

A Short Story



Pictures of the Ice

by Alice Munro

THREE WEEKS BEFORE HE DIED—DROWNED IN a boating accident in a lake whose name nobody had heard him mention—Austin Cobbett stood deep in the clasp of a three-way mirror in Crawford's Men's Wear, in Logan, Ontario, looking at himself in a burgundy sports shirt and a pair of cream, brown, and burgundy plaid pants. Both pants and shirt permanent press.

"Listen to me," Jerry Crawford said to him, "with the darker shirt and the lighter pants you can't go wrong. It's youthful."

Austin cackled. "Did you ever hear that expression—mutton dressed as lamb?"

"Referred to ladies," Jerry said. "Anyway, it's all changed now. There's no old-men's clothes, no old-ladies' clothes, anymore. Style applies to everybody."

Once Austin got used to what he had on, Jerry was going to talk him into a neck scarf of complementary colors and a cream pullover. Austin needed all the cover-up he could get. Since his wife had died, about a year ago, and they had finally got a new minister at the United Church (Austin, who was over seventy, was officially retired but had been hanging on and filling in while they haggled over whom to hire as a replacement and what they would pay him), he had lost weight, his muscles had shrunk, and he was getting the pot-bellied, caved-in shape of an old man. His neck was corded and his nose lengthened and his cheeks drooped; he was a stringy old rooster—stringy but tough, and game enough to gear up for a second marriage.

"The pants are going to have to be taken in," Jerry said. "You can give us time for that, can't you? When's the big day?"

Austin was going to be married in Hawaii, where his wife-to-be lived. He named a date a couple of weeks ahead.

Phil Stadelman, from the Toronto Dominion Bank, came in then and did not recognize Austin from the back,

though Austin was his former minister. He'd never seen Cobbett in clothes like that.

Phil told his AIDS joke; Jerry couldn't stop him.

Why did the Newfie put condoms on his ears?

Because he didn't want to get hearing aids.

Then Austin turned around, and instead of saying, *Well, I don't know about you fellows but I find it hard to think of AIDS as a laughing matter, or, I wonder what kind of jokes they tell in Newfoundland about the folks from Huron County?* he said, "That's rich." He laughed.

That's rich. Then he asked Phil's opinion of his clothes. "Do you think they're going to laugh when they see me coming, in Hawaii?"

KARIN HEARD ABOUT THIS WHEN SHE WENT INTO Logan's most crowded doughnut place to drink a cup of coffee, after finishing her afternoon stint as a crossing guard. She sat at the counter and heard the men talking at a table behind her. She swung around on the stool and said, "Listen, I could have told you, he's changed. I see him every day and I could have told you."

Karin is a tall, thin woman with rough skin and a hoarse voice and long blonde hair, dark for a couple of inches at the roots. She's letting it grow out, and it's gotten to where she could cut it short, but she doesn't. She used to be a lanky blonde girl, shy and pretty, who rode around on the back of her husband's motorcycle. She has gone a little strange—not too much so, or she wouldn't be a crossing guard, not even on the strength of Austin Cobbett's recommendation. She interrupts conversations. She never seems to wear anything but her jeans and an old navy-blue duffle coat. She has a hard and suspicious expression, and she has a public grudge against her ex-husband. She will write things on his car with her finger. *Fake Christian. Kiss arse Phony. Brent Duprey is a snake.* Nobody knows that she is the one who wrote

Austin, his parish believed, was going to retire to Hawaii, with a new wife and wardrobe. But life, as he liked to say, has its surprises



Lazarus Sucks, because she went back (she does her writing at night) and rubbed it off with her sleeve. Why? It seemed dangerous, something that might get her into trouble—the trouble being of a vaguely supernatural kind, not a talk with the chief of police—and she has nothing against Lazarus in the Bible, only against Lazarus House, which is the place Brent runs, and where he lives now.

Karin lives where she and Brent lived together for the last few months—upstairs over the hardware store, at the back, in a big room with an alcove (the baby's) and a kitchen at one end. She spends a lot of her time over at Austin's, cleaning out his house, getting everything ready for his departure to Hawaii. The house he lives in, still, is the old parsonage, on Pondicherry Street. The church has built the new minister a new house, quite nice, with a patio and a double garage—ministers' wives often work now, as nurses or teachers, and then you need two cars. The old parsonage is a grayish-white brick house, with blue-painted trim on the veranda and the gables. It needs a lot of work: insulating, sandblasting, new paint, new

window frames, new tiles in the bathroom. Walking back to her own place at night, Karin sometimes thinks about what she'd do to that place, if it were hers and she had the money.

