

Copyrighted Material

Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.

She was fifty-three years old by then—a grandmother. Wide and soft and dimpled, with two short wings of dry, fair hair flaring almost horizontally from a center part. Laugh lines at the corners of her eyes. A loose and colorful style of dress edging dangerously close to Bag Lady.

Give her credit: most people her age would say it was too late to make any changes. What's done is done, they would say. No use trying to alter things at this late date.

It did occur to Rebecca to say that. But she didn't.

. . .

On the day she made her discovery, she was picnicking on the North Fork River out in Baltimore County. It was a cool, sunny Sunday in early June of 1999, and her family had gathered to celebrate the engagement of Rebecca's youngest granddaughter, NoNo Davitch.

The Davitches' cars circled the meadow like covered wagons

braced for attack. Their blankets dotted the grass, and their thermos jugs and ice chests and sports equipment crowded the picnic table. The children were playing beside the river in one noisy, tumbling group, but the adults kept themselves more separate. Alone or in twos they churned about rearranging their belongings, jockeying for spots in the sun, wandering off hither and yon in their moody Davitch manner. One of the stepdaughters was sitting by herself in her minivan. One of the sons-in-law was stretching his hamstrings over by the runners' path. The uncle was stabbing the ground repeatedly with his cane.

Goodness, what would Barry think? (Barry, the new fiancé.) He would think they disapproved of his marrying NoNo.

And he would be right.

Not that they ever behaved much differently under any conditions.

Barry had a blanket mostly to himself, because NoNo kept flitting elsewhere. The tiniest and prettiest of the Davitch girls—a little hummingbird of a person—she darted first to one sister and then another, ducking her shiny dark cap of hair and murmuring something urgent.

Murmuring, "Like him, please," maybe. Or, "At least make him feel welcome."

The first sister grew very busy rummaging through a straw hamper. The second shaded her eyes and pretended to look for the children.

Rebecca—who earned her living hosting parties, after all—felt she had no choice but to clap her hands and call, "Okay, folks!"

Languidly, they turned. She seized a baseball from the table and held it up. No, it was bigger than a baseball. A softball, then; undoubtedly the property of the son-in-law stretching his hamstrings, who taught phys ed at the local high school. It was all the same to Rebecca; she had never been the sporty type. Still: "Time for a game, everybody!" she called. "Barry? NoNo? Come on, now! We'll say this rock is copyright material that log over to where first base ought to be. The duffel bag can be second, and for third . . . Who's got something we can use for third?"

They groaned, but she refused to give up. “Come on, people! Show some life here! We need to exercise off all that food we’re about to eat!”

In slow motion they began to obey, rising from their blankets and drifting where she pointed. She turned toward the runners’ path and, “Yoo-hoo! Jeep!” she called. Jeep stopped hugging one beefy knee and squinted in her direction. “Haul yourself over here!” she ordered. “We’re organizing a softball game!”

“Aw, Beck,” he said, “I was hoping to get a run in.” But he came plodding toward her.

While Jeep set about correcting the placement of the bases, Rebecca went to deal with the stepdaughter in the minivan. Who happened to be Jeep’s wife, in fact. Rebecca hoped this wasn’t one of their silly quarrels. “Sweetie!” she sang out. She waded through the weeds, scooping up armfuls of her big red bandanna-print skirt. “Patch? Roll down your window, Patch. Can you hear me? Is something the matter?”

Patch turned and gazed out at her. You could tell she must be hot. Spikes of her chopped black hair were sticking to her forehead, and her sharp, freckled face was shining with sweat. Still, she made no move to open her window. Rebecca grabbed the door handle and yanked it—luckily, just before Patch thought to push the lock down.

“Now, then!” Rebecca caroled. “What’s all this about?”

Patch said, “Can’t a person ever get a moment of peace in this family?”

She was thirty-seven years old but looked more like fourteen, in her striped T-shirt and skinny jeans. And acted like fourteen, too, Rebecca couldn’t help thinking; but all she said was, “Come on out and join us! We’re starting up a softball game.”

“No, thanks.”

“Pretty please?”

“For Lord’s sake, Beck, don’t you know how I hate this?”

“Hate it!” Rebecca responded, choosing to misunderstand. “But you’re wonderful at sports! The rest of us don’t even know where the bases go. Poor Jeep is having to do everything.”

Patch said, "I cannot for the life of me see why we should celebrate my little sister's engagement to a—to a—"

Words appeared to fail her. She clamped her arms tight across her flat chest and faced forward again.

"To a what?" Rebecca asked her. "A nice, decent, well-spoken man. A lawyer."

