Under the Sun

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Under
the
Sun
Also by Cydney Chadwick:

Enemy Clothing
Dracontic Nodes
The Gift Horse's Mouth
Persistent Disturbances
Sleight of Fancy
Interims
Inside the Hours
Benched
Flesh and Bone
A man reads something, immediately finds one of his notebooks and writes it down. He doesn’t know why he feels the need to copy it into his notebook since he finds it agitating and repulsive: it is that the Earl of Portsmouth would slaughter his own cattle with an axe, shouting, “That serves them right, the ambitious toads.”

The man does not bother with the citation, certain he will not forget it.

Weeks later when he sees it again, he can’t remember where he read it, becomes skeptical and indignant. How could such a thing be documented in the first place? Many things done by aristocracy were intentionally not documented, things done to people.

In the country there are people who do not spay or neuter their cats. This has resulted in a booming feral cat population, the toms roaming the countryside looking for females. While the toms are on their treks they often wander onto the properties where domestic cats reside.
The domestic cats attack the invading offenders, frequently ending up on the worse end of the confrontations, as the wild cats are good fighters, have come from long lines of good fighters.

The people who live with the cats grow angry when they have to take their injured pets to the vet.

A family is told by a friend that he purchased a pellet gun and fires at the strays when they wander onto his property. He says this does not cause the cats any permanent harm, just bruises them, and that after being struck a few times the animals stay away.

The family believes this to be the best solution and most humane way to take care of the problem—since the wild cats evaded traps set for them, cages given out by an organization specializing in altering and vaccinating the feral cat population.

The family also buys a pellet gun, although no one but the husband knows how to shoot. The man takes his wife and children into the rustic backyard, where he teaches them how to load the gun, aim and fire.

They practice on a wheelbarrow, a stump and a tennis racket tied to a thin tree.

After several weeks the family becomes competent, if not adept at shooting. But when they spy an unknown cat, grab the pellet gun, run outdoors and fire, they miss because after it sees one of them racing toward it, the cat of course becomes a moving target.

The family finds a way to make for more realistic practices: they keep approximately a twenty foot distance as the husband sprints back and forth across the grass in
hockey pads and helmet while they take turns firing.


don the fourth of July a man comes out of a modest suburban house carrying a soccer ball. He releases the ball, dribbling it with his feet to the center of the small lawn. There he uses a cannonball kick, sending the ball into some irises planted next to the house. He executes a goal kick to send it back onto the lawn, this time causing the ball to ricochet high off the trunk of a tree. As it descends, he uses a header to direct it into some decorative brick that lines the edge of the lawn. Before the ball has a chance to rebound off the bricks and into the driveway the man is there, ready. With extreme force he takes a step and kicks it into a brown wooden fence where it collapses with a thud under a juniper. When he hauls it out he takes a penalty kick, sending the ball into a high arc back toward the lawn’s center—but before it drops he dives onto the lawn with his back arched, neck tensed and once again uses a header so the ball shoots off the top of his skull and toward some decorative gravel just in front of a bedroom window. He scampers to his feet and cuts off its flight before it lands on the gravel, past the boundary of the lawn.

The man continues his game, kicking the ball to various places in the yard, causing flowers to be severed from their stems, other foliage to be crushed by the ball’s impact.
Yet because of his skill there are no broken windows, and his ball never flies into the street.

A woman speculates what she and her life would have been like if her family had never emigrated, what would have become of her in their former country. She can picture herself walking along the beach, thinking of how she would prepare the fish she would cook for her husband and children that evening, for her people came from a fishing village and her husband would be of a culture that expected women to do all the cooking, and produce many children. As she walked along the water’s edge she would be dressed in long black clothing, a cross hanging from her neck.

The human body contains five million hair follicles. Most people are born without hair and it grows on their heads in infancy. When one is a child more hair grows on the arms and legs and during puberty hair develops in the pubic region, armpits and in the case of males on their faces and chests.

As people age some hair falls out of certain heads, due to male pattern baldness, a condition caused by an overabundance of dihydrotestosterone within the hair follicles. Women are also susceptible to hair loss, but not to such a great extent.
In the case of women, by the mid-thirties hair may begin to appear on the chin, neck and upper lip, caused by an increase in androgens. In middle age, men sprout hair from their ears, nostrils and sometimes the top of the nose and this is also thought to be caused by dihydrotestosterone.

