

Story

I get home from work and there is a message from him: that he is not coming, that he is busy. He will call again. I wait to hear from him, then at nine o'clock I go to where he lives, find his car, but he's not home. I knock at his apartment door and then at all the garage doors, not knowing which garage door is his—no answer. I write a note, read it over, write a new note, and stick it in his door. At home I am restless, and all I can do, though I have a lot to do, since I'm going on a trip in the morning, is play the piano. I call again at ten forty-five and he's home, he has been to the movies with his old girlfriend, and she's still there. He says he'll call back. I wait. Finally I sit down and write in my notebook that when he calls me either he will then come to me, or he will not and I will be angry, and so I will have either him or my own anger, and this might be all right, since anger is always a great comfort, as I found with my husband. And then I go on to write, in the third person and the past tense, that clearly she always needed to have a love even if it was a complicated love. He calls back before I have time to finish writing all this down. When he calls, it is a little after eleven thirty. We argue until nearly twelve. Everything he says is a contradiction: for example,

he says he did not want to see me because he wanted to work and even more because he wanted to be alone, but he has not worked and he has not been alone. There is no way I can get him to reconcile any of his contradictions, and when this conversation begins to sound too much like many I had with my husband I say goodbye and hang up. I finish writing down what I started to write down even though by now it no longer seems true that anger is any great comfort.

I call him back five minutes later to tell him that I am sorry about all this arguing, and that I love him, but there is no answer. I call again five minutes later, thinking he might have walked out to his garage and walked back, but again there is no answer. I think of driving to where he lives again and looking for his garage to see if he is in there working, because he keeps his desk there and his books and that is where he goes to read and write. I am in my nightgown, it is after twelve and I have to leave the next morning at five. Even so, I get dressed and drive the mile or so to his place. I am afraid that when I get there I will see other cars by his house that I did not see earlier and that one of them will belong to his old girlfriend. When I drive down the driveway I see two cars that weren't there before, and one of them is parked as close as possible to his door, and I think that she is there. I walk around the small building to the back where his apartment is, and look in the window: the light is on, but I can't see anything clearly because of the half-closed venetian blinds and the steam on the glass. But things inside the room are not the same as they were earlier in the evening, and before there was no steam. I open the outer screen door and knock. I wait. No answer. I let the screen door fall shut and I walk away to check the row of garages. Now the door opens behind me

as I am walking away and he comes out. I can't see him very well because it is dark in the narrow lane beside his door and he is wearing dark clothes and whatever light there is is behind him. He comes up to me and puts his arms around me without speaking, and I think he is not speaking not because he is feeling so much but because he is preparing what he will say. He lets go of me and walks around me and ahead of me out to where the cars are parked by the garage doors.

As we walk out there he says "Look," and my name, and I am waiting for him to say that she is here and also that it's all over between us. But he doesn't, and I have the feeling he did intend to say something like that, at least say that she was here, and that he then thought better of it for some reason. Instead, he says that everything that went wrong tonight was his fault and he's sorry. He stands with his back against a garage door and his face in the light and I stand in front of him with my back to the light. At one point he hugs me so suddenly that the fire of my cigarette crumbles against the garage door behind him. I know why we're out here and not in his room, but I don't ask him until everything is all right between us. Then he says, "She wasn't here when I called you. She came back later." He says the only reason she is there is that something is troubling her and he is the only one she can talk to about it. Then he says, "You don't understand, do you?"

I try to figure it out.

So they went to the movies and then came back to his place and then I called and then she left and he called back and we argued and then I called back twice but he had gone out to get a beer (he says) and then I drove over and in the meantime he had returned from buying beer and she

had also come back and she was in his room so we talked by the garage doors. But what is the truth? Could he and she both really have come back in that short interval between my last phone call and my arrival at his place? Or is the truth really that during his call to me she waited outside or in his garage or in her car and that he then brought her in again, and that when the phone rang with my second and third calls he let it ring without answering, because he was fed up with me and with arguing? Or is the truth that she did leave and did come back later but that he remained and let the phone ring without answering? Or did he perhaps bring her in and then go out for the beer while she waited there and listened to the phone ring? The last is the least likely. I don't believe anyway that there was any trip out for beer.

