

KAREN MAKES A CHANGE

The Wanderer

After George, Allan, and the others had left the club room of the Scottsdale Resort one remained. This was Dido Makros, a morose man who had made only one remark all evening, and that was to agree that Bob McAdoo had embarrassed himself at Mona's gallery opening earlier in the evening. To agree was a characteristic thing for Dido. He was always nervous for himself about appearing to be different. But in any case, he could be expected to agree.

Dido's given name was Theodore, but no one had called him that since prep school. The boy who had been Theodore had much disliked school, and the man recollects it with a shudder. He recollects it often, as the epitome and apogee of formal, institutionalized brutality — not anything which could be set down in a complaint, such as buggering by the masters or bullying from the boys, but the relentless manias, demands for conformity, and lust for physical contact threatened Dido's shyness and made often fatal demands on his meager social skills.

Nevertheless, Dido had made enough of himself since to be comfortably acceptable to a group of wealthy men chatting by a fire in the club room of a coveted resort, where his habitual silence went unremarked upon and his eccentricities were ignored. Dido was realistic enough to know that these boons were bought with money, not awarded out of kindness. Kindness was a hedge fund like any other, from which the investor expects more in return than the amount risked.

In times past, Dido reflected, he would have stayed on to finish a good cigar. In times to come, he supposed, cigars would be as poor an investment as Pullman cars.

Dido Makros was of an age to regret the old pleasures without being able to adopt the new.

Just now he was having a spiritual crisis. He had seen it coming on. On previous occasions he had weathered it on his own. For the friends who had just left him, it would be a weakness, or at least dubious, to take advice like a lawyer or an accountant. That would be one eccentricity too many.

Bob McAdoo was an accountant.

Dido delicately rolled the ash from his imaginary cigar and stared at the temporarily real flames of the resort's only remaining fireplace.

The men's earlier discussion of Bob McAdoo's gaffe reminded Dido that these attitudes were not confined to the things he knew. He

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was familiar enough with the necessity of passing for what he was not, with the tugging of forelocks, even in the delicate world of connoisseurship.

Unlike the schoolboys who were once stood up on the burning deck, on the endless cruel sea the emotional whippings Dido had received for forgetting his lines had left permanent scars on his back.

And if you wrong us, do we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.

No. That was merely another speech. Dido Makros was no passing Jew, a man resembling to resemble for sake of lawyers' talk of mercy. But how could he say to his friends and relatives, if he had any, or to his imaginary wife and hypothetical children: I do not exist. You don't see me. I am not here — and then go off as a sadhu in a breechclout or whatever it is sadhus wear in search of non-existence?

The claim that he did not exist was likely as false as the claim that he did.

Excuse me.

Dido blinked and emerged from his reverie.

Someone overhead somewhere cleared his throat and asked again to be excused.

A waiter.

May I bring you another drink, sir?

Ah, Dido said in a rough, unused voice. No, thank you. I'm done for the evening. What do I owe you?

Mr. Makros has taken care of that, sir.

Has he. Well, this is for you, then.

Dido took two bills from a crumpled stash in an outer pocket of his jacket. The waiter took them, returned thanks, and glided away.

It was something to do with the carpet that made the staff seem to move so oddly.

Apparently, Dido thought, I do exist. I paid the bill. What else, I wonder.

So. That's done.

But he was not in fact done. Dido slipped on his overcoat, a black leather duster, and walked through the lobby out onto the reception portico, where a doorman offered to retrieve his car. The car arrived, Dido got in. It was too warm. He dialed the temperature down to 68° and drove out onto Scottsdale Road. The GPS asked him where he wanted to go.

Dido smiled. It was a sardonic, temporarily liberating smile.

Home, he said.

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The Copper Star

The first warm evening that spring — it was sometime in April, he didn't pay much attention to that sort of thing — Dido Makros put the top down on the roadster and went out for a drive. He got out a raccoon coat he had inherited from his father, along with driving gloves and goggles and a blue and white cloth cap. On the switchbacks coming down off the mountain the little car hunkered down and took a hungry hold of the road.