Hair springing forth on various parts of the body causes certain people distress and they remove it—some through expensive processes such as electrolysis and hormonal creams applied to the face. Most, though, especially women, use plucking to remove unwanted hair. They stand under bright lights staring into mirrors and pluck the hairs with tweezers, pulling it out by the roots. However, much of it grows back because plucking only distorts the root, but does not kill the hair follicle. Men take less notice of hair growing from places deemed inappropriate. Indeed, hair poking out from unexpected places does not make them insecure about their appearance, except if they are successful businessmen in which case they usually pay someone to remove it. Sometimes if women forget to pluck the hairs they worry them with their fingers, wish they had more time to spend on grooming.

In Paris women have been observed in public places such as cafes near the Orsay and St. Surplice reaching into handbags for tweezers and mirrors and pulling hairs from their chins. If anyone looks at them they meet the observer’s eyes with a haughty expression, conveying to the onlooker that he or she really should have better man-

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ners and avert their eyes while hair is being yanked from the skin.


EARLY IN THE 21st century many people believe themselves to be educated and sophisticated. Information is only a click away, and most like to think they keep up with world news and events.

Twenty, even thirty years previously there was more tolerance—particularly concerning single women of a certain age. At one time in history these single women were invited to participate in activities by couples and families. The couples and families found them interesting, and a welcome addition to any party or outing. Today, these women have become an annoyance. The quality of the women’s conversation and their sense of humor has not deteriorated from the last era to the present, but they are seen as awkward and inconvenient. Yet people, because they are kindhearted and humane, feel compelled to invite them to their homes for social occasions and to spend holidays—always hoping they will have other plans, which they usually don’t. The host or hostesses will grudgingly put them on his or her guest list, irritatedly wondering why they can’t do something about themselves—find a mate... adopt a child.


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Sometimes others pay them attention. They are praised, often receive additional monies and the phone rings frequently. On occasion some appear in the newspaper or other media outlets.

As time passes they are not regarded as highly, people forget their triumphs, their achievements. When this happens their financial circumstances are often reduced. They grow depressed and angry. Most rally though, become more determined, and after a time find themselves achieving some kind of success again. They are invited places; others want to know what they think.

Their lives are comparable to trying to exist on a giant raft afloat on a huge body of water. While aboard they are in an exclusive place, but because so many desire to be there they find themselves crowded off, forced back down into the water where they flounder until they devise ways to crawl back on board, in which case others go tumbling off as there is only limited room and with too many on top the raft would fail to stay afloat.

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Greedy Bastards he thinks, although his children are legitimate. He is a typical wealthy man who hates his family. Like many wealthy men who hate their families he has children who hope he will die soon so they can inherit his estate. One son who especially likes cocaine fantasizes about buying an ounce and snorting it up in a weeks' time—or maybe three days' time, depending on its quality. His other heirs merely imagine travel, luxuri-
ous hotels, nicer homes and cars, and taking chances on high-risk investments.

The man sometimes wishes that after his wife died he had married a much younger woman, younger than his children—a woman with large breasts who was good at performing oral sex. However, he feared he might get tired of having such a woman underfoot, despite her charms, and it would entail lots of meetings with his lawyer to divorce her. No, easier to have call girls come to the house when the mood strikes him.

The man has devised a way to thwart his dreaming children. Every evening he goes online and finds organizations that interest him. They range from Canine Companions to COYOTE—a group of prostitutes who want their trade legalized. He e-mails their addresses to his attorney, instructing him to send a check to the group, specifying the amount. He also insists the check be presented anonymously. In this way he believes if he lives another five years he can deplete his estate. Most of the contributions are also tax-deductible.

INSIDE HUMAN BONES are cavities filled with a gelatin-like substance, the marrow—which is also called myeloid tissue. Red bone marrow helps to destroy old red blood cells. Yellow marrow mainly stores fats, but can be converted to red in the case of severe blood loss or fever.

From birth until the age of seven all marrow is red because the need for new blood formation is high, but
by adulthood most marrow is yellow. The only all red marrow to be found in men and women is in the vertebral, hips, breast bone, skull and at the ends of the long bones in the arms and legs.

IT IS A weekday afternoon in a major metropolitan city. There is a restaurant located on a small street off the main avenues, free from the racket of the bustling neighborhood. Under dual beige awnings light filters through two bay windows set on each side of the French doors. Inside are well-polished hardwood floors of pale oak, and white votive candles glow on tables of blonde wood.

As it is late in the afternoon there are very few patrons. One couple at a table next to a bay window is attractive and well dressed. They order salads with exotic names and, as far as salad goes, exotic ingredients.

