

Downsizing with Child
(Excerpt from a novel in progress)

The ground floor apartment on the wrong side of Prospect Park and nine blocks from the subway was dark and dank as a coal mine. On the few windows, the thick bars did not encourage optimism about the neighborhood. The yard was paved for parking except for a falling-down shed. Samantha felt like weeping.

The real estate lady with the fixed jack-o’lantern grin said again, “Eight hundred a month. You won’t find much for that with three rooms. Once you spruce it up, it’ll look cheerful.” She tapped her foot. She was obviously growing weary of Sam and her hopes.

“Let me think about it.” Two of the rooms were the size of closets.

“At this price, it will go fast.”

This was the third apartment Samantha had looked at today. The real estate lady – Madison Carmichael – dropped her off at her babysitter’s, scarcely bothering with chit chat on the way. Obviously Madison felt she was a lost cause: no money and fussy to boot. A loser, Sam could feel the judgment. Well, she was losing a lot in this divorce.

Rachel’s babysitter Chloe was a harassed mom – like herself – who lived at the end of the row of brownstones in Park Slope. Sam had only to bundle Rachel into her adorable red snuggly and then tuck her into the stroller.

“I hope she’s been good....” Chloe didn’t charge, for they exchanged watching each other’s babies when the need arose. Sam felt guilty because lately she had required Chloe’s help a lot oftener than Chloe needed hers. She had not told Chloe yet that she was being forced to move, and that too sandpapered her conscience.

The sidewalk was icy in places but at least two thirds of the people on her block had shoveled. Then she carried Rachel, who was babbling about doggies, up the stairs, parked her in her playpen and rushed back for the stroller. Rachel was on her feet holding the bars of the playpen, but then she sat down hard. Sam waited to see if she was going to cry, but she looked amused.

Rachel was on the whole a cheerful baby. Everything interested her, amused her, excited her. She was neither fearful nor cranky unless tired or hungry. Sam often thought how much worse her situation would be if Rachel were less healthy and less content. Lately Rachel had begun to form words. However, if they had to move into a dark hole like that last apartment, she imagined Rachel pale as a grub and developing all kinds of allergies to mold, whatever made little ones sick. She sat down in her favorite chair and pulled her sweater over her head before picking up Rachel to nurse her. She still loved nursing although it was less sensuous since Rachel's baby teeth were poking through her gums, but she knew she would have to stop if she finally found a job. She had had her dream job, a conservationist at the Brooklyn Art Museum, just a longish walk away and fascinating. She specialized in old photos and oil paintings, but she had done a little of everything after their pottery specialist had been laid off.

She would miss this duplex, she really would. Coming from the shitholes Madison had been showing her to what she had lived in with Mac for the last three years was more than depressing. Here light poured into the parlor floor windows, caressing the Oriental carpet her grandma Emma had given her with all its rich web of reds and blues. This floor was all big living room and kitchen and a half bath. She would not be sorry to bid goodbye to the off-white couch that, with a nine-month old crawling around with an occasional accident, was getting more

and more off white every day. Mac had picked it out. Only washable things should be white. Rachel finished nursing and Sam returned her to the playpen before going off to the kitchen to think what to make for supper. She was staring into the refrigerator hoping for something to turn up that wasn't there, when Rachel began to complain, half-crying, half-yelling and grabbing at the bars.

“What is it, baby?” Oh, fuzzy bear had fallen out. Sam fetched it for her and Rachel happily banged it against the playpen floor. Coffee. Sam needed coffee. How could she raise a little girl in a dark hole that resembled an old coal bin? She had loved her vagabond childhood, homeschooled by Mom and Dad at archeological sites scattered across Meso-America. She had grown up among snakes, jaguars and bright screaming birds, with monkeys chattering and shrieking, with ruins to clamber over. Sometimes they were in Cambridge at Harvard and sometimes they lived on the Cape where the outdoors was benign except for poison ivy. Until they died. Suddenly.

But Rachel felt far more fragile to her than her memories of herself. She wondered sometimes how her mother Lauren could have hauled her into the jungle and raised her in camps, in tents under tropical downpours. The only house she had ever really called home was Emma's, where she had lived between the time her parents died in a light plane crash and the time her father's Whitaker clan had claimed her legally and then parked her in a girls prep school, where she was as out of place as a feral cat among poodles.