The fact that he does not tell me the truth all the time makes me not sure of his truth at certain times, and then I work to figure out for myself if what he is telling me is the truth or not, and sometimes I can figure out that it's not the truth and sometimes I don't know and never know, and sometimes just because he says it to me over and over again I am convinced it is the truth because I don't believe he would repeat a lie so often. Maybe the truth does not matter, but I want to know it if only so that I can come to some conclusions about such questions as: whether he is angry at me or not; if he is, then how angry; whether he still loves her or not; if he does, then how much; whether he loves me or not; how much; how capable he is of deceiving me in the act and after the act in the telling.

The Fears of Mrs. Orlando

Mrs. Orlando's world is a dark one. In her house she knows what is dangerous: the gas stove, the steep stairs, the slick bathtub, and several kinds of bad wiring. Outside her house she knows some of what is dangerous but not all of it, and is frightened by her own ignorance, and avid for information about crime and disaster.

Though she takes every precaution, no precaution will be enough. She tries to prepare for sudden hunger, for cold, for boredom, and for heavy bleeding. She is never without a bandaid, a safety pin, and a knife. In her car she has, among other things, a length of rope and a whistle, and also a social history of England to read while waiting for her daughters, who are often a long time shopping.

In general she likes to be accompanied by men: they offer protection both because of their large size and because of their rational outlook on the world. She admires prudence, and respects the man who reserves a table in advance and also the one who hesitates before answering any of her questions. She believes in hiring lawyers and feels most comfortable talking to lawyers because every one of their words is endorsed by the law. But she will ask her daughters or a woman friend to go shopping with her downtown, rather than go alone.

She has been attacked by a man in an elevator, downtown. It was at night, the man was black, and she did not know the neighborhood. She was younger then. She has been molested several times in a crowded bus. In a restaurant once, after an argument, an excited waiter spilled coffee on her hands.

In the city she is afraid of being carried away underground on the wrong subway, but will not ask directions from strangers of a lower class. She walks past many black men who are planning different crimes. Anyone at all may rob her, even another woman.

At home, she talks to her daughters for hours on the telephone and her talk is all premonition of disaster. She does not like to express satisfaction, because she is afraid she will ruin a run of good luck. If she does happen to say that something is going well, then she lowers her voice to say it and after saying it knocks on the telephone table. Her daughters tell her very little, knowing she will find something ominous in what they tell her. And when they tell her so little then she is afraid something is wrong—either their health or their marriage.

One day she tells them a story over the telephone. She has been downtown shopping alone. She leaves the car and goes into a fabric store. She looks at fabrics and does not buy anything, though she takes away a couple of swatches in her purse. On the sidewalk there are many blacks walking around and they make her nervous. She goes to her car. As she takes out her keys, a hand grabs her ankle from under the car. A man has been lying under her car and now he grabs her stockinged ankle with his black hand and tells her in a voice muffled by the car to drop her purse and walk away. She does so, though she can hardly stand. She waits by the wall of a building and watches the purse but it does

not move from where it lies on the curb. A few people glance at her. Then she walks to the car, kneels on the sidewalk, and looks under. She can see the sunlight on the road beyond, and some pipes on the belly of her car: no man. She picks up her purse and drives home.

Her daughters don't believe her story. They ask her why a man would do such a peculiar thing, and in broad daylight. They point out that he could not have simply disappeared then, simply vanished into thin air. She is outraged by their disbelief and does not like the way they talk about broad daylight and thin air.

A few days after the assault on her ankle, a second incident upsets her. She has driven her car down at evening to a parking lot beside the beach as she sometimes does, so that she can sit and watch the sunset through her windshield. This evening, however, as she looks over the boardwalk at the water, she does not see the peaceful deserted beach that she usually sees, but a small knot of people standing around something that seems to be lying on the sand.

She is instantly curious, but half inclined to drive away without looking at the sunset or going to see what is on the sand. She tries to think what it could be. It is probably some kind of animal, because people do not stare so long at something unless it has been alive or is alive. She imagines a large fish. It has to be large, because a small fish is not interesting, nor is something like a jellyfish that is also small. She imagines a dolphin, and she imagines a shark. It might also be a seal. Most likely dead already, but it could also be dying and this knot of people intent on watching it die.