Dido was enjoying the drive immensely, holding a line exactly a tire's width from the center stripe. For an hour he pursued the amusement of driving around Camelback Mountain, like a steel ball inside a hula hoop. He stuck close to the foot where there were fewer dead ends. Above him hung the cantilevered boxes and the porticoed mansions which followed the contours of the mountain-side like strings of chewing gum. Much grander than Dido's own, lower down. On the southeastern side of the mountain windows gleamed in the moonlight. After twice around, Dido slowed and made some forays into the upper reaches. It was early yet. Parties were going on. Small groups were out on the decks with drinks and bent elbows. Arms cocked as if about to punch each other in the stomach. Wine in crystalline flutes or an occasional bourbon. Pretending to look at the stars occluded as always by pollution. Venus only.

Dido supposed it was Venus. That would be appropriate.

Or Mars. Wasn't Mars red? Blood.

Dido himself lived in a small house dug deep into the mountain, solar powered, mostly self-sufficient, with no decks and only a glass wall to gather heat in the winter. In summer and at night it was shuttered. Venus was hidden, and Dido never gave parties.

When he grew tired of exploring Camelback he worked his way over to North Mountain, but that was boring also and he headed up to Cave Creek Road, intending to cross over to Interstate 17. He had an idea to go to Flagstaff. The Canyon. Hike in to Betatakin at dawn.

Well, perhaps not, dressed as he was.

Some other time...

This area of the Valley, the far northern townlets, was really more to his taste than Camelback. The houses were low to the ground and far apart, hidden away beneath the palo brea, closed by mesquite and prickly pear with their pads spread out like the hands of traffic cops. Stop here. Go no farther.

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So why had he not chosen to live here, instead of in the city? Dido didn't understand that. It was something to do with high and low, whether it was better to keep close to the ground, to live in a burrow, or instead to lift oneself above reach and live in an aerie. It was only something to do with keeping safe. Rabbits and mice live in holes. They know nothing of the expanse of the universe. There are no others of their kind, only the tribe and the land, and no matter how far you walk there is more of it. Eagles, geese, even butterflies know better, that there is not always more of it. To a rabbit the world is wide. For an eagle it isn't. To know that is worth the risk, Dido felt. To know the truth is worth the risk of being seen, being pointed out.

Dido turned onto the Interstate. Traffic was light at this time of night. The little roadster leapt forward like a lean dog, a cat bursting on its prey, a pheasant breaking cover.

His father took him pheasant hunting once. Dido remembered also an uncle, who he never saw again. They were on their way somewhere, rangeland, to do with oil wells. A shotgun was found for him, and when the bird flew he killed it, as he was supposed to do. The cold air, displaced by the explosion, rushed back, slapping his face. The clouds were stupendous overhead and the land went on forever. As far as he could walk.

No one said anything. There were no congratulations. It's a hen, Dido's uncle remarked then for his benefit. Leave it.

Dido understood about that when he was older and knew better what it was to be well-bred.

The road had narrowed down to four lanes and started to climb up into Black Canyon, a six percent grade. Dido was taking the curves at over ninety, a hundred twenty through the straight patches. At the top of the hill the car shot up over the rim and the land seemed to drop away. He slowed; the car rejoined the earth like a falling leaf. He turned off onto the Sunset Point overlook access.

The rest stop held only 18-wheelers, idling quietly among themselves. Dido pulled into a parking spot at the far end, away from the toilets, and turned off the ignition. It was midnight. The moon, the glowing moonstruck eye, was closed. High clouds replaced the pollution below and the stars were still covered. Venus was gone as well; at least, he had no idea where to look for it. Here the air was cold, rapacious. Dido thought of putting the top up, but instead pulled out a blanket from the bin behind the seat, covered his ears with the collar of his raccoon coat, and pushed deeper into his seat.

There was nothing to see. He fell asleep.

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On the way back down, more sedate now, Dido followed another whim and turned off at Black Canyon City where there was a roadhouse. The highway cut down here and the roadhouse overlooked it by sixty feet or so. But at the top of the gravel driveway Dido stopped in the middle of the parking lot and left the engine running. The place was somewhat ramshackle, originally a small wooden building which had been added onto indiscriminately. Two men stood on the wooden porch, talking and smoking. They glanced at the now dusty roadster, at the driver dressed in a fur coat and round goggles, and turned away again. They stood partly side by side and talked over each other's shoulders, as men do, avoiding challenge. Lean, dressed identically in jeans, boots, and khaki work shirts, they smoked and talked. The flaps of their shirt pockets were unbuttoned, where cigarettes were kept, cell phones, and a small bound notebook and a stub of pencil with which to write in the notebook whatever seemed important at the time. Heavy key rings chained to their belts. Hats, but the brims curled differently, one curled up at the sides and one flat, turned down gently at the back. The talking stopped, then the smoking, and the two went back inside.