Rachel was beginning to fret. She got that pouty look with her little forehead scrunched up and she was kicking fuzzy bear. It was time for her nap. Samantha carried her upstairs to the child's bright orange room. No pink. Sam hated pink. They were always trying to color code infants pink or blue. It was not fair that Rachel would have to give up the lovely room with its view over the yard

that would be rich with green in spring. The downstairs couple who owned the brownstone gardened. Her own master bedroom looked into an oak, a bedroom all hers now that Mac had moved in with his soon to be third wife, Holly, in Brooklyn Heights. Holly had a duplex on Columbus Heights where Mac had always wanted to live. She sometimes wondered if he were marrying Holly or the address.

The phone rang. She looked at the calling number. His fucking lawyer. Reputed to be the best divorce shark in Brooklyn. She put out her hand and drew it back. But putting off the inevitable just gave her a stomach ache. “Samantha Whitaker here.”

“Hello, Samantha. How are you feeling?” His air falsely paternal.

“Oh, just wonderful. Awesome in fact.”

“That’s nice. You haven’t signed the agreement.”

“How can you call it an agreement? It’s a fiat. A catastrophe.”

“How long are you prepared to fight this? You can’t win. I think Mr. Macintyre is being quite generous with the child support. You have to face facts, my dear.”

“If Rachel doesn’t eat much, I suppose.”

Actually, the child support was sort of adequate. But she could not afford the duplex or much else, as it turned out. She still had not found an institution to hire her. She was overqualified or overspecialized or simply unnecessary in a recession or whatever they called this mess.

“The agreement is the best you’ll get. If you don’t sign it by next Monday, February 8th, we’ll take it off the table and renegotiate. And you will not do better the next time around. Unless you want to go before a judge here in Brooklyn. You’ll find that most of them have a high opinion of Mr. Macintyre.”

“I know.” All the judges and political hacks in Brooklyn just loved golfing with him and attending those awful political dinners together. One advantage of divorce was not having to endure them.

“Be realistic, Samantha. Your own lawyer has advised you to sign.”

He had. “I’ll decide by Monday.” She hung up. A wave of grey despair washed over her, leaving her limp and leaning against the wall by the phone. Her eyes wandered over the king sized bed that was way too big for her. As always she felt a moment of pleasure looking at the spread thrown over it, woven by a friend of hers in the days when she had first moved to New York, before she had married Mac, or Mac had married her. He had been hot and heavy into her then. The colors were warm – red, orange, cobalt. She had always associated it with making love, as they had in those first couple of years, fervently, coming together as if nothing could ever come between them, as if they were two halves locking together.

How did it happen? You loved someone and they loved you and then it went away like smoke dissipating. She had not changed, she thought, except for loving Rachel as much or more than she loved, than she had loved Mac. And if he suddenly turned back into the man she had married, would she love him again? Or would she go back to him because she could not afford not to? It wasn’t an option being offered her. What did love mean, that it could go away? Perhaps it had never been real. But she could still remember its tug, its power.

Her pregnancy had been difficult, with nausea at first, some scary bleeding, bedrest the last six weeks. That was when she had lost him as well as her job. It was hard to remember how thoroughly she had trusted him, how long it had taken her to realize it was not the law that was keeping him out evenings. She was surviving by despising him, but when memories of their earlier time together

flooded her, she was weak with sorrow. Was it illusion? How could two people be so close, so tender, so passionate and now have nothing to do with each other except to fight over money and possessions? Was it her fault? She wished she could rise high above her broken marriage and take a dispassionate clear view as if looking down on the streets of a bombed city. Her friends said, oh, you were never really suited. You're punk, kind of, and he's so straight. You love art and museums and old stuff and he just cares about money. Were they right? Was it always just a fantasy, what they had together? She was sick of wondering, almost literally so. She had lost eleven pounds since the break-up, because he seemed to take her appetite with him when he moved out. What was the sense in cooking gourmet for one? Rachel was eating cereal and baby goo, bananas and apple sauce. She was eating whatever was cheap that she could keep down.

She must get out of the duplex, but she could not find anyplace she wanted to go, that she could endure for Rachel to actually live. She could pick up and leave. Only three or four friendships tethered her to New York. But she lacked enough money to establish them someplace. She was not sure that their agreement if she signed it would allow her to leave anyhow. Earlier in their war, Mac had demanded custody. She scaled back her demands in order to get him to let go of Rachel. She was convinced he did not actually want custody, but it was a powerful bargaining chip because she could not live without her daughter.

