

As she closed the door of her house against the chilly evening outside, Margaret smiled to herself and sighed with pleasure. She leaned one shoulder against the rosewood-panelled wall to support herself as she removed her boots. She hung the fashionable wool coat on a padded hanger in the hall closet, and savoured the aroma of Boeuf Bourignon. Passing through the kitchen to the alcove by the dining room window where her desk stood, she flicked on the oven light. Like everything else in her well-ordered life, the meal would be perfectly done and exactly on time.

She sighed with satisfaction at the feelings of that absence of frustration which comes from knowing that there is no one to untidy one's own tidiness, no one to disturb the calm of a comfortable and comforting haven. She reviewed the afternoon meeting. How nice to be able to arrange for just the right amount of frustration, almost to order, predictable – like calling for a pizza without anchovies.

From one compartment of her briefcase Margaret took the royal blue leather folder with her notes from the meeting. She sorted the papers into several piles on top of her desk, then three-hole-punched each group and placed it into a section of a blue three-ring binder. Next she took the neat ziplock plastic bag containing her knitting from the other part of the case.

She cast off the stitches and replaced the knitting needles in the Number 7 plastic sheath. Reaching forwards to a wicker basket beside her chair, she picked a crochet hook from a pouch inside the lid. She worked deftly to link the three segments of knitting together, the two pale lemon globes like sock heels detached from any reality of feet or legs, flanking the single finger. Then she took

a ball of yellow silk ribbon left over from the last pair of booties made for a then unsexed grandchild and snipped off a piece. She threaded the silk ribbon through holes at the upper edge of the garment.

From the papers already filed in the binder she carefully removed the lemon coloured correction stickers. She read the shorthand notes written on each one before folding it neatly into half and then into sixths. With a grin she popped the notes into the matching knitted receptacle and pulled the ribbon tight.

On the wall of the dining-room just beside the window alcove hung an oil portrait of a Victorian lady, smiling coyly. Margaret slid her fingers down the righthand side of the heavy gilt frame. There was a barely audible click as the painting revealed itself to be the door of a concealed cupboard. The back of the shallow closet was fitted with pegboard upon which were impaled rows of little hooks.

On each hook dangled a knitted object like the one Margaret now held in her hand. Above each was a gummed file label telling the date of a meeting. Twenty-six hooks were filled. A pattern of colours emerged. Orange, brown, gold. Red, white, grey-blue. Then lemon, pale green. Months symbolised. Meetings remembered.

Margaret added the new member to the gallery, writing above it the day's date. Then she closed the closet, took a ball of pale green yarn from the wicker basket and put it with the number 7 needles in the ziplock bag. From the bottom drawer of the desk she selected a pale green pad of sticker-notes, and placed it in the folder marked Materials for the Next Board Meeting.

REFLECTIONS

A Story by Zoë Landale

"Do I tilt you back?" my sister asked. She sounded dubious. Shame ambushed me. Why did people never remember? "That's right," I said. I could hear the patience in my own voice. "Back like a baby carriage. "And we go up with me facing forward, please. Otherwise you'll flip me out."

"I don't know why these wretched shopping centres never have ramps," Jeanna grumbled. Her voice was light and strong; worried for me. Quickly and competently she tipped the wheelchair and set the small front wheels on the pavement, pushed, and I was up.

Most of the time I could walk. I limped heavily, but I was still able to move about under my own power. The problem was since I'd developed arthritis in my spine, I could no longer move far unassisted. Leaning on a cane helped, but I couldn't even make it around the perimeter of a supermarket anymore.

"Not even a jar," I said. Approving.

"Course not," Jeanna said. "I want you to be in good shape for the party. I'm getting excited, aren't you?"

