

The Great Salt Marsh

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The church was built of fieldstone on a narrow corner of clipped grass and frost-worn sidewalks. Its true height and depth were difficult to apprehend because of the two perpendicular-running streets with their cars and taxi cabs and buses, the nearness of other buildings, and the small portion of land that held the church, giving one a feeling of vertigo on looking skyward or a false idea of one-dimensionality when standing before it. The grounds had great beauty because of the two yellowwood trees that grew on either side of the walkway from which one approached the church. Their trunks were knotted and gnarled. They bloomed in June with flowers that were like hanging white bouquets. The trees were almost the height of the church, and so, even from the common across the street, one saw only the dense branches and leaves. Above the trees was a rectangular steeple, also made of fieldstone, crowned with a gold weathervane in the likeness of a bantam cock with a feathered tail.

Patricia knew these things, paid attention to them. How the grass grew poorly under the yellowwood trees. How, on a Sunday, passing under the trees, crossing the loosely fitted slate walk and a brief set of steps and opening the massive wooden doors one found oneself in a vestibule and one could see, beyond it, the sanctuary and its pews and the altar and the stained-glass windows. There someone gave Patricia a bulletin and it was mostly someone she didn't know. Another walkway was on the near side of the church, longer, more recently tended and repaired, and it led to another door where, on stepping through it, one was in a small hallway with a bench, as if for waiting or resting, and beyond it was another door to the sanctuary, nearer to the altar, and to the right of the hallway were the church offices. Patricia knew all these things

and she often saw the church in her mind, its heavy proportions occupying the land. She carried the church with her, a beautiful thing made of stone and wood and glass.

The sidewalk was patched with ice. Patricia walked carefully toward the intersecting streets, carrying the evening's reading in her gloved hand. In the early dark the church seemed to be slumbering. The great windows were as if turned away, the figures in them without form. All the lights were off, even the spotlight that lit the face of the church. Only the window in the minister's office was lit. Other days, other evenings there were services and meetings of committees and coffee hour after church and lunch in the meeting hall, served the second Sunday of each month, and Saturday breakfast for men and Bible readings and people making sandwiches in the kitchen after services to give to homeless men and women on the common. Then there were the organizations that used the church to give concerts of chamber music in the sanctuary and hold Al-Anon and AA meetings in the upstairs, paneled rooms, the oak there darkened with age and neglect. Patricia sometimes used to see the men and women from those meetings standing on the side walkway in the early evening, smoking cigarettes, trying to think or not think their way from pain, crushing the tooth-marked, stained filters under their heels and lighting another, until the stewards, having been approached by aggrieved church members, told them they couldn't smoke there anymore.

Patricia didn't know all that the church did, all that occurred in its many rooms, some lushly furnished with drapes and wing chairs, some bare except for a stack of folding chairs. She was a peripheral person in the church. She had once walked the half-mile there almost every Sunday and heard the choir and the minister and looked at the stained-glass windows, struck by the sun, and at the fans in the high ceiling, the blades turning in the summer heat. When she stopped attending church with any predictability people had understood something about her and

stopped calling to ask her to sit on a committee or to bring cookies for the coffee hour. When she did attend services she sat in a pew in the back of the sanctuary and took the hands of a few people during the greeting of peace and held the hymnal and lifted her voice upward, seeking to join the others in song. But Tom, their new minister, had called to invite her to a group that was to meet each week during Lent, and so she had put on her boots to walk to the church to join them.

The minister's office was arrived at after opening a door to the suite of offices, the outer two rooms for a few staff and for storage and copying. Tom's office was small and crowded with furniture and books; Patricia wondered on entering it whether he had inherited all the paraphernalia of the other two ministers--Tom being the third to have led the congregation since Patricia had started going there--and perhaps the paraphernalia of all the ministers before them. There were voices in his office and the smell of wool coats hung in the overheated room. An old radiator clicked and hissed in a corner. There were only two places to sit, at a chair pulled up, facing Tom's desk, or around a low glass-topped wooden table that was shaped like a wheel, with the carved figures of people and small flags like prayer flags all moving outward as if on spokes. Patricia took off her coat and gloves and sat in a chair in a circle with the others. She shook the hand of the woman next to her, who had offered it to her. There were eight people in the room, including Patricia. They were all talking in low voices among themselves. The group had missed the first meeting because of the weather and Patricia had missed the following week, having had the flu or some distress she couldn't name; and so they were already into the middle of March, Easter coming that year on the second Sunday of April. Patricia, to prepare, had spent a number of evenings reading chapters from the book they had been assigned.