She checked that Rachel had gone to sleep, still holding fuzzy bear against her chest. He was getting ratty but Rachel rarely let go of him. A therapist would probably suggest she was missing her daddy, but her daddy **had** not been around enough since her birth to be missed. Rachel recognized Mac. She burbled at him, but no more than at their landlady downstairs, who had actually given her fuzzy bear. Mrs. Graziano was sorry Sam had to leave, but she had already rented the

apartment to a couple who were moving in the first of March, and there was no way in hell Sam could afford the rent.

Her life had hit a wall and she could not see around it, over it. Was there an under? A wave of rage like lava made her clutch the bureau lest she fall to the floor. Slowly it receded as she clenched her teeth, her muscles. Anger was useless. All her emotions were useless. Except her love for Rachel.

As she turned and bent over the crib to look at Rachel sleeping, mouth a little open, one hand under the right cheek, her rage subsided. Rachel had Mac's blondish hair and her brown eyes. Her skin was fair but it was too soon to tell if she would sprout Sam's freckles. Her little nose was slightly turned up like Sam's. She had been red as a boiled lobster when she was born, but at nine months, she was gorgeous. Sam felt as if she could do anything for Rachel to keep her well and happy, to cuddle and coddle her, except that she knew that was not even slightly true. She had not the means, no matter what her desires.

She was drowning. She tried to be cheerful for Rachel. She was sure that her daughter could pick up her moods just as cats and dogs can tell if something's wrong with their person. Rachel might not have a word for sadness but she certainly felt it exuding from her mother. Sam tried, but she was losing ground fast. In addition to everything else that made her feel guilty, she was not being the mother she wanted to be. She had solid ideas about being a good parent, theories and opinions and axioms enough to fill a book. She had observed her friends as mothers and judged them according to that inner doxology.

Now she judged herself. Depression could be catching, like any other disease. At twenty-seven she had better straighten out. But how? The cost of living was a pit. She felt like a beetle trying to climb out of a slippery bathtub,

scrabbling at the smooth white walls on which she could not get a purchase. If she stayed, she must find a job that would pay for a sitter as well as all the other bills and demands. Then she would not even be with her daughter for most of her waking time. Jobs for conservators were rare. She had sent out a hundred and fifty resumes – expensive but necessary. While she was on bed rest, before Rachel was even born, she learned her position had been eliminated in the budget crunch. They gave her a wonderful letter of recommendation and a little severance package, but nothing had turned up since. She had applied to teach art in public and private schools, but art education in public school was a victim of the same economic squeeze that had eliminated her job, and private schools had two hundred applicants for every job.

Just after six, her friend Simone arrived with a mushroom and pepper pizza. “I knew you’d be here. I thought I’d stop by from work.” Simone worked at a bank in Manhattan. She was tall, willowy with a helmet of glossy brown hair, even taller on the stilettos she always wore. Sam, who considered inch and a half heels high enough, always wondered how Simone could climb steps and take the subway in those heels. She considered it amusing that Simone who was five feet nine always wore stilettos while she at five nine mostly wore flats or sneakers.

“Where else would I be? That smells great.” She preferred sausage but Simone was a vegetarian and she was lucky to get the pizza. “You’re a sweetheart.”

“So what was your day like?”

“Took Rachel to Prospect Park for some air this morning. Futile apartment hunting. Call from Mac’s lawyer. Never marry a lawyer.”

“I’m not looking to get married. Once was enough. I wish you could stay here.”

“Don’t I?” Simone lived two blocks away. If Sam had to move far, would she ever see Simone? Occasionally? Rarely? Then never.

“Can’t stay long. I have a first real date.”

“What are you doing?”

“Some play I never heard of. Met him online through that service I’ve been trying. This was the only night we both could do it.” Simone launched into a detailed physical description. “Of course that could be what he looked like twenty years ago. Photos online are largely fiction.”

After Simone left, Sam remembered dating. Could she really do that again? Did she even want to? She saw herself dressed in an outfit that was totally out of date sitting on a barstool trying to look interested in her drink. An unemployed single mom with a child, forget it. It was a job she needed, not a boyfriend or even a casual lay. She could remember walking into parties and having men begin to hit on her within the first ten minutes. She had been really cool before her marriage but now she would be seen as tepid indeed.