He suggests they share an expensive bottle of wine, she looks at her watch and agrees, saying she's decided not to go back to the office.

They are two people who have worked the requisite hours to become successful. They are their own bosses, have disposable incomes and receive recognition for their accomplishments. They are the envy of colleagues, and sometimes during their lunches they relate anecdotes about what people have said or done to them in piques of professional jealousy.

Often during these late lunches each of them have thoughts of what it would be like to make love to the
other and these thoughts are very appealing.

Sometimes while in their offices, located in different parts of the city, they have fantasized about living and working together, for who knows better than the other what it entails to keep their businesses growing, about the creative vision necessary to thrive above the competition. Each of their daydreams was always interrupted by the fact that although they have the accoutrements of prestige and success they are really not successful enough to disrupt their lives—pay alimony and child support, lawyers and day care centers. They also wonder if such a rearrangement would harm their careers, make clients and colleagues hostile and suspicious.

When things are going badly they often call or e-mail each another to boost their morale, each using cellular phones or private e-mail addresses so their none of the employees would be able to access their words. Often after these verbal or written exchanges they tell themselves that if they just keep toiling they will reach the rung of success that will allow them to rearrange their lives.

Once in a while when they meet and things are not going well, they marvel at being caught in a trap of their own making. They have worked themselves into a corner and their lives have shrunk despite what they have accomplished. To dissolve their businesses would mean going to work for someone else, throwing away the dreams and goals they pursued for over the last decade. Had they not been so dedicated and determined they would have had to dissolve their businesses years ago.
and the sense of failure of once again working for someone else would not be as enormous.

When they finish their meal they pay the check and linger over wine, each paying their half of the bill in cash so no pesky credit card slip could be questioned by a spouse. They gather their things, put on their coats and move to the street where they give one another a hug. He takes her hands in his for several seconds and they go back to their lives. They never look back at the other, but each always takes a final wistful glance through one of the bay windows at the restaurant's glowing, intimate interior, the soft lighting, its white-blonde wood.

AFTER MANY YEARS of physical inactivity a woman wants to get back into shape, decides to join a gym. On her first day she meets with a trainer who shows her how to use the various machines. The trainer suggests she go slowly and gives her a chart on which to track her progress. She records the woman's blood pressure and resting heart rate. Suggesting she mount the Elliptical Fitness machine designed for cardiovascular exercise, the trainer gives the woman a sub-maximal stress test to determine her target heart rate, which the woman should not exceed. The trainer also administers tests for muscular strength and endurance. The woman is then left to her first work out. She gets on a treadmill and begins to walk. It feels good, invigorating, and the woman swings her arms, getting caught up in the music playing throughout the gym. A
faster tune begins and woman increases the treadmill’s speed, going into a slow jog. It feels like the years are falling away. Although she is a little winded, she feels energetic, a feeling she has nearly forgotten. Another song comes on, one that was popular when she was in her teens. It has a fast rhythm and the woman increases the speed of the treadmill accordingly. At the song’s end her face is red and she can hardly breathe. She slows the machine down; when she is able to inhale and exhale comfortably, she stops the machine, goes into the locker room to shower.

That evening while cooking dinner for her family the woman goes into cardiac arrest. Dies.

Her family cannot sue the gym because the woman signed a contract agreeing that the gym was not liable for any personal injuries sustained on the premises, or injuries resulting from using the facilities and equipment. Nonetheless, her litigious husband hires a lawyer to look into the matter, but there were witnesses who saw the woman red-faced and gasping. It was obvious to all who were present that she failed to keep within her target heart rate.

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THE BLADDER IS a hollow muscular organ. When empty it lies against the pelvis, but when filled with urine brought from the kidneys via tubes called ureters, the bladder distends and expands into the lower abdomen. While the bladder is filling none are cognizant of the process until
pressure on the sensory nerve endings cause a desire to urinate. Parasympathetic nerves contract the walls of the bladder to accommodate urination while the detrusor muscle causes the bladder to empty. This applies to both humans and animals.

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SHE DID IT the way they said it should be done—straight As in high school, an undergraduate degree with honors and a graduate degree cum laude. After came Mister Right, or as right-as-she-ever-thought-she’d-encounter. Soon after Mister Right’s appearance she also found a good job as a _____ with the opportunity for advancement.

Mr. Right is not as ambitious as she, but ambitious enough, and he makes good money. At 28 the woman has her first child, a girl and at 31, a boy.