In the shop windows, Jeanna's face looked animated. If I glanced sideways I could see her profile, like a strong cameo. She was wearing very dark lipstick that year; it set up a resonance between the definition of her lips and her Nordic-white skin. Across either cheekbone, an artistic wedge of colour had been brushed. Her coppery hair had just been cut to shoulder-length the week before, and its usual waviness had tightened into a mass of curls. You could tell from the confident way she moved, and the long extended lines her body fell into, that she was pleased with her appearance. Jeanna was only twenty-one, five years younger than I was. Sometimes she seemed very young.

"Only two more days till Halloween," I said. "We've got a lot to do."

"I know," Jeanna said. "The decorations. I'll come over tomorrow, if that's okay. I want to arrange those spiders in the doorways – aren't they awful? And we have to put up the cut-outs and the crepe paper. Have I left anything out? What about the balloons?"

"I don't want to blow them up till the last moment. Half-deflated balloons would look ridiculous. Oh, and we forgot the spider webs. I've got some black wool that'll be perfect."

By Mr. Robert's we turned the corner and headed toward Woodward's Food Floor. At ten o'clock in the morning the mall was almost deserted. It looked grey and dreary in the restrained October light. The raised flower-beds displayed only bare trees and dark, raked earth. The concrete of the mall looked stained.

"Do you realize how long it's been since I've been here?" I asked.

"Two years," Jeanna said instantly. "Oh Val, I wish those bloody doctors could *do* something." The heels of her new Frye boots beat angrily against the pavement.

It was not a subject I wanted to go over again. "I know," I told her. "Shall we look in Chapman's window? Since we're here?"

Jeanna swerved around a flower-bed and we darted across the mall at a diagonal. She very nearly severed the Achilles' tendon of an unsuspecting woman in a beige trench-coat, who had the temerity to step out in front of us. I made an inarticulate sound of protest – how often had I warned my family about the danger of protruding foot-rests? Jeanna did not hear me. She pushed determinedly by, missing the woman only by accident, or grace.

In the glass I could see my own image. Today it was fairly satisfactory. My lips and nails were the same shade of rose pink, and my hair was a shining blonde helmet. Not for nothing did Jeanna and I patronize the best salon in Vancouver! I was wearing my navy blazer and a blue wool skirt. A bright gauzy blouse from France combined all the different colours and pulled the whole outfit together: I looked nice.

I followed the lines of my reflection down. There was nothing wrong with my legs. I'd noticed that kids invariably glanced at them first, to see what was the matter with me. Hey, I can walk, I wanted to tell them. This chair is just an inconvenience, a temporary measure till I get better.

Would they have believed me if I'd told them? Did I believe myself? Mouths formed soft rings of astonishment when I rose up from my wheelchair and walked; Lazarus himself could not have encountered more dubious looks. A middle-aged woman who worked at a hotel we'd stayed at in California, put it clearly. "I didn't know anybody went back and forth," she'd apprised me, her face cracking like a suspicious frog's. "We had a convention here once, and they were all in wheelchairs – and stayed there. The whole time." Triumphant, this last, as if she'd scored a point. I had never dared to go into the gift shop again, wheeled or on legs.

I distracted Jeanna by pointing out an elaborate silver tea set displayed at Birks and slipped a 222 into my mouth. I carried the pills loose in my jacket pocket. I hurt. I hurt all the time, but I tried to minimize awkwardness and fuss. In the booklet I'd been given, called *Chronic Pain*, there was a section on timing medication. Taking weak analgesics, and taking them by the clock, managed pain very effectively, the writer caroled. I loathed his falsely optimistic tone – is there life after pain – yes, yes, yes, with massed choir – but I had to admit the advice was sound.

Inside Woodward's, Jeanna and I looked from the shopping carts to one another. This was one problem we hadn't encountered before. "I can push the shopping cart and you can push me," I said. "Or I could push myself." That meant extra strain on my back.

Jeanna sensed my doubt. "I'll push you both," she said decisively. "Not to worry."