People stopped talking when Tom arrived and sat with them. He was dressed informally in trousers and a V-neck sweater, and under it an open-collared shirt. He was a man in his mid-thirties, with a large frame, and so he filled up spaces like chairs and altars and small rooms. He said, in his trained, pleasant voice, "Hello and welcome. Welcome to the third week of the Lenten season." They greeted him with respectful silence. He said, "Patricia is new to our group tonight. Patricia, would you like to introduce yourself?"

Patricia looked down, then across the wooden table, and addressed the group. She said, "Hello, I'm Patricia Waring." Waring was her married name. She used it more and more easily now. She paused and thought about how she would introduce herself to the people in the room, whom she didn't know, who looked at her with mild expectancy. Her life seemed suddenly complicated and unclear, like a trail looping back on itself. She wished she had a story, a simple, clear story: this is what I bring to you. She said, "I've been coming to church for a number of years. Though not with any regularity. As I had so hoped. I'm glad to be here with you and I look forward to sharing this Lenten season." The group looked away from her and turned to Tom. He asked them to introduce themselves to Patricia and she began to hear their names, and she nodded and repeated, "Bill," and "Ethel," and "Fiona," to each. Everyone seemed to be about the same age, within a range; she thought Tom must have planned that, he must have had some idea about how he wanted the group to be composed.

There were a few small white stones clustered on the glass tabletop, and a small metal bar and a hammer with a triangle-shaped head beside it. A honey-colored candle had already been lit. The burning wick illuminated the rim of the candle and the flame flickered within it. Patricia imagined that Tom had lit the candle the first evening; the wick seemed to have burned that far. Tom struck the hammer to the bar and asked for a moment of silence and prayer. Patricia closed

her eyes and bowed her head. The one, high note of the bar seemed to linger in the air. She heard breathing and the shuffling of boots on the worn wooden floor, and she saw where the office door was, in her mind, and the door leading to the hallway, and the door leading outside, and she breathed once deeply and told herself where she was, in a room with people of the church.

They continued to bow their heads. Tom had led them not into prayer but a prolonged silence. Patricia wondered what she was to do. She was to pray. But how to arrive at a prayer. Hers were usually so brief. For help, or guidance, or gladness. She did not know what to do with the silence. It seemed as if a cloth, a loosely woven cloth, covered her eyes. She began to think about the weather and the walk home in a deeper darkness, and she remembered how the minister, the one who had died, had walked her home after a meeting. He had asked her to join a committee and afterward, after the meeting was done, he walked her home. The season cool, early spring; the smell of hyacinths. The setting of the sun had brought a mild, intermittent wind, and at the street corners there was a sharpness to it, as if it carried with it the end of the harshness of winter.

He walked her home through the spring darkness and talked about the oak tree across the street that was over two hundred years old, its bark that turned the color of metal in the dying light, and how old and drafty the parsonage was, and how he wrote his sermons by hand at a small hard desk in a cramped room that overlooked the flowering chestnut tree, should it ever bloom again, while he wore a heavy sweater and blew into his hands. She knew from a plaque on a wall in the church the year he had started his ministry; he had been there almost twenty years. She had come to the church out of loneliness, the kind of loneliness one can only have in New England, and there was her minister walking beside her in the spring night. She listened to his voice in the darkness, with only the faint contained light from a streetlight on each corner, and

she thought she could walk with him into the night and the next. She went home and tried to understand how she was to think of that walk, with her minister speaking to her as they slowly pursued the evening under the trees.

Tom struck the metal bar again and the people in the room opened their eyes and raised their heads. He said, to Patricia, “As you know, we’re reading week by week as we move through the Lenten season. We should now be reading from the third week of Lent, but if there’s anything else you want to look at from the earlier chapters, we can do so. We will continue to prayerfully contemplate Jesus’ forty days and nights in the wilderness as we continue our journey.”

People crossed their legs. They opened their books. Patricia said, “If I may say. I just wondered about Lent. How it came to be something we participate in at this time, in the days leading to Good Friday and Easter.” She had placed her book on the glass-topped table. “In that,” she said, “first Jesus was baptized by his cousin John, then he went into the wilderness, then he returned and called his disciples and preached and healed the sick. Then he was crucified. He was in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, after his baptism, it seems to me as a way to prepare for his ministry, not later, not to prepare for his death. After his baptism, see here, our book quotes Mark, “The spirit driveth him into the wilderness.” Patricia looked at Tom. He had shut his book and held it on his knee. She wondered if she sounded to him like one of the impertinent Pharisees, trying to trip up Jesus. “Because,” she continued, “he came to Jerusalem quite deliberately, from Jerico and Bethany and the Mount of Olives, and then he was betrayed. Before that, he went from a city, like Capernaum, say, or the coasts of Judea or the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he withdrew to the desert or a mountain to be alone and pray, but people followed him, the multitudes followed him, and brought him back to them.”