There were five trucks in the parking lot, two with dual wheels and hitches in the beds for hauling horse trailers. Inside the talk was loud, covered by that Mexican music which sounded like polkas. It had a name, that music, but Dido could not remember what it was.

He would not go in now. Perhaps on a hot afternoon sometime, with no one there, dark and cool, he would sit in a booth in the back and drink a beer.

Dido turned the roadster around in a tight circle. He looked back, one arm behind the other seat, but soon enough drifted away, gravel crunching lightly under the tires, and returned to the highway.

He was tired. The nap at Sunrise Point — was that the name? Diamond Point — Peak? — had not been enough. The roadster drifted to the left, out of its lane. Dido was having trouble keeping up speed. Now it was morning. Traffic was thickening.

A snarling woke him to the present danger. He had been drifting again, into the path of an oil tanker. He jerked the wheel to the right. For three-quarters of an hour after that he managed to stay in the main current of the traffic. The bustle around him grew. He felt like an uprooted tree, a snag moving slowly, causing turbulence.

And then he missed his exit, unable to reach it across two packed lanes. Dido worked his way to the right and got off at Indian School Road one intersection too far south. He turned east. The sun was in his eyes.

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And then another mistake. Dido realized that he was about to run out of gas. Casting about, he saw a station on the near corner and pulled into the narrow portico between the building and two old pumps which were obviously not working. The bleary windows facing them stared in lidless stupor.

Now what? Dido backed up. Where was the exit onto the street? Hunting around behind the building, he found to his puzzlement that the place wasn't a gas station at all, but a coffee shop, like a boy in the husk of an old roué. He parked the roadster and went in. It had been twelve hours.

There were not many tables, and only one unoccupied. Dido put his cap and goggles down there to reserve it and went to the counter. To the wrong end. A genial man with a pony-tail directed him to the other end, and there took his order for coffee and a sandwich.

Room for cream?

No.

Cup or mug?

Mug.

What size?

Small. A large one gets cold before I finish.

Breakfast?

What is there?

The counter man gestured toward a board beside the register, but Dido was unable to take it in. Egg and sausage.

Wheat or sourdough?

Dido asked for a croissant and was offered a bagel, which provoked a new flood of questions about flavor, toasted, buttered, and several other things. Then it seemed there was also a choice of sausages. Salsa no. More possibilities. Dido began to laugh uncontrollably.

Just one more thing, the counterman said. What's that legendary coat?

Raccoon. It was my father's.

Grandfather's, wouldn't it be? Flappers and speakeasies and rumble seats? Not around here, though. Then.

Well, yes, Dido admitted. Probably. They lived in Philadelphia, I think. My father never said.

The counterman's round open eyes glimmered. Can I feel? he said, shyly. Dido held out his sleeve and the other man caught it between his fingers.

Awesome.

He let go. Dido withdrew his arm from over the vitrine with its scones and rolls, reluctant.

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Here's your coffee. I'll call you when the sandwich is made.

Dido nodded in acknowledgement, made his way back between the tables, and sat with his back to the wall. The other customers were all women, some seeming students with open laptops, a texting high-school girl, a woman in casual business clothes dripping butter onto a folder of papers she was marking up, a woman about Dido's age in running clothes reading the *Republic*, which she had folded up into a tight square like a veteran strap-hanger.

One of the students raised her head, saw Dido, and smiled. She closed the lid of her computer and began to collect her things into a large cloth sack.

Have a nice day, she said, and somehow meant it.

And you as well, Dido responded formally.

The counterman brought his egg and sausage sandwich on sourdough with mayonnaise and mustard and a pickle and a great deal else present or absent.

The counterman wiped his hands on his apron, took Dido's mug, and refilled himself at the rank of coffee urns underneath the posted menu.

I guessed you wanted French roast, he said, putting down the mug delicately.

Dido took a bite of sandwich. He chewed it slowly. He chewed for days, weeks. That sandwich would never be eaten. In times to come Dido would still be there, unable to leave because his car was out of gas, with his sandwich and the teacher dribbling butter on her students' homework and the man who liked his grandfather's raccoon coat.

He would take the bus home.

Eventually.