"A *corporate* lawyer. A man who brings his appointment book to a picnic; did you notice his appointment book? Him and his yacht-looking, country-club-looking clothes; his ridiculous yellow crew cut; his stupid rubber-soled boating shoes. And look at how he was sprung on us! Just sprung on us with no warning! One day it's, oh, poor NoNo, thirty-five years old and never even been kissed so far as anyone knew; and the next day—I swear, the very next day!—she pops up out of the blue and announces an August wedding."

"Well, now, I just have a feeling she may have kept him secret out of nervousness," Rebecca said. "She didn't want to look foolish, in case the courtship came to nothing. Also, maybe she worried you girls would be too critical."

Not without reason, she didn't add.

Patch said, "Hogwash. You know why she kept him secret: he's been married once before. Married and divorced, with a twelve-year-old son to boot."

"Well, these things do happen," Rebecca said drily.

"And such a pathetic son, too. Did you see?" Patch jabbed a thumb toward the children by the river, but Rebecca didn't bother turning. "A puny little runt of a son! And it can't have escaped your notice that Barry has sole custody. He's had to cook for that child and clean house, drive the car pool, help with homework . . . Of course he wants a wife! Unpaid nanny, is more like it."

"Now, dearie, that's an insult to NoNo," Rebecca said. "Any man in his right mind would want NoNo for her own sake."

Patch merely gave an explosive wheeze that lifted the spikes of hair off her forehead.

"Just think," Rebecca said. "Didn't I marry a divorced man with three little girls? And see, it worked out fine! I'd be married to him still, if he had lived."

All Patch said to this was, “And how you could throw a party for them!”

“Well, of course I’d throw a party. It’s an occasion!” Rebecca said. “Besides: you and Biddy asked for one, if I remember correctly.”

“We asked if you planned to give one, is all, since you’re so fond of engagement parties. Why, Min Foo’s had three of them! They seem to be kind of a habit with you.”

Rebecca opened her mouth to argue, because she was almost positive that Patch and Biddy had requested, in so many words, that she put together a picnic. But then she saw that she might have misinterpreted. Maybe they had just meant that since they knew she would be planning something, they would prefer it to be held outside. (Oh, the Davitch girls were very unsocial. “I guess you’re going to insist on some kind of shindig,” one of them would sigh, and then they would show up and sit around looking bored, picking at their food while Rebecca tried to jolly things along.)

Well, no matter, because Patch was finally unfolding herself from the minivan. She slammed the door behind her and said, “Let’s get started, then, if you’re so set on this.”

“Thank you, sweetie,” Rebecca said. “I just know we’ll have a good time today.”

Patch said, “Ha!” and marched off toward the others, leaving Rebecca to trail behind.

The softball game had begun now, at least in a halfhearted way. People were scattered across the meadow seemingly at random, with Rebecca’s brother-in-law and Barry so far off in the outfield that they might not even be playing. The catcher (Biddy) was tying her shoe. The uncle leaned on his cane at an indeterminate spot near third base. Rebecca’s daughter was sunbathing on first, lounging in the grass with her face tipped back and her eyes closed.

As Patch and then Rebecca came up behind home plate, Jeep was assuming the batter’s stance, his barrel-shaped body set sideways to them and his barrel resting neatly on the pitcher’s mound, crooked her arm at an awkward angle above her shoulder and released the ball. It traveled in an uncertain arc until Jeep lost

patience and took a stride forward and hit a low drive past second. Hakim, Rebecca's son-in-law, watched with interest as it whizzed by. (No surprise there, since Hakim hailed from someplace Arab and had probably never seen a softball in his life.) Jeep dropped his bat and trotted to first, not disturbing Min Foo's sunbath in the least. He rounded second, receiving a beatific smile from Hakim, and headed for third. Third was manned by Biddy's . . . oh, Rebecca never knew what to call him . . . longtime companion, dear Troy, who always claimed it was while he was fumbling a pop-up fly at age five that he first realized he was gay. All he did was wave amiably as Jeep went trundling past.

By that time, Barry had managed to locate the ball. He threw it toward Biddy, but she was tying her other shoe now. It was Patch who stepped forward to intercept it, apparently without effort. Then she turned back to home plate and tagged her husband out.

Patch and Jeep might have been playing alone, for all the reaction they got. Biddy straightened up from her shoe and yawned. NoNo started clucking over a broken fingernail. Min Foo was probably unaware of what had happened, even—unless she'd been able to figure it out with her eyes closed.

"Oh," Rebecca cried, "you-all are not even trying! Where is your team spirit?"

"For that, we need more than one side," Jeep said, wiping his forehead on his shoulder. "There aren't enough of us playing."

To Rebecca, it seemed just then that there were far too many of them. Such a large and unwieldy group, they were; so cumbersome, so much work. But she said, "You're absolutely right," and turned in the direction of the river. "Kids!" she called. "Hey, kids!"