When the woman is 34 her career stalls and she cannot understand why. She is genial, hardworking and believes she knows what needs to be done socially and professionally to get the promotions she covets. Yet for some reason they do not materialize. She sends her resumé to other businesses and goes to a rival company in the same city, since her family does not wish to be uprooted.

Here, the same thing occurs—the promotions go to others, or to people brought in from the outside and she is locked into her position.

The woman doesn’t know what is wrong. She works extremely hard, her work is good. She is slim, attractive—believes she knows how to make people like and respect her.
While she is floundering her husband comes to realize he hates her. But he can’t determine if this is because her life progressed with daydream-like precision, or because it no longer does.

A young poet who has had one collection published lunches once or twice a month with an older poet who is the author of more than thirty books, and has received awards for his work. When they meet they usually discuss poetry or poets they know. Of late the man noticed that the older poet frequently loses his train of thought, and the last time they met he misquoted a famous Objectivist.

On a sunny but crisp fall day they meet and decide to sit outdoors at a small café. The older poet has brought along some new poems from the manuscript he is working on, and offers them to the younger poet to read. He has heard from others that the older poet doesn’t write all that much anymore, so he is honored that the older man sees him as a colleague astute enough to offer commentary on the poems.

When the young poet arrives home he excitedly takes the poems out of their manila envelope and settles down at his desk. He is shocked to find the poems scattered, almost as if the older poet merely wrote down lines that came into his head and didn’t edit any of the work. The young poet is shocked by how bad the writing is, doesn’t know what to say to the older poet.
In the evening when he is revising his own poems, the young man decides not to see the older poet any more. He will send the poems back by post, accompanied by some sort of insincere, flattering note. He is afraid that if he continues to associate with the older poet his talent and ability will disappear, that he will become contaminated.

In mid-December they drive up a steep hill to a house on a Christmas tree farm. An elderly couple comes outdoors to greet them, and take them toward the acre where the trees have grown in rows. There are not many to choose from. All the trees are small, with minimal foliage and have bald spots where branches and pine needles should be. The elderly couple follow the man and woman around the muddy rows, pointing out the virtues of each tree the couple stops to look at.

Almost simultaneously the man and woman arrive at the same conclusion: the proprietors of the farm have grown too frail to adequately care for the trees—suppose their business is not prosperous enough for them to hire outside help. The elderly pair confidently show a few other examples, equally unsatisfactory. The older couple's confidence turns to doubt and humiliation—which they hope is undetectable to the potential customers who do not select a tree and look quite unhappy. Finally the elderly man shuffles to a tree at the far end of a row and plaintively glances up at the two. The couple nod to one
another and offer to help the elderly gentleman cut and
carry it to their car. But the elderly man refuses. He takes
a very long time to fell it and haul it to the driveway.
They pay the man, fasten the tree to a rack on the roof
and drive down the hill, disappointed over such a dis-
mal purchase that will probably not hold the sparsest
decorations without its branches drooping. But they also
reflect that in the true spirit of the season they have helped
two seniors.

On their way home they stop off for a hot toddy each
shaking off the thought that has crept into their minds—
that unless the elderly couple look older than their age,
in seven years they will be approximately that age, and
seven years is hardly any time at all.

The elderly couple watched the two mount the tree
on the car’s roof and drive away, waved to them as they
descended the driveway, but the couple did not look back.

The man follows his wife into the house where they
glance at one another, apprehensive and afraid, neither
willing to voice that this would undoubtedly be their last
year in business.

As the fire crackles in the fireplace they listen with
hope for the sound of another car pulling into the drive-
way and their eyes meet conspiratorially: they are still
capable of pulling off a sale despite having to invoke pity
to accomplish it.
A woman from a broken home marries in the middle of the 20th century. Many women became wives at an early age then, at 18 or 21 and dropped out of college—if they attended it in the first place.

She is twenty and beautiful. Her husband is twenty-five, not beautiful, not much but arrogant. Her friends do not know what she saw in him or still sees.

He makes decent money. They think this very important. She makes babies and afterward raises them—all parental responsibilities are hers. He makes love to other women, which she finds out about but aside from crying and yelling, she does nothing.

When his work is going badly he wants only oral sex, but if his job is only moderately frustrating he likes to bend her over. She does not find a paramour who knows how to properly make love to a woman, although she is still beautiful and many are more than willing.

After many years pass they are in accord on one subject—their children are disappointments—have not achieved enough money, fame or prestige to make them proud.

Their children eventually move to other parts of the country and do not return for holidays.