AUSTIN SHOWS HER A PICTURE OF SHEILA BROTHERS, the woman he is to marry. Actually it's a picture of three people: Austin, the woman who used to be his wife, and Sheila Brothers, in front of a log building and some pine trees. A retreat, where he—they—first met Sheila. Austin has his minister's black shirt and turned collar on; he looks shifty, with his apologetic, ministerial smile. His wife is looking away from him, but the big bow of her flowered scarf flutters against his neck. Fluffy white hair, trim figure. Chic. Sheila Brothers—Mrs. Brothers, a widow—is looking straight ahead, and she is the only one who seems really cheerful. She has short fair hair, combed around her face in a businesslike way, brown slacks, a white sweat shirt, with the fairly large bumps of her breasts and stomach

plain to see; she meets the camera head-on, and doesn't seem worried about what it will make of her.

"She looks happy," Karin says.

"Well. She didn't know she was going to marry me, at the time."

He shows Karin a postcard picture of the town where Sheila lives, the town where he will live, in Hawaii. Also a photograph of her house. The town's main street has a row of palm trees down the middle; it has low white or pinkish buildings, lampposts with brimming flower baskets, and over all a sky of deep turquoise in which the town's name—a Hawaiian name no one can pronounce or remember—is written in flowing letters like silk ribbon. The name floating in the sky looks as real as anything else in the picture. As for the house, you can hardly make it out at all—just a bit of balcony among the red and pink and gold flowering trees and bushes. But the beach is there in front of the house, the sand as pure as cream and the jewel-bright waves breaking. This is where Austin Cobbett will walk with friendly Sheila. No wonder he needs all new clothes.

AUSTIN WANTS KARIN TO CLEAR EVERYTHING out. Even his books, his old typewriter, the pictures of his wife and children. His son lives in Denver, his daughter in Montreal. He has written to them, he has talked to them on the phone, he has asked them to claim anything they want. His son wants the dining-room furniture, which a moving truck will pick up next week. His daughter says she doesn't want anything. (Karin thinks she's likely to reconsider; people always want *something*.) All the furniture, books, pictures, curtains, rugs, dishes, pots and pans, are to go to the Auction Barn. Austin's car will be auctioned as well, along with his power mower and the snowblower his son gave him last Christmas. Everything will be sold after Austin leaves for Hawaii, and the money will go to Lazarus House. Austin started Lazarus House, when he was a minister. Only he didn't call it that; he called it Turn-around House. Now they have decided—Brent Duprey has decided—they'd rather have a name that is more religious, more Christian.

At first Austin was going to give them all these things, to use in or around Lazarus House. Then he thought that he would be showing more respect if he gave them money, to buy things they liked, instead of using his wife's dishes and sitting on his wife's chintz sofa.

"What if they take the money and buy lottery tickets with it?" Karin asks him. "Won't they be tempted?"

"You don't get anywhere in life without temptations," Austin says, with his maddening little smile. "What if they *won* the lottery?"

"Brent Duprey is a snake."

Brent has taken control of Lazarus House. It was a place to stay for people who wanted to stop drinking or

some other troublesome way of life; now it's a born-again sort of place, with night-long sessions of praying and singing and groaning and confessing. That's how Brent got hold of it—by becoming more religious than Austin. Austin got Brent to stop drinking; he pulled and pulled on Brent until he pulled him right out of the life he was leading and into a new life of running this house with money from the church, and the government, and so on, and he made a big mistake, Austin did, in thinking he could hold Brent there. Once started on the holy road, Brent went shooting on past. He got past Austin's careful, quiet kind of religion in no time and cut Austin out with the people in his own church who wanted a stricter, more ferocious kind of Christianity. Austin was shifted out of Lazarus House and the church at about the same time, and Brent bossed the new minister around without difficulty. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Austin wants to give Lazarus House the money.

"Who's to say whether Brent's way isn't closer to God than mine is, after all?" he says.

Karin says just about anything to anybody now. She says to Austin, "Don't make me puke."