The children were hopping in an uneven line a good twenty yards away, beyond a stretch of buzzing, humming grass and alongside flowing water; so at first they didn't hear her. She had to haul up her skirt again and slog toward them, calling, "Come on, everybody! Come and play ball! You kids against us grownups!"

Now they stopped, and they were doing (as some version of Follow the Leader, it seemed, leaping from rock to rock) and looked over at her. Five of the six were here today—all but Dixon, the oldest,

who'd gone someplace else with his girlfriend. And then there was Barry's son, what's-his-name. Peter. "Peter?" Rebecca called. "Want to play softball?"

He stood slightly apart from the others, noticeably pale-haired and white-skinned and scrawny in this company of dark, vivid Davitch children. Rebecca felt a tug of sympathy for him. She called, "You can be pitcher, if you like!"

He took a step backward and shook his head. Well, no, of course: she should have offered him the outfield. Something inconspicuous. The others, meanwhile, had broken rank and were starting toward her. "Not It, not It," the youngest child was chanting, evidently confused as to what softball was all about. Patch and Jeep's three (wouldn't you know) were vying to be first at bat. "We'll draw straws," Rebecca told them. "Come on, everybody! Winning team gets excused from cleanup after lunch."

Only Peter stayed where he was. He was balanced on a low rock, alert and motionless, giving off a chilling silence. Rebecca called, "Sweetie? Aren't you coming?"

Again he shook his head. The other children veered around her and plowed on toward the playing field, but Rebecca gathered her skirt higher and pressed forward. Long, cool grasses tickled her bare calves. A cloud of startled white butterflies fluttered around her knees. She reached the first rock, took a giant step up, and leapt to the next rock just beyond, teetering for a second before she found her footing on the slick, mossy surface. (She was wearing rope-soled espadrilles that gave her almost no traction.) So far she was still on dry land, but most of the other rocks—Peter's included—turned out to be partly submerged. This meant that the children had been disobeying instructions. They'd been warned to stay away from the river, which was unpredictably deep in some spots and wider than a two-lane highway, not to mention icy cold so early in the season.

Peter kept as still as a cornered deer; Rebecca sensed that even though she wasn't looking at him. For the moment, she was looking at the scenery. Oh, how a river can play on your eyes! She sank into a peaceful trance, watching how the water seemed to gather itself as it traveled toward a sharp bend. It swelled up in loose, silky tangles

and then it smoothed and flowed on, transparent at the edges but nearly opaque at the center, as yellow-green and sunlit as a bottle in a window. She drifted with it, dreaming. It could have been a hundred years ago. The line of dark trees on the opposite shore would have looked the same; she'd have heard the same soft, curly lapping close by, the same rushing sound farther off.

Well. Enough of this. She tore her gaze away and turned again to Peter. "I've got you now!" she told him gaily.

He took another step backward and disappeared.

For a moment, she couldn't believe what had happened. She just stood there with her mouth open. Then she looked down and saw a turmoil in the water. A small, white, big-eyed face gulping air and choking. A frantic snarl of thin, bare, flailing arms.

She jumped onto the rock he'd been standing on, skidding slightly and bruising an ankle. She plunged in waist deep and gasped. (The water was so cold it burned.) First she grabbed Peter's wrist but lost it. Then she clutched blue denim. She hitched him up by the seat of his jeans and found the time, somehow, to consider how absurd this must look: a middle-aged woman plucking a boy from a river like a sack of laundry, hoisting him aloft for one split second before her muscles registered his weight and they both went under. But she still had hold of him. She kept her grip. She fought to thrust him above the surface even while she was half sitting on the bottom. Then she was up and struggling shoreward, stumbling and falling and rising and staggering on, hauling him by his armpits. (A good thing he was so undersized or she never could have managed, adrenaline or no.) Between his coughs now he was drawing huge, rough, scraping breaths, and once or twice he gagged. She dragged him in a bobbling way across the rocks to the grass, where she dropped him. She bent double to clear her head and noticed, in that position, how her skirt was streaming with water; so she collected a handful of hem and wrung it out.

The first to reach them was Barry. He pounded up shouting, "Peter! Peter? What happened to you?" Peter didn't answer. He was shaking and chattering, huddling into himself on the ground. Barry peeled his own windbreaker off and bundled it around him.

Meanwhile Zeb arrived—Rebecca’s brother-in-law. He was followed by the children and then by the rest of the grownups, who slowed to a casual saunter once they saw that things were under control.

Zeb was a pediatrician; so Barry and Rebecca gave way to him. He squatted and asked, “Are you okay?” and Peter nodded, swiping at his nose with a sleeve of his father’s windbreaker. “He’s okay,” Zeb announced.

Well, a layman could have done that much. “Check his lungs,” Rebecca ordered.

“His lungs are fine,” Zeb said, but he went on watching Peter. “How did it happen, son?” he asked.