Patricia was aware of the people in the room, that their attention was elsewhere; they probably were eager to speak, to discuss the book they held in their hands. Lent was a figment, she knew, it was a Catholic invention that some Protestant churches, at least her church, had decided to imitate. Perhaps the Catholics could get away with it, because at one time their congregants were forbidden or unable to read the Bible; it was left to the priests to interpret it for them. But anyone who read the Gospels could see that Christ was baptized, he went into the wilderness, he preached and healed the sick, he celebrated Passover with his disciples in Jerusalem, he was betrayed and tried and crucified. Anyone who could read could see that. After his baptism Jesus relinquished the world and went into the wilderness alone. He prayed and fasted. He had been sent to learn, Patricia thought, to be who he already was. She remembered the Catholic girls in her high school, their foreheads marked with the thumb of the priest, discussing what they had decided to give up--chocolates or sneaking cigarettes or chewing gum in class. They skipped breakfast as a way of fasting and by mid-morning were sullen and petulant and often on the verge of tears. She did not know what people did now, even the people of her own church, what prayer was like, or penance, and if fasting brought on the hardships that Jesus knew, and then the revelation. She had been excluded by her own ignorance, her own disbelief.

Tom returned his book to the table with deliberation. He picked up one of the stones, moved it an inch along the surface of the glass, then moved it back again. He looked at Patricia sternly, as if she were some reckless woman who had arrived invited to the table but now had placed herself outside the circle of believers.

Patricia adjusted her shoulders. She was trying to find a posture from which to speak. She did not look at Tom. "It seems the struggle Jesus had," she said, "was with something more,

something we don't know about. He always seemed to know that he would be betrayed, that he would be abandoned by his disciples, that he would die. So perhaps in a way he was already preparing himself for his death. Maybe he was sent to the wilderness to learn how to be the beloved Son of God."

Patricia wondered if her church had celebrated Lent under the minister who died. She attended church irregularly, even then. She wondered if she would have questioned it, if she would have questioned the minister who died. But she believed everything then; she believed the minister who died as he gave readings from the Bible and spoke with formality and love to the people listening in the pews and led them in communion and lifted his robed arms and blessed them at the end of the service. But now she needed to know why the church would celebrate Lent whose premise was an event that had not occurred in the weeks before Jesus' crucifixion. It had something to do with the minister's death, she knew. Nothing had been right since then.

Around the glass-topped table, a few people had pressed their fingertips against their foreheads. Tom, it seemed, had simply been waiting for her to finish. She looked at him now, her mouth slightly open.

He said, "We have entered a time of prayer and introspection with the advent of Lent. It is a time to make room for God." He was not speaking to her. Nevertheless, he seemed to be rebuking her, as if she had transgressed the agreed-upon, shared belief about the story of Jesus in the wilderness. To prepare for their meetings, she had read the Gospels again, to know again how the people who witnessed Jesus preach and heal the sick and cast out unclean spirits and perform miracles were amazed and astonished, they marveled, they were full of wonder, they trembled and were afraid. Shepherds saw angels and Jesus' disciples saw him walk on water and the multitudes saw him touch a person and make him whole. People were hungry and were fed.

Lazarus rose from the dead. The priests were offended. Jesus wanted his followers to be silent about what they had witnessed, but they rejoiced and spread his fame. The people who had lived beyond the reach of hope or comfort wore robes and rags and wept in Jesus' presence.

“As we begin,” Tom said, “I want to remind you that this is a place of safety, where we are free to speak our hearts.” The old radiator banged. The room was hot and close. Patricia's mouth was dry. She gripped the underside of her chair with her fingers.

“I read here,” the woman next to Patricia said, opening her book, “in the reading for Tuesday, about desire, and passion, and the promise of ecstasy, and I thought about my husband. He's been gone now for three years, and it's just occurring to me that we had a relationship of great distance, thought he was always kind. We raised three children together. But now, thinking about him, I remember his courtesy and his carefulness, as if we were playing out an idea of marriage as a kind of obedience to God. Though something was always between us. A veil was always between us.”

Patricia looked at the woman beside her, at her lowered eyes. She seemed to be looking at the space in front of the burning candle. Patricia thought that this was what was being sought by her, in Tom's office, some way to acknowledge absence, or an understanding of disappointment, and to share it. But no one made a reply to the woman who had spoken about her husband.

