers. Her diary from seventh to ninth grade. She worried that a classmate had stolen it, but prayed that it had fallen down a manhole or into a garbage can or had somehow been devoured by a wild dog.

"Someone did steal it," Roger confirms. "Reese Spiffen? Or was it Reggie Spinner . . . something along those lines? The name's a little foggy."

"Oh my god," she says, dumbfounded. "Where on earth did you find it?" She sees now what this pile is—lost objects, many of them items that had caused her something close to heartbreak when she discovered they were missing. A marble fountain pen given to her by her father on her fourteenth birthday; a rusted house key (her grandmother's); a shinier car key (her ex-boyfriend's—a loss that had nearly brought about a break-up); a wrinkled fifty dollar bill; her autograph book containing the signatures of none other than Shawn Cassidy, Farrah Fawcett, and Rick Springfield; her social security card; a brand new leather wallet purchased in

Florence on her senior-year trip to Europe and lost somewhere on the way to Paris for her flight home; a cassette tape of the *Grease* soundtrack; a crucifix necklace from her first communion; a soiled Chicago Cubs jersey that had belonged to her friend Mike Kreski, who had never forgiven her; a long, pornographic love letter from the scandalous and gorgeous Austin Lepadien, her most searing college fling.

“I didn’t find any of this on earth, Meri. Everything was in our lost and found,” Roger says. “I had to get special authorization to claim your things, but it wasn’t much of a problem. Normally you don’t get your lost goods until you can claim them yourself. But I pulled a few strings, called in a favor.” He chuckled. “The wheeling and dealing continues after death, I’m sorry to say.”

“I can’t believe this,” she says, collapsing into a chair, picking up the still-immaculate wallet and fumbling it open. Inside are the several thousand lira and a receipt for several chocolate bars her now almost-unknown younger self stashed there over twenty-one years ago.

“Your wish is my command, dearest one.”

She stares up at him, his benign, sorrowful face begging her to adore him again.

“But I didn’t ask for these things, Roger. I wouldn’t even have known to ask for them. I’m happy they’re here but it’s a shock to see them after so many years.”

He waves his elegant pianist’s hand. “I had to make it up to you. I want you to know how much I care for you. There aren’t any geisha girls, by the way. Don’t worry. One woman at a time. Those are the rules out here. A bit stodgy, but it works, I suppose.”

“Brian’s coming over at nine-thirty,” she says, “and I need a shower before he gets here. I hate to say it, but maybe we should think about cutting it short again tonight.” Despite the hangdog look and the otherworldly loot on the table, she absolutely needs to be alone. All is not forgiven. In fact, she is very creeped out by the sudden reappearance of the diary and the earring and the rest of her old forsaken things. They look so strange to her, some of them faded and possibly tainted by the dust of some spooky alternate universe.

“Couldn’t you call and tell him you’re too tired tonight? Just this one time?”

“I want to see him, Roger. He’s a man with all of his parts intact, and as we both know, you’re not. I’m sorry to put it so bluntly, but it’s true.”

“Fine,” he says, wounded. “I’m off again then. Banished to the frigid nothing of the eleventh dimension or wherever else I listlessly wander. I’ll see you tomorrow, unless you want to put me in quarantine for another day or two.”

She takes a breath, her stomach leaping queasily. "I really think we should consider seeing less of each other. Maybe only once a week. Or even once a month."

He stares at her. "Once a month. I see. You want to call it off. I'm not a fool, Merilee. If you want to break up with me, you only have to say so and I'll leave you alone for good."

"This isn't a break-up," she says, alarmed.

He snorts. "Call it whatever you'd like."

"We haven't been dating."

"I love you, Merilee. We're in a relationship, whether you call it that or not." He lunges toward her and tries fruitlessly to hug her.

"Oh God," she says, feeling his grief in their failed embrace. "Please don't say that."

"But I do love you. I'm a dead man without you." He has started to cry, his tears falling into thin air and vanishing before they reach the table.

"You're a dead man with me, too."

"I'm even more of a dead man without you," he sobs.

She feels terribly guilty but does not want to back down, even if he is now so pliable and not the least bit scary. How easily he might turn into a horrible ghoul, she thinks, suppressing a shudder. (Before meeting him, she thought ghosts and ghouls were the same, but ghouls, she has learned, are much less civilized, the ids of the afterlife, the party crashers.) "You'll find another girlfriend," she assures him. "You're very handsome and giving, though if you start spying on everyone again, you'll get into the same trouble you did with me."