Rebecca tensed, dreading the answer, but Peter kept silent. You couldn’t tell a thing from his expression: eyes lowered, mouth pursed in a stubborn little bunch. Even before his dunking, he had had the skinned appearance of a wet cat, and now she could make out the pink of his scalp beneath his colorless hair. Periodically he swiped at his nose again in a fractious way, as if a gnat were pestering him.

“Well,” Zeb said finally, and he sighed and rose to his feet. He was a gangling, bespectacled, kind-faced man, so accustomed to dealing with the children of the inner-city poor that he wore a permanent look of resignation. “Let’s rustle up some dry clothes for these two,” he said. “Come on, everybody. Fun’s over.”

As they were heading back toward the picnic—Rebecca hugging her rib cage and doing her best to stop her shivers—Barry came up beside her. “I don’t know how I can ever thank you, Mrs., er, Beck,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, “goodness! I’m sure he would have grabbed on to a branch or something, eventually.”

“Well, still: I appreciate your coming to the rescue.”

For now he did, she thought. But wait till he found out that Peter never would have fallen in if not for her.

Copyrighted Material

They didn’t continue the ball game. There was talk of going home early, even; and for once, Rebecca let them argue without

intervening. She sat quietly at the picnic table, cocooned in a leaf-littered blanket, while they hashed it out among themselves. Look at how blue Peter's lips were, several of the women said. He would catch his death of cold! But of course, the grandchildren wanted to stay, and the uncle—an energy miser—pointed out the waste of gas if they had driven all this way only to turn around and drive back. “Let's just eat, for mercy's sake,” he said. Bidly, who had gone to a lot of trouble over the food, jumped up as if that settled things and started unpacking coolers.

By this time, Rebecca's hair had dried into its usual pup-tent shape and her blouse had changed from an icy film to a warm, damp second skin beneath her blanket. She repositioned the blanket around her waist and accepted the loan of Zeb's cardigan. Peter fared better: from the back seats and floors of various vehicles, an entire outfit was assembled. Emmy donated a sweatshirt, Danny a pair of striped baseball knickers, and Jeep two semi-white gym socks. Ignoring the curious stares of the other children, Peter stripped then and there, exposing tweaky pale dots of nipples and dingy, stretched-out underpants fraying at the edges. (This was what happened, Rebecca reflected, when a father had sole custody.) Everything was too big for him. Even Danny's knickers—and Danny was barely thirteen—hung off him in folds, clinging to him only where the wet underpants had soaked through.

It struck Rebecca as unusual that a boy that old didn't mind changing clothes in public. And there was something needful and nudging about the way he stayed so close to his father. Once they were settled on NoNo's blanket, he kept interrupting the conversation by plucking Barry's sleeve and whispering at length in his ear, as if he were not just small for his age but young for his age, too.

“Is that child all *right*?” she asked Zeb.

“Oh, sure. Just bashful, I suspect,” he told her.

But a big part of Zeb's profession was soothing parents' anxieties; so she turned to Bidly. “I haven't heard him say a word to NoNo,” she said. “I hope there isn't going to be some kind of step-mother problem.”

Biddy said, “Well, at least he was playing with the other kids by the river. That’s always a good sign.”

“He wouldn’t talk to us, though,” one of the children spoke up.

This was Emmy, a long-legged sprite pouring lemonade from a thermos. Rebecca hadn’t realized she was listening. Hastily, she said, “Well, of course he wouldn’t talk! Imagine meeting all of you at once! I bet he talks your ears off as soon as he feels more at home.”

“He wasn’t really playing, either. He was only, like, hanging around our edges.”

Rebecca said, “Maybe I should give him a welcoming party. You know? The way I do for our new babies? I could, oh, set up a scavenger hunt! And all the clues could be Davitch-related, I mean things he would have to ask the other kids to—”

“He would hate it,” Emmy said flatly.

Rebecca slumped in her seat.

Biddy was uncovering a tray of runny cheeses garnished with edible flowers, and a mosaic of tiny canapés studded with salmon roe, and a sunburst of snow peas filled with smoked trout and dill. Two days a week, Biddy worked as a nutritionist for a retirement community (her monthly newsletter, *What Kind of Wine Goes with Oatmeal?*, had been mentioned in the *Baltimore Sun*), but she dreamed of becoming a gourmet chef, and it showed. “Ew, what’s this?” the children were forever asking, pointing to something stuffed or sculptured or wonton-encased or otherwise disguised; and today they were all the more distressed because meaty, smoky smells had started drifting down the river from somebody else’s grill. “Can’t we ever have hamburgers?” Joey asked.

Rebecca said, “You can get hamburgers any old place! It’s only at a Davitch party you can try these, um . . . these, um . . .”