THE HAND AND THE SPIRIT

Karen McAdoo was, like an old lemon tree, a woman of few words and most of them sour. She put all her sensuality and intelligence into her pottery. Hers was a philosophy of slurred fingertips; such ideas as she had were soft, morphic, morphiotic, wobbly-legged, but somehow upright. Her affections were otherwise – dry, hard, and muscular, needing a lot of pounding and folding of the earth to make them philosophical. It did not escape her that sensuality and thought, at least insofar as pottery were concerned, were temporary conditions.

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Bob was not suitable. Karen McAdoo was meticulous on the matter: it was Bob who was not suited. Whether she were suited to Bob was unanswerable, and she declined to speculate.

Karen had a Bartleby-like preference for mute particulars. Bob simply wanted to pass over. Bob the economist. When pressed he would retreat to statistics. Whereas Karen declined to say. The difference was obvious to her, at least.

But it does mean something? Bob asked, quizzical and slightly irritated.

Probably.

The pot fell. Angry with Bob, she had squeezed too hard.

Karen sighed, cut it from the bat and threw it into the slip bucket. Nine carefully weighed balls of white clay were arranged in an exactly spaced line under plastic on a nearby shelf. She took one, centered it, and began again.

Wet clay is sexually lubricated. Pulling up a cylinder and then opening it out with her thumbs, stretching it into a bowl or a jar, was so obvious as to be a cliché. Except to Bob, of course. Only some of Karen's intelligence was in her fingers, in the hard muscles of her arms and wrists. The rest of it was in her belly, where the pots came from.

Bob was a hard man to like – inconsiderate, narcissistic, passive-aggressive. Years of marriage had taught him nothing. Nor her. But they were married for life. It was all too complicated for an irrational person whose fingers did not like to plan too far ahead.

That business with the glass of water in the museum was so typical of Bob.

He had done it on purpose, of course.

Once, when he was away at a conference of lesser wonks, she decided to find out how it would be to throw naked. She went at it with abandon and got herself coated from armpits to knees and had had to go out into the yard naked to hose off with icy water and it was nowhere near fun.

Another pot shivered and fell. Hopeless. She put the eight remaining balls of clay into the damp box.

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Lunch. She ate hers in the studio, in the kiln room. The door of the kiln was cracked open. She had fired it the day before and had not begun to unload it; some residual heat warmed her dark winter cave hoared with clay dust and furry moss.

One end of the house was visible from where she sat, a somewhat ramshackle artist's house in one of those miniature neighborhoods in Phoenix abounding, not far from the midtown office high-rises. The street side was shaded by old mulberry and olive trees now discouraged because of their asthmatic pollen and thirstiness. The sidewalks were rumpled and the yards patchy grass – no suburban desert landscaping here. Behind this comfortable 1940s façade, the house grew fingers and toes all over the lot. Covered paths led from patios and terraces attached to added rooms to the sheds and worktables of Karen's pottery. There were jars and bowls everywhere, teapots and unmatched cups and plates in rough stony brown, gleaming reds and creamy blues and whites, unglazed bone-colored bisqueware in waiting rows. Her better pieces were on display in the house among the bohemian furniture, bookshelves, computers. It was a mystery to her why Bob consented to live there. She supposed he did. Bob was mostly an annoying abstraction, like her mother who was always pestering her to go to church and have a baby. Go to the bathroom and have a pee.

Bob the pee.

But really, what was to complain? She had a few likeminded friends, none of them potters, and she had a network of colleagues in the Valley, in Tucson and Sedona, who were cheerful and uncompetitive for the most part, and were happy to let her have a small reputation outside the academy, modest sales, and the comfortable angular friendships typical of craftsmen.

Karen piled up a small accumulation of lunch dishes and took them to the kitchen to wash. Through the somewhat bleared wooden casement window above the sink, one of its leaves cranked open to clear the house of stuffy winter air, she could see the east end wall of her neighbor's house. The neighbors were marginally more

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kempt than the McAdoos but no one complained. The woman next door usually kept her curtains closed on this side against the sun, but sometimes on dark days she would open them and then forget. Their daughter in the other bedroom was less careful. Bob, of course, was oblivious.

Bob. Why did he want to go by such an undignified name? He was still the Bob of a Montana childhood where no one has a real name.

When she felt suffocated or abused she sought out some affair of a few days or a week, a spa or sweat-house to clean herself of the pollutants in her life. There wasn't any passion in these interludes, nor any good sex either – she supposed, having no examples to go by – but she rubbed along. Out to lunch with some friends she once remarked about this and was surprised by a lot of dreadful stories. Her own was after all, she had to admit, nothing but the same perfunctory acceptance as what kept Bob from calling himself Robert. There had been some vying around the table for the worst experience, and a lot of ebullience, and whoever had been sitting at the other tables would have gotten an earful.