The woman’s beauty disappears, she grows thin, her skin sags. He becomes fat and dissipated, drinking whiskey and watching television every evening until he falls asleep. Saliva drips onto his bathrobe from his gaping mouth.

In the second month of the new millennium he hits a tree while driving home and is killed upon impact. An
autopsy reveals his blood alcohol was .06—below the legal limit. The coroner believes he may have had only one drink, but more than likely suffered a stroke.

The children return home. There is weeping all around. After the funeral the children go away again, feeling apprehensive but obligated to do something about their mother. However, since their mother is not ill, only alone, they procrastinate as they confront more pressing concerns in their day-to-day lives. When they speak to their mother on the phone they tell her to keep busy, that she should join social clubs.

The woman does not join clubs, she cannot find the energy or motivation. She keeps her house clean, reads some popular novels and watches television.

There is a volunteer organization in her area called We Care whose members visit senior citizens, and the woman ends up on their list, referred by a busybody who lives down the street. The organization’s policy is that women visit women, the men call on men.

When any of the volunteers arrive for a visit, the woman tells them she was blessed, has had a really nice life; she so loved her husband. Some of her visitors can’t believe she is telling the truth—after a smattering of her life’s details slip out during the woman’s long reminiscences.

Several of the visitors see her as the tail end of a generation of American women who lived that way as a matter of course. It makes them uncomfortable to think some might still. They put those concerns out of their minds, shift their thoughts to how pleasant and fulfilling their
own lives are. And they make these thoughts convinc-
ing.

A MAN WHO is close to turning thirty wonders about which will be the best part of his life. He is fairly certain it hasn't occurred yet, although he was better looking and had more friends several years ago. He was part of a large crowd that went to clubs, concerts and films. There were also parties where he was able to pick up women. Women liked him, not just those in his crowd who were approximately the same age, but women who were both older and younger. He prided himself on being able to attract women older than himself—that they took him seriously and flirted. He'd even slept with two or three women outside of his circle.

After a time the group broke up, most moving away to work for companies or pursue graduate degrees.

He has a good job for his age—and a girlfriend, but he doesn't really like her that much. She loves him, though, and this makes him uncomfortable, but he does his best not to make it look like her love is reciprocated. He buys her gifts and takes her out a great deal, which she seems to enjoy.

If he allows himself to admit it, the time when he was younger was better. Actually when he was a lot younger he liked that too, but he doesn't want to see himself as one of those dismal people who had their best years in high school or college.
There is nothing wrong with thirty. It is probably better than forty, or fifty or the rest of it. Thirty is good, for by forty he will have made something of himself. He is intelligent, works hard and knows how to ingratiate himself to people with power. He can’t imagine not marrying and having children, not with this present woman, but with one he will meet in the next year or so—a pretty woman who’ll dote on him. He will make enough money so she won’t have to work if she doesn’t want to. This will make her love him all the more.

Some of his friends who married young are already divorced. They don’t have a lot of money and say that women don’t want men who don’t have money. But surely this is a cliché, and at any rate he is certain he will have money soon. This turning thirty won’t be bad at all. It will be good, in fact. He’ll get in shape, maybe take up jogging or lift some weights, watch his diet. Thirty will be fine. He won’t let himself get lazy, will keep trying to make connections, look for better jobs, be on the alert for the perfect soul mate. This thirty business is a wake up call and his life will just get more productive and interesting. His future lies in his hands. In ten years he will be somebody.

Several minutes later he is made uncomfortable by the thought that this line of thinking could be some sort of indelible universal trick to keep people going.
IN LATE SPRING, a farmer who has been working his land for over thirty-five years is about to disc one of his fields—a crop of mustard that failed due to prolonged rains. Weeds have grown between the rotted plants and now both the ruined mustard and the weeds are drying out, creating a fire hazard.

Red-winged blackbirds migrated to the area in the early spring and began building nests, sturdy shelters of tightly wound grass.

After the eggs hatch the birds spend their days going off in search of seeds and insects to feed their offspring.

The farmer begins at the fence line closest to his home. His tractor crushes the tall grass. Disc blades cut into the dirt, lightly upturning it and severing the weeds. Hundreds of nests fall to the ground from the impact of the tractor and the discing blades. Large numbers of the adult birds rush toward the melee. Some dive toward the area where their nests had been and others attack the farmer, swooping toward his large canvas hat, picking at his arms. The farmer flails at them, only taking his hands away from his face and body to steer now and again, at one point nearly rolling the tractor by not getting his hands on the wheel quickly enough while going over a large mound of dirt.