After the little Chinese markets I'd been reduced to shopping in

for the past two years, the Food Floor seemed the size of several football fields. Maybe it was, for all I knew. I gazed at the long aisles in astonishment: all that distance to walk! Being around such a quantity of food was intoxicating and bewildering. There were so many items to tug at the eyes, different shapes, colours and sizes. Even the textures of the packaging varied; the gloss of plastic-wrapped boxes, cardboard with matte finish, the solid sheen of cans. A cheerful clatter ascended, an amalgam of people's voices, the dash and rattle of shopping carts, and the blurred ringing of a dozen cash registers. Opposite was the bakery section. It smelled of white bread and doughnuts, sugar-sweet.

"Carr's water-biscuits. McVitie's whole-meal crackers." I stroked lines through items on our list as they were put into the shopping cart. I wondered how people confined to wheelchairs usually managed. I could only reach a limited distance up on the shelves, and once, straining forward, the chair tilted dangerously as I put too much weight on the footrests. "Two tins broken shrimp."

The aisles were enormous. We'd go up one and three over, then we'd miss something and have to backtrack. We spent a long time deciding which pickles to get, choosing the different jars with as much care as if the whole success of our party depended upon it.

In the coffee aisle, we stopped and sniffed the rich fragrance which seeped from the big grinding machine. "How are you holding out, cute one?" my sister demanded.

I was tiring; I knew it and she knew it. My face I could control, but not my eyes. They glazed, or so I had been told. The pain in my back was starting to gnaw at me, but I could manage for a while longer. I had to, we weren't finished. "All right," I answered.

Jeanna scrutinized me and snorted her disbelief. "There can't be too much left to buy," she said. "Give me the list for a moment."

Her hands were small and delicate, but like a child, Jeanna still bit her nails. Each one was savagely short, surrounded by a mass of reddened skin and chewed cuticle. The absence of nails peeping over her finger-tips gave her hands a curiously blunt and defenceless look.

"Red Leicester, German blue...uh-huh. We could save time if I lined up at the deli counter. You could pick up a few avocados for us," she said. "Six to be precise. We need some green onions, too."

"Who made the list?" I asked, mock-indignant. "Sure, go get the cheese."

I made good time over the smooth tiled floors. I pushed faster and faster on the cold aluminum wheel-rims, adroitly putting pressure on one to manoeuvre around a display of canned peaches on special. The problem with Woodward's was that it was so tempting. Everywhere I looked I saw things I wanted. There were dozens of varieties of tea, my favorite brand of Major Grey chutney, unavailable anywhere else. Huge shelves of hard-to-find spices. Maple syrup. *Vegetables, Valerie*. The pain in my back was uncompromising: *go for the vegetables*.

I came to the wheelchair equivalent of a screeching halt in front of a pile of avocados, stacked like pebbled green eggs. Beautiful. I had to backtrack in order to find a roll of plastic bags. Every time I stopped it was necessary to put on my brakes. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. If I reached out unsecured, the wheelchair drifted away from the counter.

I piled what we needed on my lap, including some spinach for my dinner. I would've bought more, but I didn't have the room.

One avocado rolled out of the bag and bounced on to the floor. Another shopper, a woman, picked it up and returned it before I could even bend down. I felt a flush of embarrassment at the careful good-will of her gesture.

On my way to the cheese counter I remembered I'd wanted to buy a case of catfood. Well, too bad. I couldn't begin to pick up the wretched thing, and besides, where could I put it? Across the arms of the chair? The ache in my spine had expanded to a grinding pain. I was getting nauseous. Pain was eating me. Moment by moment I could feel my energy seeping away to a cold place where there was no colour, just jags and spires.

Jeanna was still ordering. "...and half a pound of cream cheese," I caught as I approached, "a pound of Stilton and half a pound of Gloucestershire." Her clear voice projected a long way. I smiled. She sounded just like our mother.

"Do you think this'll be enough?" Jeanna asked me seriously as I drew up beside her. I was taller than she was; it seemed strange to be looking up into her face.