Tom struck the hammer softly to the bar and it returned a low, muffled note. They all bowed their heads. The radiator released a burst of steam. Patricia closed her eyes and held her fingers lightly to the underside of her chair. The minister who died had walked into a meeting after church. It was being held in a room with drapes and good chairs. He wore a light wool suit. She didn't know who he was. His skin was clear, almost radiant. After he died someone said to her that his radiant skin was a sign that he was a man of God. But she didn't know him then. No

one acknowledged him and he sat quietly and listened to the progress of the meeting. A man with a bony face and rough-knuckled hands was proposing a protest against the limits imposed on their committee to give money to causes, to worthy causes; he wanted to march on the church in the way protestors did against the Vietnam war. Patricia was new to the church, she didn't understand its history and its loyalties and its factions, but she said, "I can't protest against a church I have just come to." The man who had made the proposal looked like an old warrior, familiar to protest, but Patricia didn't want to be part of an estrangement. The man in the light wool suit stayed a few more minutes and left. Afterward, an hour or so later, he called her at home. So it was he. He was just ending his sabbatical, he said. He was spending the day in meetings. He said, "People in the church are too intimidated by that man to oppose him, but you had the courage to do so." She said, "I'm perhaps too new to know any better." Then he had to go away, to another meeting. She heard someone speak to him, respectfully, as if from across a room. After he said good-bye to her she sat in her living room and held the receiver in her open hand and then put it back in its cradle.

Another woman spoke. People raised their heads. The woman said, "I remember the birth of each of my daughters. They're both married now, but I remember their births so vividly." She looked at the woman next to her and they smiled at each other deeply. "I know that isn't what our book discusses, exactly, but in reading it I thought about my daughters. I had asked for love and found my husband. Then I had my two daughters. I was glad to have that, to know the love of a child."

Tom struck the metal bar. The note seemed to enter the room in waves. Patricia looked at the carved prayer flags under the sheet of glass. She did not know what to call what had happened between herself and the minister who died. He telephoned her sometimes in the

morning, on a Saturday. She was always surprised. He said, “How are you?” and she felt buoyant, and she understood happiness as a physical thing. She said, “My grandmother left me a book of recipes when she died. I’ve begun to read it. It’s written in a beautiful hand.” The minister had the flat accent of the Plains. He told her that when he first came to the church, the women wore elaborate fur coats and looked at him reproachfully from their pews, as if to say, What can you do for me? He was a young man then, not even forty, called to the church that was set back from the frost-broken sidewalks, with its old ways and its politics and its patrician congregants. He kept the liturgical calendar, he had them sing the old hymns. He read to them from Paul’s letters and from the Gospel according to John.

People were looking at Patricia. They seemed to be waiting for her to speak. Had she said something? She picked up her book. She had read the chapters, but she couldn’t remember any of them. She thought about Jesus’ ministry, how he often retreated to a mountain or the desert. That was surely what he did after he was baptized, he retreated to the desert in prayer. Although none of the Gospels described what Jesus had done there, what had really brought him to the desert. In John, Patricia had read about Jesus admonishing a Pharisee, “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” So the Spirit was like a wind, Patricia had thought, closing her Bible, that one surrenders to. It comes from somewhere and it takes one somewhere, and it is impossible to know. It was the breath of God that drove Jesus into the desert to confront himself.

In the overheated room, she fumbled with the book. She searched for a passage she had marked. “I was moved by this chapter,” she said, “this brief chapter, for Monday, on prayer, where it is described as meditation, as entering into an awareness of God.” She thought when

reading the passage she had understood what Jesus had done in the desert. The desert brought hunger, and hardship, and temptation, and finally, surrender to God. And afterward Jesus was able to return and begin his ministry. She ran her finger along the page in the book, touching the black letters and the margins and the spaces between the lines of print.

“Let us do so then,” Tom said. He sounded the metal bar and they closed their eyes. All was blankness and darkness. Patricia felt the small living heat of the candle lit on the glass-topped table. The cloth in front of her eyes was loosely woven and its color was brown, like dirt or sand.

The minister who died hardly ever talked about himself. He called her in the morning when she imagined he thought she would be at home. He called her on a Saturday. He said, “Hello, Patricia.” She thought him very kind. She loved him. This was what she could not say to him. She wasn’t sure what he wanted to know about her. But he was, she thought, asking her to talk to him. She was going in the afternoon, she told him, to visit the shore. She would go to a clam shack on the water and order steamers and French fries. She ran her hand down the cord to the telephone. She heard him breathing lightly. “The shore,” he said. He waited for her to go on. In the evening, after a meeting, when he walked her home, the shadows of the leaves were on the brick walls and the shadows made the bushes in the small yards rise above themselves, their own doubles. The minister who died listened to her. She told him about picking strawberries, on a farm to the west, and how they had stained her fingertips red and the hard seeds on the new berries had made small cuts on her hands. She had made a compote of the strawberries and stalks of rhubarb from a recipe she had found among her grandmother’s papers. The minister who died walked beside her as the shadows of the leaves rose along on the brick walls. She knew he was waiting for her to tell him something, but she didn’t know what it was. When they got to where

she lived sometimes she wrapped her sweater around herself or felt the long flow of her scarf, and in doing so turned slightly away, and he was gone, into the evening, and she couldn't hear his footsteps, all was quiet and still, and she felt alone and bereft.