Chapter Two

Emma watched the sun move slowly toward the prism she had hung in one of the south-facing windows that lit her bedroom. Finally the light passed through the glass and splintered into a rainbow on the coverlet and her arm. She flexed her arm slowly up and down, letting the colors flow over her skin. Pallid skin. She had always been tan, befitting someone who drew and painted from nature. Strange how the light refracted into the same colors as always, when the light itself was, if not the orange of midwinter, still quite golden in February.

There were few birds today at the feeder outside her window, a group of chickadees, a pair of ruby kinglets. She saw a nuthatch working the locust upsidedown. Roberta had forgotten to fill the feeder this morning. Her oldest daughter was not a nature lover. She viewed the birds as little feathered parasites. Ted, her husband, resented hauling the heavy bags from the store into the car and from the car into the house. Often he would forget to buy birdseed.

Sienna was sitting on the window ledge watching the feeder hopefully, but birds were scarce today. Her tail that ended in white twitched in annoyance. Although Emma's three children had all been from different fathers, that alone did not seem to explain the enormous differences that characterized them, Roberta – stupid name, her father had insisted on. Lauren dead now fifteen years. You never got over the death of a child, never. Whenever she thought of Lauren, a pain went through her core like cold lightning. Tony, her youngest, now forty-three and living in Spain. He was the handsomest.

Chickadees looked cute, but she had always tried to learn something about what she was drawing. They were hierarchical birds, more like a wolf pack than a family. The alpha male and female mated, as did the betas, but the others were

not permitted. Only by death of an alpha did a beta move up. They ate in the proper order at the feeders, fiercely maintaining their territory from other packs.

Her last lover Mark, dead of a stroke these nine years, had shared her pleasure in the chickadees, nuthatches, ruby crowned kinglets, the jays and cardinals, the downy woodpeckers, even the hawks who came to prey on them, the wild turkeys that strutted up the drive. They had hung two birdfeeders outside their diningroom and another by the livingroom. This one that her physical therapist Jeff hung for her was the only birdfeeder here, and Roberta refused to put down ground food. She called it messy. Therefore with no cracked corn spread out, the turkeys and the crows came no longer. In old age, so many friends fell away, but the birds could be depended on, so long as food was provided.

It did not feel like nine years. She still actively missed Mark. She would never make love again, never feel another body against hers, over hers, under hers. Aged, she might not have craved sex as often as she had when younger, but the desire when it came was fierce. Sex in her seventies had been more tender, more prolonged, occasionally awkward but no less satisfying. But at eighty-one, she missed Mark perhaps most when she woke, alone in a cold room. Roberta was saving on oil. She was aware of herself trying to be fair to the daughter she was sorry to be dependent on. She had not asked Roberta to move back here and take over the house. She never would have asked Roberta for help – she was too much like her rigid and cold father, Emma's first husband and worst mistake. Still, her old bones craved heat. She still paid the electric bill herself and the phone bill – the house and her own cell. She wanted to keep control of them and she did not want Roberta complaining about her laptop or her Droid. She was proud of her grasp of technology for communicating; when a woman got older,

she needed more technology, not less. She had to keep track of her son and her granddaughter, Samantha, and the few old friends left alive. But also she needed to monitor her investments in the way that Roberta and Ted could not get their hands or their eyes on.

She dragged herself up on the cushions, smiling as she thought of Roberta's father. Well, it might be hard to choose which of her husbands and lovers were the worst. She had made a great many mistakes. Mark had been the best of the lot. Maybe she had finally learned something about men by the time she hit sixty-three, when he moved into this house that had not been new, even when her own mother Vivienne had come to live here. The house where Emma had grown up. The house where Vivienne had lived until her death at eighty-three. The house where Emma had moved after her third marriage had come apart with a great stench of decay. She had fled to here and found how much she loved the land, just as she had as a child. She was determined to die here, as Vivienne had.

Great thumps shook the ceiling. Teddy was exercising. Teddy was always exercising. Roberta was plump and Teddy was rail thin. Roberta was always dieting. She had been on a diet since she married Teddy—it must be thirty-five years? Emma really couldn't remember. She had been in Japan at the time. Emma took sly satisfaction in never having dieted in her life. She had been too active. Now she was scarcely mobile, but her appetite had wasted away. Eating felt like work. Then, Roberta was not a great cook, for she nursed a strong mistrust of food. Food was the villain. Therefore she punished it with overcooking. The meat was always dry; the rice, soggy; the vegetables limp.