She was looking at a platter of pastry thimbles filled with what seemed to be mud. Biddy said, “Snails in phyllo cups.”

Joey said, “Ew!”

“I beg your pardon—” Biddy began, but then Rebecca grabbed Joey around the waist and pulled him close and nuzzled his neck. “Such a persnickety,” she teased him, “such a hoity-toity,” while he

squirmed and giggled. He smelled of fresh sweat and sunshine. “Gram!” he protested, and she released him, and he went careening off toward his cousins.

“That child needs to be taught some manners,” Biddy said. “Poppy? Care for a snail?” she asked her great-uncle.

Poppy was seated on the other side of the picnic table, folding both hands on his cane and hunching forward all hungry and hopeful, but he drew back sharply and, “Oh,” he said, “why, ah, not just now, I don’t believe, thank you just the same.”

Biddy sighed. “I don’t know why I bother,” she told Rebecca. “Why not just grill a batch of hot dogs, or set out a loaf of store-bought bread and a jar of peanut butter?”

Why not, in fact? Rebecca wanted to ask. It wasn’t as if Biddy were catering to her own tastes, because Biddy didn’t eat. She was painfully, unattractively thin, every vertebra visible down the back of her neck, even her short black ponytail skimped and stringy, her wide-legged slacks and long red sweater all but empty. Offer her a bite and she’d say, “Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly,” and yet she talked about food nonstop, read cookbooks the way other women read romance novels, pored over magazine photos featuring glossy, lacy salads and succulent pork roasts. “Call people to the table,” she told Rebecca now. “Everything’s drying out! Make them come!”—as if she herself could not be heard; as if the food were her only means of communication.

Obediently, Rebecca stood up. (She knew from long experience that this family had to be corralled; a simple shout never worked.) “Children!” she called, wading through knee-high weeds. “Lunch is on!” Her shoes were squelching wetly, and her blanket started collecting a fuzz of burrs and pollen. “Lunch, Troy! Lunch, Hakim! Come eat, everybody!”

She should wear a whistle around her neck for these occasions. She always threatened to do that, but then forgot until next time.

Patch and Jeep seemed to be having an argument. Or Patch was arguing; Jeep was **Copyrighted Material** growling. The growler had one huge, cloddish running shoe, his fists stuffed in his rear pockets and his eyes on the trees in the distance. “Lunch, you two!” Rebecca sang out. She

scooped up the youngest grandchild but then was thrown off balance, and her blanket sarong hobbled her so that they both fell, laughing, into a clump of sprinkly white flowers. Rebecca's daughter said, "Honestly, Mom!" and helped them to their feet.

"Sorry," Rebecca said, chastened.

Once she had been the most serene and dignified young woman. That thought came to her, suddenly. She had worn her hair in a crown of braids, and friends had complimented her on the level way she carried her head, which had made her broad figure seem almost regal. Queen Rebecca, her roommate had called her.

Well, that was all in the past now.

By the time she got back to the picnic table, Poppy had started in on the least smelly of the cheeses. "Wait, Poppy!" she told him. "We haven't drunk the toast yet!"

"Who knows whether I'll live that long?" he asked crossly, but he set down his knife. He was one of those old men who appear to curl up as they age, and his chin was practically resting on the table.

Biddy was constructing a still life of exotic fruits—kiwis and mangoes and papayas and something that looked like green hand grenades. "How pretty!" Rebecca told her, although she was fairly certain that no one would venture to eat any. She reached past Biddy for a bottle of champagne and handed it to Barry. "Could you please open this?" she asked him. (Always give guests some useful task, if you want them to feel a part of things.) Another bottle went to Zeb, and she put Patch to work unpacking the old-fashioned, shallow sherbet glasses that the Davitches still used for champagne.

"Why you bring real crystal to family picnics—" Patch began, but Rebecca said, "What better occasion, I ask you, than for my nearest and dearest?"

"Half will be in splinters before we leave here; mark my words," Patch told her.

She was still upset about the engagement, Rebecca decided. It wasn't like Patch to care if the stemware got broken. She wrapped an arm around Patch. **Copyrighted Material** "Sweetie, things will work out. We have to trust NoNo's judgment! She must know what she's doing."

Unfortunately, just at that moment Barry's cell phone rang. He pulled it from a holster on his belt and said, "Hello?" Patch gave Rebecca a meaningful stare. Rebecca just smiled noncommittally and sat back down at the table.

The children were complaining about their portions of champagne. They believed they should be given as much as the grown-ups, but what did they get? A tiny drop each, barely a swallow. "Once you're legal drinking age—" Rebecca told them.

"You always let Dixon have a full glass, and he's not legal drinking age!"

"Well, Dixon's older than the rest of you, and besides, eighteen *used* to be legal."