“I wanted to return to Wednesday,” a younger man said, speaking forcefully into the room. “The Wednesday of this week, the third week. I think it’s especially appropriate. In that we are all wounded. You see, I’ve been estranged from my father almost all of my adult life. I can’t begin to tell you why; it’s too painful. And so that estrangement has led to an uncomfortable relationship with my mother, as you can imagine. So you could say that I am estranged from them both. And that has been difficult because often there has been no one. But I don’t really see a way back, because the wounds are too deep.” The younger man sat back heavily in his chair. His posture did not seem to invite comment. The room felt close, the air somehow fogged and tainted, as if the younger man had discharged something material into the room.

Tom said, “We have discussed a lot of important topics this evening, many to do with our own needs, our own fallibility. And trying to live in the spirit of God. We will end our evening with a moment of silence.” The people around the table folded their hands and bowed their heads. Patricia shut her eyes. She shifted slightly in her chair. They had been sitting now for over an hour. She was no longer afraid of the room, its closeness. There were so many wounded people in the Gospels. With leprosy, palsy, blindness; the lame and those inhabited by devils. A woman who bled for twelve years and people who died and caused great sorrow to those who loved them. People who were ill followed Jesus and he healed them. There were so many; almost everyone who came to Jesus seemed to be ill. Patricia thought they must have suffered in a different way, with some anguish of the spirit made into another anguish which Jesus healed.

Tom reminded them of the reading for the following week, and everyone, standing finally, complained about the weather and buttoned their coats and laughed as if expelling something out of their bodies, as if the evening had brought this about. Patricia walked toward home. The parsonage was a few blocks up the street from the church. Its windows were lit. Tom's wife was keeping the windows lit for him. Patricia had been to the parsonage only twice, more recently when its interior was painted after a wait of two years following the death of the minister before finding another, a man who did not follow the liturgical calendar as the minister who died had done, and Patricia felt lost within her own life. She had gone to the open house to see the parsonage again, to remember it as she had known it when the minister who died had invited her to Thanksgiving dinner. She had known him all told not even a year and he had become ill suddenly with cancer, and when he became too ill to preach and then to walk he removed himself from the church, its building and its congregation, as if preparing himself for death. He had died in the parsonage, but she didn't think of that when she walked through the rooms to see them again.

This time she was able to see the whole house, upstairs and down, not just the few rooms the minister who died and his wife and their guests inhabited over the course of Thanksgiving day, and the foyer where he took her coat and hung it in a closet and put his hand out lightly, briefly, as if to touch her back, and guided her into the house. The rooms were different now, the walls painted in bright primary colors. Patricia had liked the house so much better in its somber New England colors, the rooms with their marble fireplaces and the old rugs before them. She walked up the lovely curving staircase and found her way into the room where the minister who died had written his sermons, as if he had given her directions for finding it. The room was empty of furniture or drapes, a stark, small room with wide floorboards marred where the

minister who died had thrust back his chair. Outside the chestnut tree was in bloom, the clusters of yellow flowers upright as if displayed with scores of candles.

That Thanksgiving, Patricia had brought a sweet pea salad to the parsonage. She had tossed it in sage. She had been reading her grandmother's recipe book and it turned out it was not a recipe book, though there were some of the old recipes for stuffed tomatoes in aspic, apple coleslaw, and cranberry mold written in a careful, upright hand. It was a book, that is, a number of sheets of paper and note cards held loosely between moleskin covers, containing recipes mostly for healing illnesses. For coughs, nervous complaints, indigestion, headaches; burns and insect bites; feverish colds, female complaints, insomnia, anxiety, muscle cramps; to purify the blood, and to boost the immune system. Some were written in hands other than her grandmother's on yellowed onionskin paper. On quite a lot of them, in her grandmother's hand, was printed a woman's name and a date above the name of the recipe, and Patricia recognized some of the surnames as belonging to her grandmother's mother and her sisters and aunts. Each recipe was for a tea or a compress, a sachet or a salve. Patricia had tossed the sweet pea salad in a sprinkle of sage because it was once cultivated, she learned, in monastery gardens, and its Latin name, *salvia officinalis*, was derived from the Latin *salvere*, to save.