What a familiar story, said Marta contemptuously when she heard it.

Her partner played the two of spades from the widow and remarked that everyone's lives were mostly clichés.

That shouldn't stop a person from pointing it out, Marta replied.
How about some charity? said another, playing off trump.
What for?

IRONY

Everywhere there are people who leave their windows open. Motives vary. Some live in the country and don't see the point of hiding what there is no one to see, while others hide themselves because there might be. Some live high enough to be unseeable or low enough to be invisible. Still others do it out of laziness, or forgetfulness, because they are hurried for work or impatient for bed, or as a

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bohemian challenge, surly or ironic, to the morals of their bourgeois neighbors.

Irony is a little-understood and often misused word. It is irony when the words are not in agreement with the facts, but if this is not deliberate it is merely ignorance. Irony pretends to deny the truth; if it should prove not a pretense then it is a lie. A base lie, we used to say, at a time when we thought truth was something light and ethereal which would float away if untethered. An irony is not a surprise, though recognition of the ironist's real meaning may be; willfully obscure, surprise withheld, it is malicious. Nor is it something incongruous, unexpected, or not as predicted. It is a figure of speech, of rhetoric, not a neutral statement about the nature of events or things. So when an unobsured view of another's life is called ironic what is meant is that the exposed person's supposedly bohemian challenge is in fact a compliance with the middle-class values it purports to reject. Why one should purport to untethered truth, exposing bourgeois bad faith while seeking it for oneself, is a mystery which the voyeur is not likely to look into.

Karen McAdoo, not especially bourgeois, had never encountered an exhibitionist. Bob, eating his dinner standing up at the kitchen sink, was of course blind to the whole thing despite his direct gaze. Karen had assumed that, as the intended object, his obtuseness would be a frustration, a denial of the exhibitionist's existential claim, like Schrödinger's cat which is neither dead nor alive, in fact not a cat until someone looks at it.

What was on offer was actually no more prurient than a Bonnard painting. When she was home, infrequently, the young woman in the adjoining bedroom was more forthcoming, but her narcissism was so obvious there could be no bond with the voyeur thus denied his own existence. So among the three of them – mother, daughter, and neighbor – what purported to be reality was in fact illusion.

Karen herself was another matter. Afflicted with an unfashionable existential angst, nevertheless she could not bring herself to move close enough to the kitchen window to add that last bit of matter needed to cause the primal black hole to explode and create the

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universe again. So her lonely apotheosis accomplished nothing, and she returned to the studio to superintend a bisque firing in progress.

AN ENCOUNTER

Dido Makros was by preference a solitary animal. Not a hermit, though he could easily have become one, but merely a person who did not wish to be in the company of others.

Dido lived in a burrow-like house dug into the side of Camelback Mountain. When he did go out, to sit in Encanto Park to watch the joggers, dog walkers, picnickers, and other old people like himself sitting on benches watching joggers, dog walkers, and picnickers, he was aware that this pleasure was a little thin but he could not think of others. He went to coffee shops and sat in libraries. In the Phoenix public library, in the main branch which straddled the hurrying I-10 tunnel, there was a small gallery off the entrance which he liked to visit, and one day he noticed there a brochure for First Fridays. A bus tour of artists' studios, the brochure said, would begin at the library at 6pm, and on Roosevelt row a few blocks away many of the galleries would be open. A studio visit would probably be too claustrophobic, although the bus ride was attractive. Dido pondered this, rubbed his cheek, and set off on foot. And so it happened that on the first Friday in January a man who thought three people was a crowd was strolling among the winter visitors, people in town for the Fiesta Bowl, scruffy locals, families with double-wide prams, and anonymous people with inscrutable intentions at Roosevelt and Second Street.

He looked into Carly's Bistro but there was no place to sit. Farther up, one side of the street was occupied by artists' apartments over a string of small shops, most of which were either unoccupied or given over to shawls and buttons and hair salons, some identified on the tour guide as being galleries. One or two framed somethings. A storefront gallery on the other side of the street looked promising. He crossed over, but hesitated. Two other people were there, talking

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with a third, probably the gallery minder, who was a young man sitting on a folding stool at the rear of the single room.

Nevertheless, he went in.