"My wife was right," he snuffles. "She used to say that I made it impossible for anyone to love me. She told me all the time to go straight to hell. I suppose I had the last laugh because she thought the fire-and-brimstone hell actually existed. But it's not like the afterlife without Satan has done me any good either."

"Maybe you should take a break from here and finally go to Oregon to visit your brother. I bet he'd be happy to see you."

"No, he wouldn't, but his wife would, and that's the main problem."

Merilee blinks, not wanting to look surprised. Even when she has the upper hand, Roger can still make her feel like such a rube. She knows that she shouldn't be surprised, but she has met so few playboys in her life. "Well, perhaps he's forgiven you by now," she mumbles.

He shakes his head. "Garrett doesn't believe in ghosts, so I'm out of luck on

two counts. The only people who see me are the ones who want to. Let me stay with you,” he begs. “I can tell you almost anything you want to know about life and death. I can chase the ghosts out of all of your machines so you’ll never have trouble with your car or electric toothbrush or stereo or blender again. I know how you hate to waste time on all of the piddly things that consume most people’s lives without them being aware of it half the time. You’ve been so kind to me, you’ve cared for me when I thought that no one ever would again. This Brian character has no idea what a treasure you are. I don’t know if he ever will and I suppose that’s the reason I followed him to Phoenix. I wanted to see if there was anything about him that I hadn’t yet pegged.”

“Was there?” she asks, dreading the answer.

He sighs noisily. “I suppose so. There’s always the C factor. Chaos. He’s as prone to it as anyone else, but it so rarely interrupts his steady trudge forward. It did once when his dog got run over by a tow truck and then in college when he caught his girlfriend cheating on him with her roommate. Both times he made some uncharacteristic decisions afterward. It’ll strike again, I’m sure, but I don’t know for sure when.”

“I have to get in the shower now, Roger. He’ll be here in twenty minutes. As you know, he’s always on time.”

“I could change that for you tonight, if you let me.”

She gives him a stricken look. “Don’t you dare.”

He raises both of his hands in false surrender. “I hate good-byes, Merilee. Life is full of them. It’s ridiculous that death should be too.” With this, he abruptly disappears.

She does not try to stop him, nor will she admit that with his absence, her house feels oddly bereft. When her toaster burns out a week later, she doesn’t give in and summon him. When her car dies on the highway the next week, she still won’t give in. When her microwave inexplicably fries itself into dereliction while she heats up a package of frozen lasagna, she knows he’s toying with her but she refuses to succumb to his bullying.

Brian very kindly buys her a new toaster and gives her the microwave he won the previous year in the raffle at his company’s annual picnic and has had sitting in his crawl space since then. Brian is exhilaratingly real with his teeth-grinding at night and callused hands and badly-tailored trousers. She sees now that it is Roger who cannot possibly compete, even with his knowledge of death, the scariest secrets

of the universe made mundane, and his legendary, curmudgeonly French consorts. She is gloriously alive, as boring and unromantic as it sometimes is.

When she tells Brian on their first camping vacation that she had a ghost friend for several months not too long ago, he gives her a long, funny look but finally shrugs and says that a lot of people probably see ghosts. She really shouldn't worry about it. There are much more frightening things, in his view. He gives her a tolerant smile and says he'd rather take on a ghost any day than a grizzly bear in the woods a few feet to the south of where they've pitched their tent. "Or some maniac with a machete," he adds. "Or the Unabomber. Or those Colombian drug lords who cut off the testicles and toes of the dumbshits who try to cheat them. Or some hack surgeon who forgets his sponge inside my large intestine. Or Hitler, who I hope is dead but I do wonder sometimes if he found the fountain of youth and is still alive down in Peru or some place like that. Don't you ever worry about this, too?"

Anyone with half a brain must, she agrees, hearing in that instant a whisper behind her, *What a nitwit*, before insect racket engulfs it. She knows that she won't be left alone until Roger loses interest. "The poor old masochist," she accidentally says aloud, Brian giving her a puzzled look but knowing enough (Bless his heart, she thinks, squeezing his hand) not to ask. The night around them is alive with the buzz-saw symphony of a billion hungry insects, all of them fierce with the desire to live.