The dining room table in the parsonage sat twelve and it was fitted with a linen tablecloth, and Patricia and the minister's wife and the other women brought out the food and set it on the table. The minister who died said a prayer and Patricia bowed her head and listened deeply. A number of people from the congregation had been invited and Patricia sat at the table and was glad. Afterward they sang hymns in the living room with its high ceiling and oak woodwork and a fireplace fire burning. Later the minister's wife put together a plate for her and Patricia walked home with it held out in her hands. That was before she was married, and she

was lonely and full of sorrow and rage and she loved the minister who died but she didn't know, would never know, if that is what he had wanted of her.

A thin sheet of ice on her front steps splintered under her heel. She unlocked the door and took off her boots on the mat inside the door. Fred was asleep on the couch. He had seemed to come to her out of nowhere, as if in a dream, and married her. They could have lived anyplace, within reason, but he moved into her small house in the neighborhood full of old trees and vines that crawled across the roofs of houses because he noticed the way everything was familiar to her, the front-door lock that had to be jiggled and the squirrels that ran across the telephone wires like trapeze artists and the dips and ruts in the road. Patricia sat on the couch so they were hip to hip and leaned over him and kissed him. He put his arms around her and she crawled onto the couch with him. He was still in his work clothes, a blue shirt and black trousers and a Jerry Garcia tie flung wildly across his shoulder.

"I thought you were going to call me," Fred said. His voice was arriving from the end of sleep.

"The walk was good, even in this weather." She had put the book down on the coffee table.

"So," Fred said.

Patricia sighed.

"No?" He looked at her closely. "I thought it might be good, you know, good to be with a group of people at the church, have a conversation."

Patricia lifted the book and put it down again. "Do you think that a way to talk about Jesus' suffering in the wilderness is that we must talk about our own?" she said. "The evening was like a confessional. I found it embarrassing. I think Tom encourages it. He has a candle and

a bell; there were a lot of silences for prayer. We may as well have all been lying on horsehair couches draped in Oriental rugs.”

“I would think not,” Fred said. He had sat up. He was fully awake now. They were sitting together on the couch. He had smoothed his tie down his chest. “I would think we’re supposed to try to replicate Jesus’ experience in the wilderness, as if that were even possible, in terms of prayer.” Fred was raised as a Baptist, and he had read the Bible, really studied it, but he had lost his belief in God. That continued to confuse Patricia. “And where did prayer lead him?” Fred went on. “That’s the question. People seem to miss the point. Maybe it’s too difficult. Who is able to forgive, for example? Maybe it’s all beyond us.”

“I wish we could just talk about Lent, whatever it’s supposed to be, and not bring our own lives into it,” Patricia said. “I felt that I couldn’t really join in without confessing something. As if that would have made me a true part of the group. One man spoke about his father and it was somehow very disturbing. Although a woman spoke about the birth of her daughters, it was from the part of the reading about having the courage to ask for love.”

“That sounds like it,” Fred said. He kissed her hair. He watched her go into the kitchen. He was too tired to follow her. She turned to look at him. He had brought her love. She had cried a lot in the beginning, when she was alone again, after he drove her home from a dinner or a film. She didn’t know why she cried so. Already they had known they would marry each other. In the kitchen she prepared a plate with slices of apple and almond cake and brought it to the dining room table. She set down dessert plates and forks and they sat next to each other and she filled his plate.

They ate irregularly together; Fred often worked at his office into the evening. She had tried the old recipes her grandmother had left her but most of them were too heavy to eat at the

late hour they often had dinner. Her grandmother had a recipe for corned beef and carrots and turnips and potatoes, another for a lamb stew in a thin broth, its ingredients finely chopped then simmered, which Patricia remembered with complete clarity but could never replicate. Her grandmother's pies stood cooling on the kitchen table. She made a thin, delicious applesauce from fall McIntosh apples, and purple beets cut almost to paper thinness and drowned in clarified butter. Patricia had been able to approximate her grandmother's beef stew, which she made with cuts of Angus beef, and she and Fred ate it on winter evenings and soaked up the gravy with crusts of bread.

Fred placed another slice of almond cake on her plate. He said, "Are you going to talk to your minister?"

"I will," she said, "tomorrow."

They lay together under a woolen blanket. Patricia heard Fred's breath in sleep; it was like a ragged purr. Sometimes, when she first knew him, he would play a bit of music for her, to entertain her, and she would cry. She was embarrassed and ashamed. He would hold her and pet her back. She learned how not to cry with him, for how then could he marry her? He brought her a bouquet of wildflowers. He held her hand. She no longer cried. It was as if she was one of those with some terrible affliction of the spirit, who had wept and cried and was saved.