"Enough?" I said, indicating the generous bulge of brown-wrapped parcels on the counter. "It looks great. I just hope everyone turns up, otherwise we'll be eating this stuff for weeks."

"That will be all, thank you," Jeanna said to the woman behind the counter. "No wonder people don't give parties more often," she whispered to me. "I can't believe how much this is all going to cost."

We had nearly reached the haven of the check-out counter when my sister said "Didn't you want some catfood?"

I wanted to groan. Visions of my apartment and lying down were brutally interrupted. Jeanna was so thoughtful. But she was right, Biscuit would go hungry if I said no. The Chinese store didn't carry any brands he'd eat.

"Thanks for reminding me," I said. The aisle where the catfood was stocked was on the far side of the store. I palmed another 222.

Finally, we escaped from Woodward's, feeling guilty and triumphant about the glorious supply of food we'd laid in. "Well, at the rate of one party every ten years, it's a bargain," Jeanna argued. "What's a hundred dollars? A mere nothing."

"We are splitting it," I muttered. I felt strangely distanced from events; the remorseless jarring of wheels over concrete, the fine drops of moisture which hazed the air. While we'd been shopping, mist had swirled in from the sea. It was chilly outside, raw. I shifted, trying to ease the clamour of my back. I might as well not have bothered.

By the blank wall of the Food Floor, Santa Claus, complete with half a dozen real reindeer took up residence every Christmas. Now, in the autumn, there was a man selling lottery tickets behind a table. It was not until Jeanna pushed me closer that I saw he too, was in a wheelchair. A grey blanket was over his knees and his head wobbled to one side as he studied something on the table.

I wanted to tell Jeanna to switch to the other side of the mall, but it was too late. Still, the man had his head down. Perhaps we could get by without him seeing us.

"Hey, Valerie, I just remembered something." My sister's voice floated effortlessly over the concourse.

The man looked up. He was about thirty, with fuzzy brown hair and thick eyebrows. For a moment his face was blank, then he noticed the wheelchair. "Hel-lo," he said. His voice was slurred.

Of course, it's like a car club, I thought. I should have known. I was supposed to acknowledge this guy - weren't we in the same sort of vehicle? "Hi," I said, and smiled.

The man really saw me then. We were almost opposite one another, separated by a distance of about three meters. He straightened as though he'd been pulled upward, and his eyes filled with blind warmth. I could see myself mirrored in his eyes: he looked as though he'd been searching for me all his life, as though he were my lover. Delight and incredulous wonder chased across his face. Weren't we the same, both crippled? The man's blue eyes locked fast on mine. The sudden, dreadful intimacy made me flinch. "Hel-lo," he said again.

Jeanna, confused by this interchange, slowed till we were almost stopped.

"Keep on," I hissed.

"How - are - you? the man asked. His head bobbed.

The chair began to move again. I smiled weakly. I couldn't think what else to do.

Past Mr. Robert's, we turned the corner and headed for the car. In the store windows, our reflections paced us: two women, one walking, one in a wheelchair.

THE USE OF WOMEN

A few years back, the wife of a Toronto rabbi declared that intermarriage between Jews and Christians was 'worse than Hitler.' Even so stupid an opinion has a grain of truth in it: minority cultures may thrive under persecution, then wither away when they achieve acceptance by the larger society. (Paul Delany, from "The Homosexual Factor," in Saturday Night, February 1981, p. 36)

Good journalist, unprejudiced,
sensitive to the needs of homosexual
men, has sacrificed a woman,
en passant, without
noticing her, to rewrite her
'grain of truth'
logically, acceptably.

At cocktail parties and
other sexual
intersections,
bottoms are not pinched but bright
heads get pillaged for 'stupid' opinions
to be
revised into cogent
comment by real thinkers.

They winnow away emotional chaff, language;
they keep the grains of truth, logic.
Everybody knows women see only outsides
of things, superficially, never know whereof
they speak so no credit
need be given: none is due.

Polly Fleck
Banff, Alberta