She must have dozed, as she often did – kind of an embarrassment – because her physical therapist Jeff’s voice in the hall woke her. He had been waylaid by Teddy, who was going on about some scheme.

“Oysters could be mail-ordered,” Teddy said. “Mail-ordered all over the country. We’d do something to make them unique, to give them that *éclat* that a successful product requires. We’d paint a logo on the shells.”

“That sounds expensive,” Jeff said politely. She could imagine him trying to edge toward her room.

“Or stamp a logo. Something clever.”

She reached for her hairbrush. When she was young, her hair had been so curly she could scarcely force a comb through. With age her hair had relaxed and now it was merely wavy, thinner and completely, almost shockingly white. It had been auburn, they called it. Strange name. Must be from the French. She would look up the etymology on her phone: she had a dictionary app. She had always been curious where words came from, how they evolved, like birds, like animals but faster. For years, she had dyed her hair red, then after fifty, returned it to auburn. Since Mark’s death, she had not bothered dying it and the startling white had taken over. Ah, auburn did come from the French, originally from Latin.

Jeff finally appeared at the door, which had been left open when Roberta brought her breakfast. There he paused. “Emma? Are you up?”

“Horizontal but awake, dear. And dressed.” Roberta scolded her, saying it was inappropriate to call her therapist by pet names. Roberta was easily shocked. Who would Emma address fondly, if not her pal, her health hero.

He helped her out of bed and had her walk, his arm across her back at first, then his hand steadying her elbow. Finally he let go but stayed close to prevent a fall. She lunged forward slowly. God, she was awkward. She had used to walk

four or five miles a day, ten on occasion. Walking had been her favorite form of exercise, bar one of course. They turned at the doorway and she indicated she wanted to go right. Slowly she inched along the hallway and then into the bright diningroom at last. “Emma,” he said gently, “If you didn’t stay in bed, hide in your room, you’d have much better musculature.”

“It’s my sanctuary, the only part of the house I control.” The brightly lit dining room was not a formal room, although Roberta and Teddy did not use it as much as Mark and she had, as much as her mother had. That and the kitchen had been the heart of the house. Roberta and Teddy used the livingroom more. Over her protests, they had broken down a wall and incorporated into the old front parlor the birthing room beyond that had been her office. Today she continued into the livingroom, narrowly missing the chintz covered sofa. The television was on but the sound was off. On the screen a man on Fox News appeared to be shouting about immigration.

Jeff helped her into a chair, one that was too large for her but better than dropping to the floor. She ignored the TV. Jeff sat on a hassock, took her pulse and asked her questions about her past couple of days. Then it was time to rise and walk farther. He brought her coat and they went outside. “Where would you like to go?”

She could hear the brook, meaning a thaw had come during the night or maybe even the day before, when Jeff had not come and she had been confined to her room. “This way.”

She led the way and he followed close behind, ready to catch her if she misstepped. The path was not as broad as it used to be. The inkbush holly, the arrowwood virburnum and vigorous bull briar were encroaching. In early spring if she had the strength, she would go out with clippers and attack them.

Yes, the brook was pushing and bubbling among banks of ice. She did not dare venture out on the ice, lingering on the bank, listening, breathing in the sharp piney air, watching the dark water tumble past.

Jeff touched her cheek. "You're getting chilled."

"It's not that cold today, dear. Let's stay a while. Being out in nature gives me strength."

"You can't recoup it all at once. Your strength is slowly making a comeback, but let's not push too hard. You'll pay for it tomorrow."

Jeff had come into her life after her second heart attack had almost killed her. Reluctantly she let him take her elbow to steer her back up the slight slope through the oak and pine woods into the clearing around the house. Inside, he helped her out of her coat. She walked toward her room on her own.

The orange afternoon light poured into the hall and illuminated a painting hung on the usually dark far wall. "Who is that?" Jeff peered at it, a nude sitting slightly sideways on a red sofa. "Did you paint it? She's beautiful."

"I was the painted, not the painter. I was nineteen that year."

"Not that you still aren't beautiful." He stroked her hand.

"I never painted portraits. Not of people, anyway."