Now at last Mrs. Orlando must go and see for herself. She picks up her purse and gets out of her car, locks it

behind her, steps over a low concrete wall, and sinks into the sand. Walking slowly, with difficulty, in her high heels through the sand, legs well apart, she holds her hard shiny purse by its strap and it swings wildly back and forth. The sea breeze presses her flowered dress against her thighs and the hem of it flutters gaily around her knees, but her tight silver curls are motionless and she frowns as she plunges on.

She moves in among the people, and looks down. What is lying on the sand is not a fish or a seal but a young man. He is lying perfectly straight with his feet together and his arms by his sides, and he is dead. Someone has covered him with newspapers but the breeze is lifting the sheets of paper and one by one they curl up and slide over the sand to tangle in the legs of the bystanders. Finally a dark-skinned man who looks to Mrs. Orlando like a Mexican puts out his foot and slowly pushes aside the last sheet of newspaper and now everyone has a good look at the dead man. He is handsome and thin, and his color is gray and beginning to yellow in places.

Mrs. Orlando is absorbed in looking. She glances around at the others and she can see they have forgotten themselves too. A drowning. This is a drowning. This may even be a suicide.

She struggles back over the sand. When she gets home, she immediately calls her daughters and tells them what she has seen. She starts by saying she has seen a dead man on the beach, a drowned man, and then she starts over again and tells more. Her daughters are uneasy because she becomes so excited each time she tells the story.

For the next few days, she stays inside her house. Then she leaves suddenly and goes to a friend's house. She tells this friend that she has received an obscene phone call, and

she spends the night there. When she returns home the next day, she thinks someone has broken in, because certain things are missing. Later she finds each thing in an odd place, but she can't lose the feeling that an intruder has been there.

She sits inside her house fearing intruders and watching out for what might go wrong. As she sits, and especially at night, she so often hears strange noises that she is certain there are prowlers below the windowsills. Then she must go out and look at her house from the outside. She circles the house in the dark and sees no prowlers and goes back in. But after sitting inside for half an hour she feels she has to go out again and check the house from the outside.

She goes in and out, and the next day too she goes in and out. Then she stays inside and just talks on the phone, keeping her eyes on the doors and windows and alert to strange shadows, and for some time after this she will not go out except in the early morning to examine the soil for footprints.

Liminal: The Little Man

Lying there trying to sleep, a little light coming through the curtain from the street, she planned things and remembered things and sometimes just listened to sounds and looked at the light and the dark. She thought about the opening and closing of her eyes: that the lids lifted to reveal a scene in all its depth and light and dark that had been there all along unseen by her, nothing to her since she did not see it, and then dropped again and made all that scene unseen again, and could anytime lift and show it and anytime close and hide it, though often, lying sleepless, her eyes shut, she was so alert, so racing ahead with what she was thinking, that her eyes seemed to her to be wide open behind the closed lids, bugged, glassy, staring, though staring out only into the dark back of the closed lids.

Her son came and laid out three large gray shells on her thigh, and the visitor, sitting close to her on another hard chair, reached over to take up the middle one and look at it—an oval cowrie, with white lips.

The moment when a limit is reached, when there is nothing ahead but darkness: something comes in to help that is

not real. Another way all this is like madness: a mad person not helped out of his trouble by anything real begins to trust what is not real because it helps him and he needs it because real things continue not to help him.

Her son out on the terrace is dropping a brick over and over again on a plastic gun, breaking it into sharp pieces. The television is on in a room behind a closed door. Another woman comes out with her hair wet and a towel wrapped around her saying suddenly and loudly to him, That's bad, stop it. Her son stands holding the brick, with fear on his face. She says, I was beginning to meditate and I thought the house was falling down. The pieces of red plastic shine on the painted clay around his feet.