It does not occur to him that the birds do this from instinct—they are just an example of the pesky creatures who live on his land, such as the screech owls who sometimes startle him out of a sound sleep, or the raccoons who occasionally remove trash can lids and scatter garbage on the ground.
His hands, tough like animal hide and spotted from sun exposure, grip the steering wheel and fly away from it again to protect his face, his body. As he gets to the end of the fence line he makes a right turn to disc the ground adjacent to his most outlying property, oblivious to the destruction he causes below his eye level.

Other birds who have nests in the stretch he is currently discing take up the attack. He abruptly turns the wheel and the tractor trudges up the middle of the field toward the house—where he will get his rifle to blow some of these annoying creatures away.

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IN A CITY deli a worker fails to turn up. Despite the manager calling several other employees, no one can fill in. At lunchtime people begin to line up. The usual sandwich maker works as fast as he can but the line grows longer and longer and people grow irate. A few say loudly, to no one in particular: I have to be back in 45 minutes!—while others storm out, saying Jesus or Oi. The manager calls his wife on her cell phone and insists she come in and she agrees—after her dentist appointment. He cannot leave the cash register, but a worker who does various things in the back—hauls out garbage, keeps the toilet clean and stocks mayonnaise, goes up to the front after hearing the commotion asking, Do you need help? The sandwich maker throws him an apron, which he ties on, but he has forgotten to wash his hands, and neglects to use the gloves required for food handlers, as he is not
used to handling food. He struggles to keep up and get the orders correct.

A woman at the front of the line orders a cheese sandwich with everything. Her sandwich is made by the experienced sandwich maker. He hands it to her, she pays and leaves. Many people in line after her have their sandwiches made by the inexperienced sandwich maker. In the days that follow they come down with food poisoning. Although they think hard during their maladies, none of them can pinpoint where they came into contact with a contaminated meal.

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They become parents for the first time, are elated by their transformation from a couple to a family. They feel so adult, so complete.

When the child is a toddler they think he is remarkable—what an unusual mind, what ability to deduce and understand. They look at each other with delighted, knowing expressions. He can be whatever he wants to be.

The child is sweet and loving—until adolescence when his personality changes. He is insolent, obnoxious and doesn’t bother to study—an honor student who now gets Cs. His parents send him to a psychiatrist, but the boy won’t talk to him, merely sits sullenly for the fifty minutes. The psychiatrist informs his parents that he cannot make an accurate diagnosis since the boy refuses to speak, but he believes the child is clinically depressed.
He prescribes antidepressants, which the boy only takes sporadically.

He manages to graduate high school and decides to move out. He will work for the father of one of his friends, in his auto body shop. But you could be anything! his parents say. You could go to college, have a career....

I want to do this, he says. You can't stop me.

His parents hope that in several years he will grow out of it. Whatever IT is—rebellion, they suppose. But at twenty he decides to get married, to a simpleminded girl with too-tight jeans and a cheap, blonde dye job. His parents attend the wedding.

They sometimes wish they'd had another child—maybe a girl—who wouldn't disappoint them. It is too late now....They had so much to offer their child, that is why they wanted just the one. He could have done whatever he wanted; he was smart.

Each blames the other for their son being a disappointment—the husband blames the wife for overindulgence and the wife blames her husband for exerting too much pressure on the boy.

The couple tries to come to terms with the circumstances. They have done their job and their son is free to run his own life. They should enjoy this new phase, their new freedom. But filled with disappointment and the feeling that they sacrificed themselves, their time, and their money for nothing, the chasm between them just grows wider.
As they sleep some begin to swell. While the hours pass their tissues fill with fluid, the spaces between tissue and organs expand. In some this is caused by too much salt or sodium in the diet, in others by the use of steroids or estrogens, in still others it is a side effect of antihypertensive drugs, or anti-inflammatories; swelling is a result of malnutrition in yet another segment of the population.

A smaller number of people swell due to acute nephritic syndrome—an inflammation of the internal structure of the kidneys.

Regardless of the physical affliction, all have tissues that expand with fluids as they roll onto their backs and stomachs, turn from side to side throughout the night.

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It is summer, but in a certain part of the countryside people hesitate to go outdoors to enjoy the weather, for this part of the country has become infested by yellow jackets and many of the population is stung as they sit on decks, while gardening, while reclining on lawn chairs, or throwing Frisbees.