Jeep didn't like what he'd been served, either; he preferred beer. "Didn't we bring a six-pack?" he asked. "Where's that six-pack? Geez, Patch, you know how champagne makes me burp," and he started rummaging through ice chests.

Then Poppy took it into his head to start reciting his poem. "*You're given a special welcome when you get to heaven late,*" he declaimed in a ringing voice.

This was the poem he'd written for his wife's funeral, all of thirty years ago, and he never missed a chance to quote it. As often as Rebecca had heard that opening line, she mistook it every time for a reference to the Davitches' tendency toward tardiness. So like them to be unpunctual even in death! she always thought. Although the second line dispelled that notion. "*When you're the one who's been left behind to mourn,*" Poppy went on, rolling his *r*'s.

"Yes, but, Poppy," Rebecca said gently, and she reached across the table for his hand. "This is actually more of a *joyous* occasion, you know?"

He glared at her, but he subsided. His hand had a light, hollow feel, like a dried-up locust shell, and it lay in hers without moving.

Oh, none of the others considered how every engagement on earth would have to end up, Rebecca thought. They glided right over "till death do us part."

But she squared her shoulders, and, "So!" she cried. "Barry, NoNo, tell us how you met! This has all been such a surprise!"

Barry was just replacing his phone in its holster. He looked over at NoNo, and she slipped both hands through the crook of his arm and smiled up at him. “Well,” she began, in her scratchy little voice, “you know how I’ve always had the gift of second sight.”

Her sisters nodded, but a couple of the men were heard to groan.

“Well, I’m standing in my shop one morning, and in walks Barry. Says he wants a dozen roses. ‘Fine,’ I say, and I turn to get them, and all at once, out of the corner of my eye, I see the strangest thing. I see me, standing next to him, and I’m wearing a white chiffon wedding dress and holding a bouquet of late-summer blooms in various shades of yellow and gold—calendulas and rudbeckia and cosmos and gerbera daisies.”

Rebecca supposed it was only natural that NoNo should focus most specifically on the flowers, but even so, she couldn’t help laughing. The others looked at her. “Sorry,” she said.

“And then,” NoNo went on, “I blink and he’s alone again. Waiting at the counter and wondering what the delay is, no doubt. So I go get the roses, I bring them out, I wrap them, and all the time I’m thinking *madly*. Madly. And finally I say, ‘What would you like me to put on the card?’ Which is not the usual thing, of course. Usually when a customer comes in person, he doesn’t bother with a card. Or if he does, he writes the message himself. But I was afraid he was married or something. I wanted to see who the roses were meant for.”

“Only, I didn’t know that wasn’t the usual thing,” Barry said. “I told her, ‘Just write, *For Mamie with love.*’”

“And I said, ‘Who is Mamie?’”

Patch stopped handing out napkins. “You didn’t,” she said.

“I did! I was brazen! And Barry said, ‘Mamie’s my secretary.’ See, it happened to be Professional Secretaries Day.”

“You send flowers to your secretary with *love*?” Patch asked Barry. He shrugged. “It’s just an expression,” he said.

Patch looked at him a moment longer and then went back to her napkins, shaking her head.

But NoNo was oblivious. “In the meantime,” she told the others, “he is taking money from his wallet, and I am thinking,

Shoot, he's paying cash! I won't find out his name! So I write on the card, *For Mamie with love, from your boss and from Elinor Davitch, who would like to get to know him better.*"

Patch sent a despairing glance toward the sky.

"Wasn't that smart?" Barry asked, beaming down at NoNo. "She figured Mamie would ask me, 'Who's this Elinor Davitch?' Which she did, sure enough. And I said, 'Who is *who*?' and Mamie showed me the card. I said, 'Well, I never! It must be that woman at Budding Genius.' And I went back there after work and asked if she'd have a drink with me."

"We hit it off immediately," NoNo said. "I knew we would. Have I ever been wrong? Remember that time I saw a big, huge belly on Patch when she was trying to get pregnant? Remember when I asked Dixon why he was wearing a Johns Hopkins T-shirt? He said, 'This is a Camp Fernwood T-shirt, Aunt NoNo, but I wish it *were* Johns Hopkins because Hopkins is my first-choice college.' And I didn't even know it! Nobody'd told me a thing!"

Patch was shaking her head again. "Ridiculous," she said in an undertone to Rebecca.

Rebecca said, "Well, she does have this uncanny way of—"

"Not that, Beck. Although how uncanny could it be, when she fulfilled her own prophecy by immediately writing that note, for Lord's sake? But do you happen to have any idea when Secretaries Day is?"

Rebecca said, "Um . . ."

"It's in April."

"April," Rebecca said, still not comprehending.

"That was barely two months ago! Or less; more like one month, because I think it's toward the tail end of April. NoNo's known this man just a month and now she's up and marrying him!"