A dozen paintings were on offer, ten of them by one artist, with no stock or reserve, as if it all would be packed into the back of a van at the end of the evening, leaving the former gallery windows still bleared and unwashed, waiting for the next First Friday. Besides the paintings there were some intriguing pots – soup tureens with sculptured lids, one a scene of braceros weeding lettuce with short-handled hoes, another in the form of the dome of Congress with a tiny deformed Liberty on top. The paintings were perfunctory, however, and Dido's inspection of them quickly became a pretense. Instead, he gave an ear to the three people at the back.

The minder was an ASU student, almost a boy. Either he or the middle-aged woman talking to him was certainly the painter, but whether of the ten or the two Dido could not guess. The third was a man in his thirties, well-dressed but without a tie and altogether somewhat rumpled. He stood with his hands in his pockets, one foot deferentially hooked behind the other as if about to polish the toe of his shoe on his pants. Despite appearances, this was clearly a person of authority. And suddenly he turned to Dido, pointing electrically.

You! he said. What do you think of this?

Dido bridled. A person wearing a red foulard and carrying a two-hundred-year-old sword stick ought not, he thought, be addressed as *You*.

On the floor, leaning against the minder's stool, was a small unframed painting which Dido had not noticed. The man picked it up, holding it negligently by one stretcher, and beckoned Dido forward.

Oh, Dido began, uncertain. There was something both harried and hopeful in the boy's face which identified him as the painter, and when his eyes fell expectantly on Dido there was no possibility of remaining silent. So Dido took a careful breath and embarked on his analysis. Color; composition – Dido pointed out an atavistic desire

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for a centripetal organization based on the golden mean —

A spiral, the well-dress man said.

Yes. Resulting in the disorganized brushstrokes here, and here — Dido pointed with his stick -- they dissipate the energy, don't you think --

Dido broke off, unnerved by the abashed young painter and by the intensity of the well-dressed man's gaze.

A couple came in from the street. The minder stood up. The well-dressed man put out his hand to Dido

Gordon Brisbane, he said. Representing Magdalena Gallery.

Sisters, it was, said Dido, pleased to have a safe reply. Was called Sisters at one time. I've been in.

Some time ago. We're digital now.

This put an end to the obvious strategies and Dido, not knowing what to do next, did nothing. He took back his hand. Gordon returned his to his pocket. There was an exchange of smiles, one broad and one faint.

Come across with me to Carly's, Gordon Brisbane said. There's bound to be a place at the bar by now. We can talk. Dido assented, Gordon took him discreetly by the elbow, steering him across the intersection, into the bistro, to the two seats predicted. Gordon nattered all the while in a quiet voice which nevertheless somehow managed to be heard through the din. And so Dido was obliged to introduce himself, more loudly than Gordon, to this oppressively persuasive man of a sort never to be found on a bench in Encanto Park, overheard he was sure by those people who were now jogging his elbow, pressing familiarly against his back, and breathing on his cheek.

Gordon held out a business card. Dido took it, held it by the edges between thumb and forefinger.

Come out to Mona's sometime and have a chat. Quieter.

He looked sharply at the woman breathing on Dido's neck and melted into the crowd. Dido put his glass of beer, still full, on the counter and pushed his way back out onto the street where a woman with a rough voice accosted him from behind.

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Excuse me, you forgot this.

It was the salty-haired woman from the gallery.

That was the tip, Dido said, nettled by her phenomenally lame excuse.

She was wearing tattered and mud-spotted jeans and a squirrel-colored shirt joined together by a wide leather belt with a conch buckle. Dido thought this ostentatious.

I couldn't help hearing, she began unwisely —

Yes, you could help, Dido snapped.

that —

Dido turned on his heel.

Excuse me —

Astounded by the woman's blithe persistence, Dido confronted her.

Karen McAdoo, she said, extending one hand. In the other was a purple motorcycle helmet. I used to work for Mona, she said, taking back the gesture.

Ah. So you know this Brisbane fellow.

Yes, she said, cutting off the chance of any elaboration.

And what are you now? Dido asked, taking the other option.

A potter. Come and see my stuff. She handed him yet another card, put on her purple helmet and, message delivered, bobbed away up the street. The crowd was beginning to thin. Dido turned in the opposite direction, back toward Central Avenue, looking thoughtfully at the two cards.

What had happened was the sort of thing which always made him very anxious. He felt *accounted for*. Known. Fitted into some transcendental scheme like the criminal in a detective story who must be found out, without whom there is no story.