Austin says she must be sure to keep a record of her time, so that she will be paid for all this work, and also, if she sees anything here she would particularly like, to tell him, so that they can discuss it.

"Within reason," he says. "If you said you'd like the car or the snowblower, I guess I'd be obliged to say no, because that would be cheating the folks over at Lazarus House. But how about the vacuum cleaner?"

Is that how he sees her—as somebody who's always thinking about cleaning houses? The vacuum cleaner is practically an antique, anyway.

"I bet I know what Brent said when you told him I was going to be in charge of all this," she says. "I bet he said, Are you going to get a lawyer to check up on her? He did, didn't he?"

Instead of answering that, Austin says, "Why would I trust a lawyer any more than I trust you?"

"Is that what you said to him?"

"I'm saying it to you. You either trust or you don't trust, in my opinion. When you decide you're going to trust, you have to start where you are."

Austin rarely mentions God. Nevertheless, you feel the mention of God hovering on the edge of sentences like these, and it makes you so uneasy—Karin gets a crumbly feeling along her spine—that you wish he'd say it and get it over with.

FOUR YEARS AGO KARIN AND BRENT WERE STILL married, and they hadn't had the baby yet or moved to their place above the hardware store. They were living in a cheap apartment building belonging to Morris Fordyce that had at one time been a slaughterhouse. In wet weather Karin could smell pig,

and always she smelled another smell that she thought was blood. Brent sniffed around the walls, and got down and sniffed the floor, but he couldn't smell what she was smelling. How could he smell anything other than the clouds of boozy breath that rose from his own gut? Brent was a drunk then, but not a sodden drunk. He played hockey on the O.T. (over-thirty, old-timers) hockey team—he was quite a bit older than Karin—and he claimed that he had never played sober. He worked for Fordyce Construction for a while, and then he worked for the town, cutting up trees. He drank on the job when he could, and after work he drank at the Fish and Game Club or at the Green Haven Motel Bar, called the Greasy Heaven. One night he started up a bulldozer that was sitting outside the Greasy Heaven and drove it across town to the Fish and Game Club. Of course he was caught, and charged with impaired driving of a bulldozer—a big joke all over town. But nobody who laughed at the joke came around to pay the fine. And Brent just kept getting wilder. Another night he took down the stairs that led to their apartment. He didn't bash the steps out in a fit of temper; he removed them thoughtfully and methodically, steps and uprights, one by one, backing downstairs as he did so, and leaving Karin cursing at the top. First she laughed at him—she had had a few beers herself by that time. Then, when she realized he was in earnest and she was being marooned, she started cursing. Cowardly neighbors peeped out of the doors behind him.

Brent came home the next afternoon and was amazed, or pretended to be. What happened to the steps? he yelled. He stomped around the hall, his lined, exhausted face working, his blue eyes snapping, his smile innocent and conniving. God damn that Morris. Goddamn steps caved in. I'm going to sue him. God damn *fuck*. Karin was upstairs, with nothing to eat but half a box of Rice Krispies, no milk, and a can of yellow beans. She had thought of phoning somebody to come with a ladder, but she was too mad and stubborn. If Brent wanted to starve her, she would show him. She would starve.

That time was the beginning of the end, the change. Brent went around to see Morris Fordyce, to beat him up and tell him about how he was going to be sued, and Morris talked to Brent in a reasonable, sobering way, until Brent decided not to sue or beat up Morris but to commit suicide instead. Morris called Austin Cobbett, because Austin had a reputation for knowing how to deal with people who were in a desperate way. Austin didn't talk Brent out of drinking, or into the church, but he did talk him out of suicide. Then, a couple of years later, when the baby died, Austin was the only minister they knew to call. By the time he came to see them, to talk about the funeral, Brent had drunk everything in the house and had gone out looking for more. Austin went after him and spent the next five days—with a brief time out for burying the baby—just staying with him on a bender. He spent the next week nursing him out of it,

and the next month talking to him or sitting with him until Brent decided he would not drink anymore, that he had been put in touch with God. Austin said that Brent meant that he had been put in touch with the fullness of his own life and the power of his innermost self. Brent said it was God.