Rebecca started to remind her that she wasn't marrying him till August, after all. But in the lull that had suddenly fallen—with the only sounds the distant river and the chirring of the insects—she worried NoNo was overtraining her coordination. So instead, she picked up a glass of champagne. "Time for our toast, everybody!" she cried.

One by one, they reached for glasses of their own. The children were the most enthusiastic. They raised theirs high above their heads, like people hailing taxicabs. The only exception was Peter, who sat on NoNo's blanket in a puddle of heather-gray sweatshirt and allowed his glass to dangle limply from one hand.

Rebecca drew in a deep breath and began:

*“A toast to the bunch of us gathered together
In this glorious spring weather,
And to Zeb for scoping out the site
And Biddy for cooking with all her might.”*

Her rhyming toasts were a tradition. She had no illusions about their literary merit; she knew they were pure doggerel. (More than once, in a pinch, she'd been forced to rely on nonsense syllables—*tra la la* or *tum dee diddle*—to finish up a line.) But her family had come to expect them; so she took another breath and went on.

*“And most of all, to NoNo and Barry.
We're so delighted they're planning to marry.”*

“Hear, hear,” the others murmured.

Joey's glass had a bee on the rim and there was a little to-do, since Joey was deathly allergic; but eventually they did all manage to take their sips. Then Barry said, “Well, thanks, you guys,” and sheepishly rubbed the top of his bristly blond crew cut.

That was the best he could do?

Oh, Rebecca always felt suspicious of the people that her loved ones fell in love with. She worried! She couldn't help it! But that was her deep, dark secret, because invariably she was the first to rush forward with a warm welcome. Now she raised her glass again. “And next!” she said.

*“Next, a toast to Peter!
Someone new in our family!
Nothing could be sweeter.”*

“Hear, hear!” they repeated, more loudly now, and Barry said, “Aww,” and raised his glass to Rebecca. “That’s very nice of you,” he told her.

But Peter said, “I’m not in your family.”

His speaking voice turned out to be high and thin and childish, but it managed to silence everybody.

“I’ve already got a family!” he said.

Rebecca said, “I didn’t mean—I’m sorry! I honestly didn’t mean—”

Peter scrambled to his feet, tossing aside his glass. (It sent out a spray of bright drops before it landed, intact, on the blanket.) His floppy borrowed socks nearly tripped him up, but he righted himself and started running.

Not toward the river, thank goodness. He seemed headed for Barry’s car, although it was difficult to be sure. Rebecca, rising from her bench with her fingers pressed to her lips, thought he resembled one of those charred paper bits that float above a bonfire, gray and weightless, fluttering without aim. As he neared the car he glanced over his shoulder, and when he found Barry ambling behind at a nonchalant pace, he veered to the left without slowing down. In front of him was a green thicket. He plunged directly into it.

“Stop him,” Zeb said suddenly.

Everybody looked at him.

“He’s going toward where the river bends! He’s headed for the water,” Zeb said, and he set off at a lope. “Barry!” he called. “Stop him! He’s about to get wet all over again!”

Barry gathered speed.

Peter entered the thicket and vanished.

A moment later, Barry vanished too.

And that is when the first intimation came to Rebecca from nowhere, brushing across her mind like the most delicate of moth wings.

How on earth did I get like this? How? How did I ever become this person who’s not really me?

That night, she dreamed she was traveling on a train with her teenaged son.

Never mind that she had no son. Never mind that if she had, he would have been a grown man by now. In her dream, she took it for granted that this tall, quiet, gawky young boy belonged to her without question. His hair was the same fair color as hers, except that it hung in a shock to one side. He was thinner than Rebecca had ever been, but he had her gray eyes and sharp nose. And most familiar of all was some quality in his expression, something hopeful and wistful, some sense he felt a little bit outside of things. Didn't she know that feeling! She recognized immediately the shy, uncertain edginess at the corners of his mouth.

He had the window seat; she had the aisle. He was gazing out at the scenery and so was she, supposedly, but really she was seizing the chance to dwell on his dear profile. She felt a wash of love for him—the deep, pervasive, abiding love you feel for one of your own.

When she woke up she was sorry and she wanted to go back to her dream again but she couldn't.

She lay awake in the bed that she had come to as a bride, in the room that she had slept in for over thirty years. For the majority of her life, in fact; so why did she still think of this house as somebody else's? The Davitches' house, not hers. The Davitches' ornate but crumbling nineteenth-century Baltimore row house, with its two high-ceilinged parlors, front and rear, its antiquated backyard kitchen connected to the dining room by an afterthought of a passageway, its elaborate carved moldings and butterfly-parquet floors and seven sculptured marble mantelpieces overhanging seven fireplaces, five of them defunct.