How it works: Sometimes there is a thought that becomes a dream (she is laying out a long sentence and then she is out on Fourteenth Street laying out a long piece of black curb) and the mind says, But wait, this isn't true, you're beginning to dream, and she wakes up to think about thinking and dreaming. Sometimes she has lain awake a long time and the stroke of sleep comes down finally and softens every part of her body at once; then her mind notices and wakes because it is interested in how sleep comes so suddenly. Sometimes her mind won't stop working in the first place and won't stop for hours and she gets up to make a warm drink and then it is not the warm drink that helps but the fact that action has been taken. Sometimes sleep comes easily, but almost right away (she has been sleeping ten minutes or so) a loud noise or a soft but offensive noise wakes her and her heart races. First there is only inarticulate anger, then her mind begins working again.

Coughing, her head up on three pillows, warm tea beside her; or on another night a limp, melting rag of wet kleenex across her forehead.

She slept by her son on the beach; they lay parallel to the line of water. The water lapped up in sheets over the sand and drained off. People moved, took positions nearby, walked past, and the sound of the ocean was enough of a silence so that the two slept peacefully, the lowering sun on the boy's face, grains of sand on his neck, an ant running over his cheek (he shuddered, his hand unclenched and then clenched again), her cheek in the soft grayish sand, her glasses and her hat on the sand.

Then there was the slow uphill walk home, and later they went into a dark bar to have dinner (her son nearly asleep bowing over the polished wood) and because of the dark, the crush, the noise, the violent noise, so that they seemed to be swallowing some of all the noise and darkness with their food, she was dizzy and confused when they walked out into the light and the silence of the street.

She is lying in the dark going through some complex turns to get to the point where she can sleep. It is always hard to sleep. Even on nights when it will turn out not to have been hard she expects it to be hard and is ready for it, so that maybe it might as well have been hard.

That night long ago there was nothing more to be done. She lay in a room crying. She lay on her left side with her eyes on the dark window. She was eight or nine, or so. Her left cheek on a soft old pillowcase covering a small old pillow with the smell in it still of old people. Near her, perhaps over against her, under her right arm, her stuffed ele-

phant, nap worn off, trunk creased this way and that. Or more probably tonight, pillow tossed aside, elephant tossed aside, perhaps she has been lying on her right cheek staring at the light that runs under the door and shines on her floorboards, putting a hand down into the draft flowing across the floor; it has been a night of hoping the door will open again, there will be a relenting somewhere, the light will flood in from the hall, white, and against the white light a black figure come in. When the mother is gone at night she is gone very far away, though on the other side of the door, and when she opens the door and comes in, she comes directly to the child and stands at a great height above the child, light on half her face. But tonight the child has not been watching the door, she has her face to the dark window and she has begun crying hopelessly. Someone is angry; she has done some final thing for which there is no forgiveness tonight. No one will come in, and she can't go out. The finality of it terrifies her. It is a feeling close to a feeling she will die of it. Then he comes in, almost of his own accord, though he is not real, she has invented him, he comes in for the first time standing there above her right shoulder, small, soft, self-effacing, something come to tell her she will be all right, come into being at the limit, at the moment when there was nothing ahead but darkness.

She was thinking how it was the unfinished business. This was why she could not sleep. She could not say the day was over. She had no sense that any day was ever over. Everything was still going on. The business not only not finished but maybe not done well enough.

Outside, a mockingbird sang, changing the song often, every quarter minute or so, as though trying parts of it.

She heard him every night, but was not reminded every night but only now and then of a nightingale, which also sings in the dark.

The mockingbird sang, and behind it was the sound of the ocean, sometimes a steady hum, sometimes a sharp clap when a larger wave collapsed on the sand, not every night but when the tide was high at the time when she lay awake in the dark. She thought that if there was a way she could force a kind of peace into herself, then she would sleep, and she tried drawing up this peace into herself, as though it were a kind of fluid, and this worked, though not for long. The peace, when it began to fill her, seemed to come from her spine, the lower part of her spine. But it would not stay in her unless she kept it drawn in there and she could not go on with that for long.

Then she says to herself, Where is there some help in this? And the figure returns, to her surprise, standing above her right shoulder; he is not so small, not so plump, not so modest anymore (years have gone by) but full of a gloomy confidence; he could tell her, though he does not, but his presence tells her, that all is well and she is good, and she has done her best though others may not think so—and these others too are somewhere in the house, in a room somewhere down the hall, standing in a close line, or two lines, with proud, white, and angry faces.