Karin went to Austin's church with Brent for a while; she didn't mind that. She could see, though, that the church wasn't going to be enough to hold Brent. She saw him bouncing up to sing the hymns, swinging his arms and clenching his fists, his whole body primed. He was the same as he was after three or four beers, when he couldn't stop himself from going for more. He was bursting. Soon he burst out of Austin's hold, and took a good part of the church with him. A lot of people had wanted that loosening, more noise and praying and singing, and not so much quiet persuading, talking. They'd been wanting it for a long while.

None of it surprised her. She wasn't surprised that Brent learned to fill out papers and make the right impression and get government money, that he took over Turnaround House and kicked Austin out. He'd always been full of possibilities. She wasn't really surprised that he got as mad at her now for drinking one beer and smoking one cigarette as he used to do when she wanted to stop partying and go to bed at two o'clock. He said he was giving her a week to decide. No more drinking, no more smoking, Christ as her savior. One week. Karin said, Don't bother with the week. After Brent was gone, she quit smoking, she almost quit drinking, and she also quit going to Austin's church. She gave up everything but a slow, smoldering grudge against Brent, which grew and grew. One day Austin stopped her on the street, and she thought he was going to say some gentle, personal, condemning thing to her, because of her grudge or her quitting church, but all he did was ask her to come and help him look after his wife, who was getting home from the hospital that week.

AUSTIN IS TALKING ON THE PHONE TO HIS DAUGHTER in Montreal. Her name is Megan. She is around thirty, unmarried, a television producer. "Life has a lot of surprises up its sleeve," Austin says. "You know this has nothing to do with your mother. This is a new life, entirely. But I regret. No, no. I just mean you can love God in more than one way, and taking pleasure in the world is surely one of them. That's a revelation that's come to me rather late. Too late to be of any use to your mother. No. Guilt is a sin and a seduction. I've said that to many a poor soul who liked to wallow in it. Regret's another matter. How could you get through a long life and escape it?"

I was right, Karin is thinking, Megan does want something. But after a little more talk—Austin says that he might take up golf, don't laugh, and that Sheila belongs

to a play-reading club; he expects he'll be a star at that, after all his pulpit haranguing—the conversation ends. Austin walks out to the kitchen—the phone is in the front hall; this is an old-fashioned house—and looks up at Karin, who is cleaning out the high cupboards.

"Parents and children, Karin," he says, sighing, sighing, looking humorous. "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we—have children. Then they always want us to be the same, they want us to be parents. They are shaken up dreadfully if we do anything they didn't think we'd do. Dreadfully."

"I guess she'll get used to it," Karin says, without much sympathy.

"Oh, she will, she will. Poor Megan."

Then he says he's going uptown to have his hair cut. He doesn't want to postpone it any longer because he always looks and feels so foolish with a fresh haircut. His mouth turns down as he smiles—first up, then down. That downward slide is what's noticeable on him everywhere—face slipping down into neck wattles, chest emptied out and mounded into that abrupt, queer little belly. The flow has left dry channels, deep lines. Yet Austin speaks—perversely—as if out of a body that was light and ready and a pleasure to carry around.

In a short time the phone rings again, and Karin has to climb down and answer it.

"Karin? Is that you, Karin? It's Megan!"

"Your father's just gone up to get a haircut."

"Good. Good. I'm glad. That gives me a chance to talk to you. I've been hoping I'd get a chance to talk to you."

"Oh," Karin says.

"Karin. Now, listen. I know I'm behaving just the way adult children seem always to behave in this situation. I don't like it. I don't like that in myself. But I can't help it. I'm suspicious. I wonder what's going on. Is he all right? What do you think of it? What do you think of this woman he's going to marry?"

"All I ever saw of her is her picture," Karin says.

"I am terribly busy right now, and I can't just drop everything and come home and have a real heart-to-heart with him. Anyway, he's very difficult to talk to. He makes all the right noises, he seems so open, but in reality he's very closed. He's never been at all a personal kind of person, do you know what I mean? He's never done anything before for a *personal* kind of reason. He always did things *for* somebody. He always liked to find people who *needed* things done for them, a lot. Well, you know that. Even bringing you into the house, you know, to look after Mother—it wasn't exactly for Mother's sake or his sake he did that."