Karen McAdoo's card lay on the half-round table in Dido's foyer for several weeks. Finally he made up his mind and drove across town to see for himself. The work was interesting. Perhaps he would return.

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SEEN ON THE STREET

Karen was fascinated by this little man, dapper as a woodpecker, careful as a chipmunk. With some difficulty she persuaded him to meet her on Friday at Cibo on Fifth Avenue and Fillmore. This was on Thursday. Two day's time was too much. The chipmunk's nerve failed and he stood her up. Karen ate her wood-fired artichoke pizza alone, outdoors on the plaza under the sparkling electric candles, watching the traffic on the Avenue and chatting with two men at the next table. She took a box for the half of the pizza intended for Dido, skipped the nine dollar crêpe fresca, ordered a double espresso, and changed seats.

A mistake. One of them was an accountant, the other a county bureaucrat. Either of them might have known Bob. That put any flirting beyond the pale, and Karen was briefly angry with Bob for interfering. She neglected, out of caution, to ask their names.

Meeting someone, she said apologetically, indicating the dogie box. She judged these were the sort of men who would need a reason for a woman to be eating alone. Last minute affairs.

Slowly the easy banter which had earlier prevailed returned. A round of microbrews. The bureaucrat was a beer connoisseur and knew all about this beer, seemingly down to the name of the rat which had drowned in the tank. Karen went easy. The crêpe fresca returned, shared among the three of them. More beer. Consideration given to bruschetta or something of the sort. The meal was going backwards.

The possibilities remained, however, unconsum-mated. Despite Bob's perennial fears, Karen had never had any serious affairs. She sometimes regretted that, wondered whether it were a character flaw, tried it out as a thought experiment. The satisfaction was momentary.

There was some not unpleasant fiddling with knees and fingers with the bureaucrat. Karen excused herself to go and look for her errant dinner companion. It was too complicated to settle the bill, so she put down cash for the tip.

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ON THE MOUNTAIN

It didn't take long to locate a man like Dido Makros, who fancied himself to be secretive but was completely naive about secrets. He even had a doorbell. On Sunday morning she showed up with the styrofoam pizza box on Dido's doorstep. Dido, victimized by the same reluctant politeness which had made him accept her gallery invitation in the first place, invited her to come in. He took the pizza and excused himself to put it away. Karen waited in the foyer, noticing the things on the table: the Sunday newspaper, a magazine (*Art News*), an unopened letter addressed to Gospodin Fyodor Fyodorovitch Makros (postmarked two weeks earlier), and on top of the pile, a black leather hat belonging to The Man With No Name. She replaced these things as she found them. The foyer was bare of other furniture. The terrazzo floor was made with an embedded design, vaguely Hopi, and the walls were of what were probably local chunks of granite. A soft enclosing sunshine filled it, brought in through the mountainside by light tubes. Dido returned empty-handed, soft-footed in leather moccasins. Karen took off her hiking boots and followed in her socks.

There was a morning room — of sorts. The windowless house unnerved her. A service of tea stood on a low table. A teapot, a thermos of hot water, two tea bowls, small dishes of sugar and tea with silver spoons, a tiny cream pitcher. Dido filled the pot, waited for ninety seconds in silence while it brewed, and then poured.

Perhaps you know these bowls, he said shyly. Japanese, 17th century.

Karen looked at her slightly mis-shaped tea bowl more carefully, turned it, lifted it up to look at the bottom. She drank the tea.

No, she said. Are they famous?

Dido laughed, just a murmur and two breaths. Not famous, he admitted. I meant rather as a style of pottery.

Well, yes. Yes, as that.

This exhausted possible topics of small talk. The situation was peculiar. Indirectly, since the original invitation had been hers, Kar-

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en was the hostess in her host's house. He, the coerced guest, was comfortable with indefinite silence, whereas she became fidgety and unhappy. She had prepared to flee when this seemingly ever-courteous little Greek-Russian gentleman rescued her.

I have very few guests here, he said. You are in fact the first this year. A welcome novelty. Thank you for your persistence.

You live alone?

Yes, yes — alone. I would find it difficult to endure. I go out when the maid comes. The rest of the housework I do myself.

Maids, she said.

Yes. A service.

Well if you go out, Karen began brashly —

Dido saw her intent at once and explained about the park.

So then, um — Karen did not feel safe with any form of address — I don't know what to call you.