A solution to the problem becomes fashionable among some of those in the countryside, and they do not need to hire and expensive exterminators who would spray toxic chemicals throughout the area. They go to the local hardware store and purchase gold plastic traps which they fill with Attractant, a chemical composition that causes the insects to swarm the trap. The yellow jackets enter the bottom of the trap, through small holes, and fly
into a plastic cone. They are unable to escape and die. Hordes of dead yellow jackets fill the traps, while live insects struggle at the top of the cone to fly free. When the traps are full those in the country empty them, tossing the dead bodies onto the ground. They refill the traps with Attractant and hang them on tree branches, or on fences where they fill again, the living moving around uselessly trying to escape as the number of bodies multiply in the amber colored grave.

Although the traps lure yellow jackets, there are either not enough traps or yellow jackets are prolific breeders—because in spite of people throwing hundreds of dead insects onto the ground, they continue to angrily rub at the red and throbbing surfaces of their stung skin.

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AFTER A CERTAIN number of years hands begin to look like deserts. The tendons and veins protrude like dunes. If the top of the hand is splayed the creased skin at the joints and knuckles look like sand rearranged by hot winds. And when the hand is flexed the skin shows lines of cross-hatching—resembling cracks in the earth similar to the mudflats near the dunes of Death Valley. But when the fingers are clenched and the hand made into a fist, it is the smooth, even surface of an oasis.

Often those with hands in desert condition are ashamed of them and keep them in oasis-like fists, or hide them on laps; many kinds of deserts in the world.
At a family gathering shortly before Christmas a son and daughter exchange an apprehensive and concerned glance while sitting in the living room with their parents. It has been less than a month since they saw them last and within the month their mother and father have become elderly. What is it? The wrinkles didn’t gather overnight, and their father became slack around the stomach some time ago, which always causes them a moment of unrecognition since he was so thin all his life. There has been stiffness in their parents’ movements for three years maybe four and both are more than slightly bent—especially their mother who has a rounded silhouette from head to upper back when she walks. Both children repeatedly remind her to take calcium supplements. Their parents have also shrunk from their former heights some time ago, resulting in each of them being an inch or so shorter than they were in middle age.

The brother and sister give their attention to what their father is saying, glance at one another again. Both their father and mother still have strong, vigorous voices and what they utter makes sense. No, it is something else, not entirely based on physical decline. They have become more and more rooted to the ground, as if they intuitively sense they will come to lie underneath it in the none-too-distant future. This makes the children frightened and amazed, since they themselves feel so well, so vibrant and not at all as though they are rapidly moving through their own middle age.
He is sitting on his couch showing her a book he recently purchased—waving it in her direction—a university press book, clothbound and expensive. He tells of its content, which is philosophical and addresses the human condition. He momentarily forgets she is there while searching for a passage to read aloud, something he thinks she will like. She is standing in front of him, several feet from the couch wondering if she should sit. He hasn't asked her to be seated, seems not to notice she has been standing for some time, although he offered her a glass of wine or a mineral water half an hour earlier. She chose wine and they stood in the kitchen each drinking a glass of medium quality medoc. There weren't any chairs or stools to sit on in that room either. They'd leaned against the counter, close to one another and he said amusing things. She couldn't tell whether this closeness was intentional, or they just had different ideas about personal space. She lives in the country where there is more space to be had. But his eye contact was good and between that and the proximity of their bodies, with the leaning factored in, it seemed as if there is something happening between them. But maybe not. Maybe something is only happening between her and her imagination, and this fellow is a polite and entertaining host who, in his enthusiasm to convey an important bit of philosophy, has not realized she has been on her feet for a long time; she wishes she were not wearing fashionable but uncomfortable three-inch heels.
The man finds the passage and reads aloud. While he is reading she becomes aware that her nipples are erect against the silky material of her bra. The room is cold, which she hadn’t noticed before. If the man ever stops reading and looks up will he be able to see them? What will he think, that she is cold, or aroused? She could ask for her coat, but that would seem rude, or that she hasn’t liked what he’s read and wants to leave soon—neither of which is the case. What she actually would like to do is climb onto the man’s lap when he puts the book down. She can picture it: raising her skirt with both hands and straddling him. Once she is on his lap it seems like a good idea to put her arms around him give him a kiss. After this she imagines herself on the couch, her legs in the air, while he gently slides her underwear down her thighs and off her calves.

The slogan from a sporting goods manufacturer runs through her head, words to inspire people to do what they set out to do. But there is something else to consider. She doesn’t think women her age climb onto men’s laps. She had done this sort of straddling when she was in her early twenties, but doesn’t think any man would throw a woman in her early twenties off his lap.