Karin can picture Megan—the long, dark, smooth hair, parted in the middle and combed over her shoulders, the heavily made-up eyes and tanned skin and pale-pink lip-sticked mouth, the handsomely clothed, plump body. Wouldn't her voice bring such looks to mind even if you'd never seen her? Such smoothness, such rich sincer-

ity. A fine gloss on every word, and little appreciative spaces in between. She talks as if listening to herself. A little too much that way, really. Could she be drunk?

"Let's face it, Karin, Mother was a snob." Yes, she is drunk. "Well, she had to have something. Dragged around from one dump to another, always doing good. Doing good wasn't her thing at all. So now, *now*, he gives it all up, he's off to the easy life. In Hawaii! Isn't it bizarre?"

Bizarre. Karin has heard that word on television and heard people, mostly teenagers, say it, and she knows it is not the church bazaar that Megan's talking about. Nevertheless, that's what the word makes her think of—the church bazaars that Megan's mother used to organize, always trying to give them some style and make things different. Striped umbrellas and a sidewalk café one year, Devonshire teas and a rose arbor the next. Then she thinks of Megan's mother on the chintz-covered sofa in the living room, weak and yellow after her chemotherapy, one of those padded, perky kerchiefs around her nearly bald head. Still, she could look up at Karin with faint, formal surprise when Karin came into the room. *Was there something you wanted, Karin?* The thing that Karin was supposed to ask her, she would ask Karin.

Bizarre. Bazaar. Snob. When Megan got in that dig, Karin should have said, at least, "I know that." All she can think to say is, "Megan. This is costing you money."

"Money, Karin! We're talking about my *father*. We're talking about whether my father is sane or whether he has flipped his wig, Karin!"

A DAY LATER A CALL FROM DENVER. DON, Austin's son, is calling to tell his father that they should forget about the dining-room furniture; the cost of shipping it is too high. Austin agrees with him. The money could be better spent, he says. What's furniture? Then Austin is called upon to explain about the Auction Barn and what Karin is doing.

"Of course, of course, no trouble," he says. "They'll list everything they get and what it sold for. They can easily send a copy. They've got a computer, I understand. No longer the Dark Ages up here."

Austin listens to Don and then he says, "That's true. I had hoped you'd see it that way about the money. It's a project close to my heart. And you and your sister are providing well for yourselves. I'm very fortunate in my children."

He listens some more. "The old-age pension and my own pension, whatever more could I want? And this lady, this lady, I can tell you, Sheila—she is not short of money, if I can put it that way." He laughs, rather mischievously, at something his son says.

After he hangs up, he says to Karin, "Well, my son is worried about my finances and my daughter is worried about my mental state. My mental-emotional state. The

male and female ways of looking at things. The male and female ways of expressing anxiety. Underneath, it's the same thing. The old order changeth, yielding place to the new."

Don wouldn't remember everything that was in the house anyway. How could he? He was here the day of the funeral, but his wife wasn't with him, she was too pregnant to come. He wouldn't have her to rely on. Men don't remember that sort of thing well. He just asked for the list so that he would seem to be keeping track of everything, and nobody better try to hoodwink him. Or hoodwink his father.

Karin is going to get some things from the house, and nobody need know where she has gotten them. Nobody comes up to her place anyway. A willow-pattern plate. The blue-and-gray flowered curtains. A little fat jug of ruby-colored glass with a silver lid. A white damask cloth, a tablecloth, that she ironed until it shone like a frosted snowfield, and the enormous napkins that go with it. The tablecloth alone weighs as much as a child, and the napkins flop out of wineglasses like lilies—if you have wineglasses. She has already taken home six silver spoons, in her coat pocket. She knows enough not to disturb the silver tea service or the good dishes. But some pink glass dishes for dessert, with long stems, have caught her eye. She can see her place transformed, with these things in it. More than that, she can feel the quiet and contentment they would extend to her. Sitting in a room so furnished, she wouldn't need to go out. She would never need to think of Brent and imagine ways to torment him. A person sitting in such a room could turn and floor anybody trying to intrude. *Was there something you wanted?*

ON MONDAY OF AUSTIN'S LAST WEEK—HE IS SUPPOSED to fly to Hawaii on Saturday—the first big storm of the winter began. The wind came in from the west, over the lake, and the snow blew furiously all day and night. Monday and Tuesday the schools were closed, so Karin didn't have to work as a guard. But she couldn't stand staying indoors. She put on her duffle coat, wrapped her head and half her face in a wool scarf, and plowed through the snow-filled streets to the parsonage.