If she were twenty years younger, she would take him to her bed. Or probably not. He was too nice, too sweet. She had demonstrated rotten taste in men, flipping from the cold Naval officer to the rosarian who was passionate but so unworldly he had essentially forced her to learn finance and take over. The fellow painter who grew jealous of her commissions and at the same time disdainful because she painted from nature. Why run down the catalog? Especially not now when Jeff was actually here, getting her to gently move and stretch. His hands were always warm but never sweaty. He had large hands for a

rather slight man. Warm strong shapely hands – his best feature besides his dark blue eyes, like a Siamese cat she told him. Years ago, a collector who had fancied himself in love with her had given her a Siamese kitten, Rafael. Rafael had traveled with her to Japan and back, to Greece, to Mexico. Her most faithful lover except for Mark.

Jeff was solidly built, around five nine – she was not great at guessing heights, especially since she had shrunk – but broad shouldered. His hair was light brown with streaks of grey. Now it was time to exercise with the huge ball in the corner and his other contraptions. With anyone else, she would have viewed it as humiliating torture, but she enjoyed his company enough to try. That was all she could do these days: try. She did the stretches, the balancing exercises. When her breath began to strain, he stopped her to rest. Congestive heart failure, it was called. Her heart had finally failed her. It seemed oddly appropriate in a way. When she was younger, she had never imagined that her good body would some day wear out. She had imagined herself sturdy and able until some dim day when death would come, suddenly no doubt, and carry her off, still intact to the end.

By the time they finished, she was exhausted. But she could see more color in her face as she passed the mirror on the way back to her bed. “Jeff, could you do me a big favor and fill the birdfeeder outside my window?”

“Of course. But then I have to go.”

“Another client?”

“Two towns over. Do you need me to get you anything when I come on Thursday?”

“There’s a book I’d love from the library. *Inside the Neolithic Mind*, David Pearce – about cave paintings. They did animals so incredibly. No hurry. I know you go at least once a week.”

“I can always ask Mom to pick it up. She’s still volunteering.”

Jeff was one of the local kids who moved off the Cape when they finished high school . Half hung around and half took off for the mainland. Of those a little more than half returned, sometimes crowned with success of some sort, no matter how minor, and some broken. Jeff was a bit of both. He had gone to college at U Mass Amherst on scholarship, returning a decade and a half later after divorce. If he had children, he never talked about them. Some locals assumed he was gay; she did not think so. Not that it would have bothered her or the other locals. Her son Tony, a designer who lived in Madrid, was gay – married to Guillermo as was legal in Spain and here in Massachusetts. She used to visit them twice a year, when she had been able to travel. Tony was so very different from Roberta – more than could be accounted for by different fathers. Tony was more like her, while Roberta took after her father, who had retired as a rear admiral and promptly dropped dead on a golf course.

Anyhow, she did not think Jeff was gay, simply badly burned. Something had happened there in Northampton where he had been living with his wife, something from which years later he had not yet healed. She hoped that someday he would feel able to open up to her, but she was not about to push.

When she climbed back into bed, Sienna joined her, curling into her side in a tight orange ball. Emma fell asleep at once. When she woke, she had no idea what time it was. The light was fading already, grayish on the clump of birches she and Mark had planted when first they moved into the old house. Waking she went to jump out of bed and that knife sprang open in her chest. She let herself

drop. She had forgotten she was an old partly bedridden woman of 81. Why was it so easy to fall asleep in the daytime and so difficult at night? Sienna raised her head and began to purr. She was a rescue, a kitten dumped in the woods. In those days, Emma could still take reasonable hikes. Near one of the ponds, Emma heard a mewling. She stopped and moved toward the sound. She could see the leaves moving. It was October and golden and red leaves had tumbled down and almost erased the path. She caught a quick glimpse of something small and furry. The kitten ran from her. She moved slowly after it, crouching and speaking softly. She had been quite cold by the time she managed to catch it and zip the struggling kitten inside her jacket. Once caught and held in her body warmth, it stopped protesting and after a while, as she walked carefully home, it began to purr and to knead with its sharp little claws, seeking milk. Sienna had been with her ever since. She was a pale orange, more apricot, with tiger stripes and a white face and white tip of her tail. She was not a talkative cat, but she purred loudly and frequently. Emma knew how unusual Sienna was as a female. Almost all orange cats were male.