Dido, he said. In my case, this is the diminutive of Theodore. My parents anglicized the name before I was baptized. *Gospodin* as you undoubtedly know is a formal mode of address quite inappropriate for this humble person, which is why I've left the envelope unopened.

Creepy. Too noticing a person.

Your husband is, I believe, Robert McAdoo? I have some knowledge of that unfortunate accident in the Magdalena gallery.

Oh. You were there?

No. I'm not a collector, you see, and a gallery opening would be would be a quite futile nuisance — Dido left it open how he came to know about Bob's downfall. Where can one see your work? A bit disingenuously, Karen thought, since he'd had her card.

I have a gallery in Tucson, Karen said, feeling inexplicably diffident. He seemed to know what she was going to say before she did. Consignments here and there, she admitted. Gift shops for tourists, 5th Avenue in Scottsdale, the airport, there's a little museum there you know.

I didn't.

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Local fairs, word of mouth, open studio — it's a scramble. I tried the art fair circuit once. Too grueling.

Despite his unsettling knowingness and his nearly suppressed phobias, Dido's kindly and elaborate way of speaking was as reassuring as the mattress in a children's play room. Karen became a little giddy. Then, just as had happened in the restaurant the night before, she seemed to trip on something in the grass. Fatally self-conscious, she cringed to realize how she was dressed, almost in studio clothes. She felt as coy and false as she must have seemed to those two men, unable to carry through her plan. Dumb with embarrassment, wanted to flee.

Dido was studying Karen with a speculative expression. She had suddenly gone silent, as if her plug had come loose, then just as suddenly sprang to life, sprang to her feet, made some excuses, and backed hastily out of the room. In the foyer she soon abandoned an attempt to put her hiking boots back on and escaped with them in her hand.

From the open doorway he watched her go. His hand lay on the bronze lever, and a very small smile on his lips.

WHAT IS LEFT

Not far down the street was a place where the mountainside fell away steeply and a low wall had been built along the edge of the road. Karen sat down on the wall to put on her shoes. From this perch she could see across to the Estrella Mountains which bounded the southern edge of the valley. Traffic was light on a Sunday morning. The dry air was decently clear, but not so clear as it once was. In January, at this hour of the morning, the shadowed air was cold, but where the sun struck it made her skin feel as it did when she'd been slapped. Dido's house was on the south side of the mountain and the low winter sun on this wall caught her full. She walked on a short distance to a pullout where she'd parked her old car.

An old car as unpresentable as its driver. What had come over her? First the restaurant, now this. It was something to do with Bob,

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with Bob's new-found self-sufficiency. Her doings no longer mattered to him. She was on her own. She was retired from her old self. She was free to be as cynical and bitchy as she wanted to be. The thing was, she needed practice. In Bob's time she had been playing a part. Here was a chance for the real thing.

She had never wanted to be anyone's sister, big or little. Big or little, sisterhood made her feel like things ought to *add up*, that they *would* add up. So long as everyone stood in their place the sisterhood would hold together like a balance sheet, a part of the greater good. That was Bob's view, though he was least like a brother than anyone she knew. Bob would never be seen at Cibo with another guy after work, putting down margaritas and bruschettas and hustling the single woman at the next table. Casually amused, because they were with each other. Women who are together with each other only until they can re-pair are not sisters. What Karen meant was that she was not *family*.

Now that Bob had discovered himself as the minus two on the balance sheet which held the world together he was at peace.

From the mountain, Karen looked out this strip of city which flowed through what appeared to be a gap but was really a small sea which did not *flow* but clawed tidally at the enclosing land, out of which this mountain rose like an isolated rock, a threat to ships making for harbor. Her house – what used to be hers and Bob's house – was down there in the shallow water.

Bob's world was the accounting world of plate tectonics in which all the land is one mass connected at the root on which the sea lay like puddles after a rainstorm. Bob's was the world of brothers and sisters.

Karen's was the seafaring world in which rocks and mountains and continents are flotsam in the surf, soon worn away and forgotten. Once or twice she had stood on the shore and gazed at this mirror world and then turned again inland, back to the business of turning mud into rock. It was Bob's business to be increasing the orderliness of things. But that was Bob's business.

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She turned to look out of the back window back towards Dido's house, the Gospodin burrow hidden just beyond the curve, speculating on which sort of man he was.

She started the car and drove a way, down the mountain, the engine coughing a little, down the switchbacks which were the rivulets flowing off the piled-up rubble to the beach.



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