The last time she saw the minister who died he was sitting among the congregants, listening to the service. From her seat in a pew at the back of the sanctuary Patricia saw him stand when a guest minister, who was leading the service because the congregation didn't know what to do about being left so suddenly lost, said something about fear. He had finished reading a passage in Matthew about Jesus' disciples. Jesus had said to them, Be not afraid. The minister had asked anyone to stand who had known fear. A lot of people also stood. Then they sat down.

Patricia strained to see the face of the minister who died. His skin was pale. He no longer called her on a Saturday morning. He had stopped coming to meetings; he no longer walked with her in the evening past the wisteria vines heavy with flowers, their petals falling on the wind. She had learned of his illness, the quick-growing cancer, at a special meeting called by the church, and she had felt the blood drain from her limbs and she was ill and she tried not to show that she was bereft. She learned later that he had endured one round of chemotherapy and then refused any more. He had retreated to the parsonage. The hospice people took care of him. His wife refused all visitors. Patricia sent him, through an emissary who was allowed to the parsonage, a recording of the Brandenburg concertos. She hoped he listened to it. She wanted to think of him listening to it. She thought about her grandmother's recipes and the cures the Indians used and the enslaved women brought from Africa and the West Indies. But there was nothing for an illness like that. She thought about the quality of the world we inhabited and what we breathed and that there must be something about the age that had begun to harm us in these ways. That if you could just walk together you would be cured of all sadness and longing, you would find God in the night, the breath of God in the sharp winds where the vines and the shadows of the bushes on the brick walls tossed and sighed.

Patricia was sleeping heavily when Fred sat on the bed and ran his hand down her back. She turned and looked at him. It was very early. He was already in his dress shirt and tie. He lifted her up, she was like a thing of lightness, without form or will, and he held her in his arms. She clung to him. He was saying something to her, murmuring in her ear. It was like a song, something in the far distance one strains to hear, some melody known all along.

“Are you going to stay?” he said.

He meant the group at church. "I'll call Tom this morning," she said. She was up, walking him to the front door. She didn't like him thinking of her still lying in bed, to have that as his image of her as he left the house. He kissed her and held her, and the thin fabric of her nightgown slipped against his clothes.

She sat on the bed holding a cup of tea, then phoned her office with a vague complaint, a cold perhaps, some trouble with the respiratory system, some inability to breathe deeply into the lungs, and then she put down the receiver and was free. She ate a slice of toast and a black plum and got into her car, the one she had owned before she married Fred that belonged to her in the way that one takes a car to places that belong to one. She headed north, to the turnpike, and drove for almost an hour, and turned off an exit and drove north again. On the narrow roads there were old stone walls and old houses with pitched roofs and high granite steps leading to doors with wrought-iron hinges. There was always the idea of the sea. The land seemed to fall toward it, arrived at finally by river or estuary or creek or marsh. At a certain point on the river one could glimpse it in the far distance, a strip of deep blue, moving swiftly, dangerously, the water buffeted by whitecaps, and the horizon framed with climbing white clouds. After the minister had died she had driven there, on the narrow roads with the scent of the sea at the open windows. She had gone to the memorial service attended by it seemed generations of the same congregation. The seats were filled in the pews and the balcony, and a trumpeter stood near the altar and played, the notes sharp and clear, and the bishops came as if out of the Middle Ages, wearing green damask robes and mitres trimmed with gold thread, and carrying their scepters down the center aisle like staffs.

Once, driving north, she took the car through a break in a stone wall and drove down a dirt road and saw in the distance a farmhouse and beyond it the river. The house was surrounded

by fields. It was shuttered, its curtains drawn; it did not seem to be occupied. On a path near the house a smoke tree was in bloom. Patricia had brought with her a thermos of tea and a sandwich of sliced cheese and mustard. She sat under the smoke tree with her lunch. There was a mild wind off the river, and it rolled over the sea grasses on the estuary. The dusky purple panicles on the smoke tree rustled and sighed.

Once she took a turn onto a farm with a handsome brick house and pastures marked by split-rail fences. There was a circular drive in front of the house and massive oak trees that shaded it. The farm, she realized, was a preserved version of itself in that it was now a place for parents to bring their children, a place to learn about the past. Patricia saw guides with blue T-shirts and children leaning over the fences petting horses and goats and sheep, and parents closely monitoring their children, and a big turkey strutting near the children's legs, its feathers in full display. Patricia walked along the fence line and then behind the house she discovered another pasture, and beyond it a ruined barn. Farther on was another house, newer, probably even grander, alone in a field, a wrecked gravel drive leading into the distance, the house's windows without glass and the floors damaged from rain and snow and a chandelier still hanging in the foyer, its few remaining crystals catching the afternoon light.