Emma tried to remember the dream she had wakened from. It had been bathed in vivid colors, summer colors, aquamarine, gold, sizzling red, intense deep blue. Yes, she had been dreaming of the Cape of her youth. Telling Jeff about that portrait had done it. Her mother had been suspicious, a little scornful of the painters who came to Provincetown, Truro or Wellfleet for summer, most of them. However, some got stuck, as her mother said, and stayed on, washed-ashores the locals called them, folks from away. Vivienne had no interest in painting. She was a reader, always with stacks of books beside her bed or on the coffee table, but she did not take painting seriously. To her, all paintings were all more or less daubs. They did not speak to her. They did to Emma.

Emma had been fascinated. Colors moved her. In summer, there were many openings of local galleries, and she began to go. She even could cadge wine, because nobody at an opening ever asked for I.D. In those days, nobody worried about teenage drinking. At eighteen, Emma already had a womanly body and looked much as she would for the next thirty years. When a figure painter, Simon Whitehead, noticed her interest, he invited her to sit for him. Vivienne balked at the idea, suspicious of older men pursuing her daughter. Simon offered to pay her a regular model's rate. Vivienne needed the money, so she could not forbid Emma. Emma had been working as a chambermaid, and being an artist's model paid three times as much. Since she was eighteen already, she told her mother she was going to do it.

Simon's studio was near the beach, in a separate building from his house. He said it had good north light. It was really just a box with a skylight, canvasses leaning against three of the walls and a table spotted with paint daubs, a couple of easels and a strong smell of turpentine. Vivienne sat in a straight chair, her back just as straight, a book open on her lap but her eyes on Simon, scanning his every gesture and glance.

He must be a very successful painter, she thought as she lay on the Oriental rug he had placed on the floor. It was a bit itchy but she wasn't being paid to be comfortable. She liked to watch him mix the colors. "You start out making everything white," she noticed. "Why?"

"You're full of questions," he said, surprise in his voice. "Models don't ask questions, as a general rule."

"I'm not a model, generally."

He lived in New York City and here he had a house bigger than theirs and much newer, one built for him designed by an architect, she knew from the local

guys who built it. They thought the architect was an idiot. They said the roof was designed so that all the water would run down and flow over the entrance.

Besides that big house, he had this extra building just to paint in.

To be a painter seemed like a great life. It seemed far pleasanter than the long hours her mother put in as a nurse working with Dr. Rose. She didn't think she would like to paint nudes, however. She had already learned to call them nudes and not naked people. They were still, however, people with no clothes on and a little embarrassing.

She was learning to remain very still. Soon other painters wanted to use her, although the results were often bizarre to her. Still, she was beginning to understand more about art. She learned also that Simon was not that successful a painter; he had inherited money, and while his paintings not infrequently sold, they were not carried by any of the prestigious galleries. There was a definite pecking order to the painters. At openings, she listened and she picked up the jargon they used to praise or dismiss work. The big shots around were De Kooning, Motherwell, Kline, Hoffman.

She spent some of the money she earned on art supplies, sold in Provincetown. She used her mother as a subject. Vivienne got cross at having to sit still, so she painted her reading. Emma tried various still lifes of flowers and vegetables from their garden. She painted self portraits. She tried abstractions. Nothing was satisfying, but she kept working on her technique.

Her first real lover was no one she sat for – or usually lay for, down on the sand, in a field, on a chair, on a bed. He painted wild thickly coated abstracts that seemed to radiate emotion: anger, passion, torment. Ron was younger than the others, only four years older than Emma. She thought him the handsomest man she had ever seen, tall, lean, with an angular chiseled face and light brown hair

almost to his shoulders. He looked like pictures of angels, she thought, but he had a bad boy aura that at nineteen she had found aphrodisiac. They had first made love in the dunes, and got poison ivy on their behinds. Their itchy sores did not inhibit them. At nineteen, who cared about comfort?

She had bled onto the blanket. Ron seemed shocked that she was a virgin. She felt a little insulted, but then he was pleased as if he had accomplished something. If he were pleased, it must all be good. She knew little about men. Vivienne had thrown the drunk who was her father out of the house when Emma was nine, and life had suddenly improved, away from his temper, his blows, his breaking of chairs and dishes. The chief of police, who admired Vivienne, quietly told her father if he didn't get out of town, if he ever bothered his family again, the chief would put him in jail for public drunkenness and petty theft. In those days, things were done off the books in small towns. The chief meant it, and her father disappeared from her life and never returned. Vivienne had friends but never another lover that Emma knew about.