The house is cold; the wind is coming in around the doors and windows. In the kitchen cupboard along the west wall the dishes feel like ice. Austin is dressed but lying down on the living-room sofa, wrapped in various quilts and blankets. He is not reading or watching television or dozing, so far as she can tell—just staring. She makes him a cup of instant coffee.

"Do you think this'll stop by Saturday?" she says. She has the feeling that if he doesn't go Saturday, he may not go at all—the whole thing could be called off, all plans could falter.

"It'll stop in due time," he says. "I'm not worried."

Karin's baby died in a snowstorm. In the afternoon, when Brent was drinking with his friend Rob and watching television, Karin said that the baby was sick and she needed money for a taxi to take him to the hospital. Brent told her to fuck off. He thought she was just trying to bother him. And partly she was—the baby had thrown up only once, and whimpered, and he didn't seem very hot. Then, about suppertime, with Rob gone, Brent went to pick up the baby and play with him, forgetting that he was sick. This baby's like a hot coal, he yelled at Karin, and wanted to know why she hadn't called the doctor, why she hadn't taken the baby to the hospital. You tell me why, Karin said, and they started to fight. You said he didn't need to go, Karin said. Okay, so he doesn't need to go. Brent called the taxi company, but the taxis weren't going out because of the storm, which up to then neither he nor Karin had noticed. He called the hospital and asked them what to do, and they said to get the fever down by wrapping the baby in wet towels. So they did that, and by midnight the storm had quieted down, the snowplows were out on the streets, and they got the baby to the hospital. But he died. He probably would have died no matter what they'd done—he had meningitis. Even if he'd been a fussed-over, precious little baby in a home where the father didn't get drunk and the mother and father didn't have fights, he might have died; he probably would have died anyway.

Brent wanted it to be his fault, though. Sometimes he wanted it to be their fault. It was like sucking candy to him, that confession. Karin told him to shut up, she told him to *shut up*. She said, "He would have died anyway."

When the storm is over, Tuesday afternoon, Karin puts on her coat and goes out and shovels the parsonage walk. The temperature seems to be dropping even lower and the sky is clear. Austin says they're going to go down to the lake, to look at the ice. If a big storm like this comes fairly early in the year, the wind drives the waves up on the shore and they freeze there. Ice is everywhere, in unlikely formations. People go down and take pictures. The paper often prints the best of them. Austin wants to take some pictures too. He says they'll be something to show people in Hawaii. So Karin shovels the car out, and off they go, Austin driving with great care. Nobody else is down there. The wind is too cold. Austin hangs on to Karin as they struggle along the boardwalk—or where they think the boardwalk must be, under the snow. Sheets of ice drop from the burdened branches of the willow trees to the ground, and the sun shines through them from the west; they're like walls of pearl. Ice is woven through the wire of the high fence, which makes it look like a honeycomb. Waves have frozen as they hit the shore, making mounds and caves, a crazy landscape, out to the rim of the open water. And all the playground equipment, the children's swings and climbing bars, has been transformed by ice, hung with organ pipes or buried



in what look like half-carved statues, shapes of ice that seem meant to be people, animals, angels, monsters, left unfinished.

Karin is nervous when Austin stands alone to take pictures. He seems shaky to her, and what if he fell? He could break a leg, a hip. Old people break a hip and that's the end of them. Even taking off his gloves to work the camera seems risky. A frozen thumb might be enough to keep him here, make him miss his plane.

Back in the car he does have to rub and blow on his hands. He lets her drive. If something dire happened to him, would Sheila Brothers come here, take over his care, settle into the parsonage, countermand his orders?

"This is strange weather," he says. "Up in northern Ontario it's balmy, even the little lakes are open, temperatures above freezing. And here we are in the grip of the ice, and the wind straight off the Great Plains."

"It'll be all the same to you when you get there," Karin says firmly. "Northern Ontario or the Great Plains or here, you'll be glad to be out of it. Doesn't she ever call you?"

"Who?" Austin says.

"Her. Mrs. Brothers."

"Oh, Sheila. She calls me late at night. The time's so much earlier in Hawaii."

THE PHONE RINGS WITH KARIN ALONE IN THE house the morning before Austin is to leave. A man's voice, uncertain and sullen-sounding.