Patricia drove farther north. On either side of the one-lane highway there were the old stone walls, the old houses, and fences marking pastures where horses switched their tails and cows sat low to the ground on their huge bellies. A sign read, Hay for Sale, thought it was too early in the season for hay. She had brought a thermos of tea and she stopped on the side of the highway and drank it. The tea was sassafras tea, and she remembered walking through the woods near her grandmother's house and bringing home the roots for her, and her grandmother looked troubled and alarmed, as she did in the least variation in the cycles she had entered into of meals

and church and family and sleep; this was the prerogative of her advancing age. Her grandmother put the roots in a glass of water but they browned and died. Her grandmother had a kitchen garden where she grew thyme and mint and rosemary and dill. Oil of thyme, Patricia had read in her grandmother's recipe book, was used as an antibiotic. Women medicated bandages with it for binding wounds. The ancient Greeks sprinkled its flowers in their bath water, believing it was a source of courage. Her grandmother pressed the leaves between her palms to flavor chicken breasts arranged in a glass baking pan. There were pills to take now from the pharmacy and medicines from the drug store. One used a glass of water or a teaspoon. To treat insomnia one stirred a splash of whiskey in a cup of warm milk. Patricia knew from reading the old recipes that the women would go with baskets and long-handled spoons into woodlands and fields, to shorelines, wetlands, and the banks of streams; under many of the recipes there were directions by foot and dirt road. She liked to imagine the women harvesting the leaves and roots, flowers and fruits. She wondered if her grandmother had accompanied them, perhaps as a child. But she didn't know about the recipe book until after her grandmother's death, and so she couldn't ask her, and she wondered often why this book had come to her, and what her grandmother would have her do with it.

Patricia put away the thermos of tea and brought the car back onto the old highway. True spring wouldn't arrive for a number of weeks, but the trees already were turning, and faint streams of color, yellow and green, were rising into their branches.

Just above a stoplight Patricia saw a dirt road. She turned onto it. The road led down a mild incline, and it curved to the right and the left, and Patricia braked lightly. She had entered a woodland. Then the road became flat and ended in a small lot made of packed sand. She parked and got out of the car. She had entered a marsh. She could see three horizons: to the right where

the marsh opened to an estuary; to the left where it became denser and was bordered by brush: and ahead, where a narrow gravel causeway led to an island in the river signaled by a cluster of trees. Somewhere beyond was the sea. In the early season, not yet spring, the water of the marsh was like a mist, and the sky was pale blue, and along the horizon the water seemed to rise and dissipate like tendrils of steam. An egret flew low across the marsh, its long wings a flash of white against the shallow water and the pale grasses, and landed, its legs delicately outstretched, and folded its wings to its body. Patricia walked along the causeway. The shallow water on either side of it was brown, and in it was vegetation, brown also and spongy looking and filled with holes as if the homes of hidden creatures. In the water, where it was pierced by light, she could see minnows swimming. Across the marsh were the reeds and grasses from the previous year, leached of color and brittle, and along the borders the cattail flowers were spent, wisps of the cottony fruit still clinging to them. Patricia thought that other eyes, older eyes, would be able to look across the marsh and see a remedy to any ailment, a cure for any heartache.

After the minister's death, his wife brought with her all of his sermons in a number of paper bags and shook them out on a table in the meeting room during the coffee hour after the service and announced that anyone could have them, to take as many as desired. She walked around the room while people were sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups and eating lemon cookies and pointed to the heap of papers on the table and people looked at her in surprise. Then they put down their refreshments and went to the table. By the time the coffee hour was over, all of the minister's sermons were gone. People examined them carefully, pointing out to a companion the typed pages annotated in the minister's hand, and Patricia thought they were taking a sermon that held particular meaning for them, placing it into a pocketbook or a jacket pocket. Patricia watched from a distance. It seemed as if the sermons were the minister's body

and by the time the morning was over nothing was left of it. She watched the minister's wife fold the empty paper bags against her knee and leave the meeting room with them.

Pieces of gravel on the causeway were held by small clumps of ice. In the open, with the marsh on either side, Patricia became aware of a wind, a constant wind, bringing with it another season, and the sharp asides where the currents pitched against each other. It blew her hair. She unbuttoned her coat and let the wind blow her clothing. The wind caressed the old grasses and ruffled the surface of the water. She walked further into the wind. In the distance was the island with its cluster of trees. On the far side would be the river, then the sea. She walked toward it. The wind was on her face like breath.

*"The Great Salt Marsh," *Crab Orchard Review*, University of Illinois at Carbondale, Vol. 18, No. 1, Winter/Spring 2013: 28 – 45.