At first everything about Ron pleased and excited her. He liked curries; she who had never before eaten one, now adored curries, so hot they blistered her tongue and gave her diarrhea. He liked to sun bathe; she burned herself beside him, her fair freckled skin turning to flame. He liked any French movie; she saw them all with him, even the talky ones where she dozed off. He despised figurative, impressionist, landscape painting; she scoffed with him. "He's not an artist. He's just a painter," he would say of another's work. "He might as well be painting the sides of houses."

Perhaps she was too acquiescent. At the end of September, when he packed to go back to the city from his rental, she had assumed she would accompany him. He said firmly that his studio was too small to share. He would

see her next summer – if he came back to the Cape. She cried for a week. She felt used and dumped. Vivienne said she hoped that Emma had learned something. Emma wondered if she had. What had she learned? Well, she was never again that pliable. She would not go to a French movie for two years. She began to study drawing seriously, with an old artist who lived in the dunes. She began to draw from nature. She began to have her own opinions. Never again would she put on another's life like a new dress. That was what she thought then, anyhow.

When she ran into him an an opening two years later, she no longer saw an iridescent angel, a commanding pure figure. She saw an arrogant poseur who admired himself inordinately and pumped up his own ego by dismissing others. She would not be an “artist” she decided; she would be one who drew and painted well.

Emma became aware of voices outside but not what they were saying. Teddy and Roberta were talking with a man. Their voices faded. She got out of bed to stand at her bedroom window, half hidden by the drapery. After a few minutes, she saw daughter and son-in-law with a tall beefy man, built like a linebacker but wearing a Harris tweed overcoat. They were strolling around the house and then they disappeared. A few minutes later she saw them walking away along the sand road that led to the house. She must ask Roberta who that was. She was sure she had never seen the man before, yet Roberta and Teddy were chatting with him with far more animation than she was used to seeing from them. He must be an old friend, maybe someone from Minneapolis where they had lived before. A minor mystery.

Again, Teddy might have met him while trying to sell real estate. He had taken a course and got his license, but few customers. “These locals freeze me out of the market,” he complained to everyone who would listen, but she thought

he just talked himself out of sales. If that were the case, why would they be walking around here? Maybe he was a new neighbor. Some developer had built spec houses down the road, past her own land. He might have been stupid enough to buy one of those monstrosities thus becoming their newest neighbor before the real estate market took a dive. She had gotten out before the bubble burst.

Emma enjoyed speculating, although she was aware that if her life were as interesting as it used to be, she would not have thought about the beefy gentleman for a minute. Her days and nights that had once been so crowded with people had emptied out like a rented hall after an event. Friends and enemies, frenemies, critics and admirers, gallery owners, lovers, husbands, collectors, editors who sought her work – almost all gone. Dead or packed away in nursing homes or full care retirement “communities.” A forest chopped down and she was a lone broken tree still more or less standing. More or less. She left the window and sat in her chair. She would read for a while. She was finishing a biography of Louise Bourgeois that had come out recently. But first she’d check her email and glance at the news on her laptop.

She dozed off while reading and decided she should get into bed. It was after eleven. Nowadays she usually went to bed by ten. She wakened abruptly. The big numbers on the bedside digital alarm clock read 2:17. Oh, the coywolves. They were close. Sienna had wakened and was at the window staring out. She had forgotten to close the curtains. People called them coyotes, but they were sixty percent red wolf. They were yelping over a kill close by, the whole pack. She wondered what they had hunted down. People who came from the city for weekends or summers often let their pets outside, where the coywolves were happy for easy food. It could be a rabbit, a possum, a young or old deer, a wild

turkey, although mainly the females were vulnerable when they were brooding, not until spring. They slept in trees and the coywolves fortunately could not climb. She hated the sound of their victory cries. It made her feel her mortality. She saw her own death as the huge alpha male of the local pack who when she saw him stared at her fearlessly, as if judging her not as an opponent but as dinner. It was difficult to go back to sleep. She lay awake wondering how much time she had left.

Finally she got up, used her bathroom and picked up Sienna from the window ledge. "Come to bed." Sienna wandered about the bed for a few minutes and then turned three times and settled against her. She held the cat, warm, alive and eventually fell back asleep.