What if he recoils and shouts, What are you doing? This happened to her once. She had not been the climber, but the climbee—or rather, while saying something about Marguerite Duras she’d been knocked onto her back by a man who climbed on top of her and began kissing. She was startled, the same way she was startled when a car had backed out of a parking place and hit her car, stopped
in a line of traffic. For a moment she didn’t know what had happened. When she did she grew angry, as she was when shoved onto her back. And what if she gives this man offense, or causes him embarrassment, although she hasn’t known any men who were embarrassed when sex was being offered to them.

The man jumps up to look for another book on his bookshelf. He thinks she will like this one too. His back is to her, he’s scanning the shelves. She could walk up behind him, gently put her arms around his waist and embrace him. He would do one of two things: shout hey and whip around, or be quiet, turn and embrace her too. He is standing on the couch. The book is apparently on one of the upper shelves. If she moves forward she could place each of her palms on his butt, but what if this startles him so much he falls to the floor and hits his head?

He says, *Come sit next to me while I find the paragraph.* She does, and it is nice to be seated. He has his index finger on a page, scanning the text. The sexual tension is so pronounced between them that she thinks she might hyperventilate, or faint. What if she knocks the book from his hands and throws her arms around him?

She suddenly remembers an incident on a city street. She’d spent an entire day with a man who had taken his dog with them on their date. In the late afternoon when dropping her off in front of her building, he leaned over to give her a goodbye kiss, and while they were kissing, the dog leapt into the man’s front seat, knocking them apart. She’d suggested they exit the vehicle to continue the kiss, which they did—until the man pulled away,
shouting: *I'm doing this in front of my dog!* The dog hadn't paid attention to them once they were outside, and she didn't see how such a thing could traumatize an animal. The man had been far less concerned about the people on the street glaring at them, including a man who passed by mumbling: *Get a room!*

There are no dogs in this apartment, but there is a caged canary.

She is listening to what he is reading from the second book, but becomes distracted again by the thought of a man in a foreign country. He was a famous translator and she thought things might be leading up to their having sex—and she'd made the suggestion—but he said he had to go out, although he invited her to stay at his place and masturbate. Since it was a foreign country and this man was so matter-of-fact, she'd accepted his offer, and it hadn't seemed unusual—just something to do on a Tuesday afternoon while out of the country and not having to go to work.

The man has finished reading and holds the book in his lap. She agrees that it is a profound piece of text, well conceived and well-written. He is looking at her. But is he looking at her expectantly? It would seem that way, but she can't tell. He is still looking at her, offering to give her the publishing information so she can order the book herself. She is disappointed. If he offered her the book as a gift she could have worked up the courage to climb on the man's lap, or gently take the book from his hands, set it on the couch and wrap her arms around him.
Maybe this is just how he looks at the people he invites to his apartment.

She says she would like to order the title. He writes down the information, hands her a piece of paper which she slips into her purse. The visit is over.

She stands to collect her things and he helps her on with her coat. Before she leaves they embrace, a friendly hug. When they step apart the look on his face is unmistakable—lust, immobilized by indecision.

He suggests that he accompany her to the subway and they walk down the street, their bodies separated by the distance kept by two people who don't know one another well. He is not very talkative and she can't think of anything more to say. Before she goes down into the subway she wonders if there is to be another hug, but he hasn't made any gesture and it might seem silly if she were to hug him a second time.

When she gets back to her hotel she looks at the phone to see if the light is blinking, indicating voice mail messages. There aren't any. She sits down feeling strange—exhilarated with desire, yet sad. She supposes the man hadn't liked her that way.

Perhaps he has a girlfriend, although she hadn't heard anything about a girlfriend. Some thoughts drift into her mind about what could have happened to the man to make him think it not even worth trying anymore, but she doesn't know him well enough to begin to speculate.

While doodling on the hotel stationery she realizes that all her business in the city is concluded; it is not necessary to spend two more days here as she'd planned,
and the weather isn’t very nice. Maybe she can change her ticket and return home tomorrow morning.

She takes an airport shuttle and then a cab to her house. She hadn’t told anyone she was returning early and didn’t want to call a friend for a ride on such short notice.

Everything is the same as she expected it would be, but whenever she returns from a trip she always looks around as if something should be different. She sets her suitcase on the couch and goes directly to bed.

The following morning she wakes up feeling jet lagged. While having morning coffee she checks her messages. There are several about business-related things, but there is also one from the man in the city. He is upset. His recorded voice asks: Why did you leave early? Why did you leave me?
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