The ground level provided the family's subsistence; they rented it out for parties. Christenings, graduation teas, wedding receptions, retirement dinners . . . *All of Life's Occasions from the Cradle to the Grave*, as their ad in the Yellow Pages put it. *For Your Next Important Social Event, "Experience the Charms of the Open Arms."*

Funny name for such a narrow, shutter-faced house, she'd always thought.

She'd thought it the first time she came here, nineteen years old and dressed head to toe in blue, a heavysset, timid young woman standing out on the sidewalk peering up at the shield-shaped sign. *The Open Arms, Est. 1951*. Nothing open about it at all, not that she could see. Although possibly she'd been influenced by the fact that parties of any kind whatsoever were her idea of torture.

Oh, life worked out so surprisingly, didn't it?

The flannel darkness high above her turned white and then transparent, and the birds began to sing in the poplar tree next door, and the grandfather clock downstairs gave off six mournful *dongs*. Rebecca finally got out of bed and shook her nightgown around her ankles and went over to raise the window shade. It was going to be another sunny day. Chips of blue sky showed behind the rooftops. She watched a traffic helicopter cross the space between two far-away buildings, its popliteal disk, blue, above its head.

This was not the master bedroom. (That had somehow gone to Poppy, after her mother-in-law died.) It was her husband's boyhood

room, and traces of his boyhood enthusiasms could still be found here and there—in the half-dozen odd-colored rocks arranged on top of the bookcase, the framed display of wheat-sheaf pennies hanging on one wall, the Baltimore Colts decal plastered irremovably inside the closet door. Joe Davitch had been full of enthusiasms, even as a grown man. He'd been large in spirit and in frame, exuberant and outgoing, booming-voiced, quick to laugh, given to flinging out both hands in a gesture of wholehearted welcome.

Really it was Joe who had had the open arms.

She turned from the window and collected her clothes: an Indian blouse embroidered with peacocks, a flounced calico skirt, and the white cotton, old-lady underwear she had come to favor now that there was no one else to see it. She clutched all this to her chest and crossed the hall to the bathroom, which gave off the comforting smell of aged enamel paint and Ivory soap. The radiator was as filigreed and scrolled as a silver tea urn. The claw-footed bathtub was big enough to sleep in.

Then halfway through her shower: *bam-bam!* Poppy, knocking on the bathroom door. She squinched her face against the spray and started humming, because she wanted to go on musing about the boy in her dream. His stubby blond eyelashes. (*Her* lashes, which didn't even show unless she remembered, as she rarely did, to brush them with mascara.) His long-fingered, angular hands. (The hands were not hers, but whose, then? Whom did they remind her of?)

At some point Poppy gave up and went away, but she couldn't have said just when.

. . .

"I had the oddest dream," she told Poppy over breakfast.

"Were there any numbers in it?"

She was startled, not so much by the question as by the fact that he had heard her. Nowadays, he seemed to be absent so often. She looked at him over her coffee cup and realized, much later than she should have, that he was dressed wrong. He was wearing a pair of brown suit pants and a sleeveless undershirt but no shirt, so

that his suspenders cut directly across his whiskery bare shoulders. After breakfast she would have to talk him into something more appropriate.

“If you can recall any numbers,” he told her, “my friend Alex—remember Alex Ames from my teaching days?—he is always after me for numbers to play the lottery with. He wants the numbers from my dreams, but I don’t have any dreams anymore.”

“Sorry, no,” she told him. “This was about a boy. He seemed to be my son.”

“Which one?”

“Pardon?”

“Which of your sons was it?”

“Poppy,” she said. “I don’t have any sons.”

“Then what’d you go and dream about them for?”

She sighed and took another sip of coffee.

This was a man unrelated to her—an uncle only by marriage. The brother of her late father-in-law. Yet here they were, living out their lives together like some cranky old married couple. Her mother-in-law and Joe had invited Poppy to stay for a while after his wife died, when it seemed he was about to turn into a telephone drunk. (Calling up at all hours: “Can I honestly be expected to go on without my Joycie?”) Then her mother-in-law died; then Joe himself died—killed in a car wreck just six years after their wedding—and somehow, Poppy had never left. Rebecca had spent more years now with Poppy than with anyone she’d ever known; and she didn’t even especially like the man, which was not to say she actively disliked him. She just thought of him as a kind of fellow boarder. It was a matter of pure happenstance that she was the one who had to listen to the state of his bowels every morning, and accompany him on his exercise walk, and ferry him to the doctor and the dentist and the physical therapist.

But he was someone to talk to, at least; so she tried again. “In my dream I was on a train,” she told him, “and this boy was sitting next to me. He was, I don’t know, in his early teens—that awkward, bean-pole stage just after they get their growth spurt—and it seemed to be understood that he was my son.”