"He isn't here right now," Karin says. Austin has gone to the bank. "I could get him to call you when he comes in."

"Well, it's long distance," the man says. "It's Shaft Lake."

"Shaft Lake," Karin repeats, feeling around on the phone shelf for a pencil.

"We were just wondering. Like we were just checking. That we got the right time that he gets in. Somebody's got to drive down and meet him. So, he gets in to Thunder Bay at three o'clock, is that right?"

Karin has stopped looking for a pencil. She finally says,

"I guess that's right. As far as I know. If you called back around noon, he'd be here."

"I don't know for sure I can get to a phone around noon. I'm at the hotel here, but then I got to go someplace else. I'd just as soon leave him the message. Somebody's going to meet him at the airport in Thunder Bay three o'clock tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay," Karin says.

"You could tell him we got him a place to live, too."

"Oh. Okay."

"It's a trailer. He said he wouldn't mind a trailer. See, we haven't had a minister here in a long time."

"Oh," Karin says. "Okay. Yes. I'll tell him."

As soon as she has hung up, she finds Megan's number on the list above the phone and dials it. It rings three or four times and then she hears Megan's voice, sounding brisker than the last time Karin heard it.

"I am very sorry that I cannot take your call at the moment, but if you would leave your name and phone number I will get back to you as soon as possible."

Karin has already started to say she is sorry but this is important when she is interrupted by a beep and realizes it's one of those machines. She starts again, speaking quickly but distinctly after a deep breath.

"I just wanted to tell you. I just wanted you to know. Your father is fine. He is in good health, and mentally he is fine. So you don't have to worry. He is off to Hawaii tomorrow. I was just thinking about—I was just thinking about our conversation on the phone. So I thought I'd tell you not to worry. This is Karin speaking."

And she has just gotten all that said when she hears Austin at the door. Before he can ask or wonder what she's doing there in the hall, she fires a series of questions at him. Did he get to the bank? Did the cold make his chest hurt? When was the Auction Barn truck coming? When did the people from the board want the parsonage keys? Was he going to phone Don and Megan before he left or after he got there or what?

Yes. No. Monday for the truck. Tuesday for the keys, but no rush—if she wasn't finished then, Wednesday would be okay. No more phone calls. He and his children have said all they need to say to each other. Once he's there, he will write them a letter. Write each of them a letter.

"After you're married?"

Yes. Well. Maybe sooner than that.

He has laid his coat across the banister railing. Then she sees him put out a hand, to steady himself, holding on to the railing. He pretends to be fiddling around with his coat.

"You okay?" she says. "You want a cup of coffee?"

For a moment he doesn't say anything. His eyes swim past her. How did anybody believe that this tottery old man, whose body looked to be shriveling day by day, was on his way to marry a comforting widow and spend the rest of his life walking on a sunny beach? It wasn't in him

to do such a thing, ever. He meant to wear himself out, quick, quick, on people as thankless as possible, thankless as Brent. Meanwhile fooling all of them into thinking he'd changed his spots. Otherwise somebody might stop him from going. Slipping out from under, fooling them, enjoying it.

But he really is after something in the coat. He brings out a pint of whiskey.

"Put a little of that in a glass for me," he says. "Never mind the coffee. Just a precaution. Against weakness. From the cold."

He is sitting on the steps when she brings him the whiskey. He drinks it. He wags his head back and forth, as if trying to get it clear. He stands up. "Much better," he says. "Oh, very much better. Now, about those pictures of the ice, Karin. I was wondering, could you pick them up next week? If I left you the money? They're not ready yet."

Even though he's just in from the cold, he's white. If you put a candle behind his face, it would shine through as if he were wax or thin china.

"You'll have to leave me your address," she says. "Where to send them."

"Just hang on to them till I write you. That'd be best."

So she has ended up with a whole roll of pictures of the ice, along with all those other things she had her mind set on. The pictures show the sky bluer than it ever was, but the weaving in the fence, the shape of the organ pipes, is not so plain to see. A human figure needs to be there also, to show what size things were. She should have taken the camera and captured Austin—who has vanished even more completely than the ice, unless his body washes up somewhere in the spring. A thaw, a drowning, and they're altogether gone. But Karin looks so often at these pictures that Austin took—the blue sky, the pale, lumpy ice monstrosities—she looks at them so often that she gets the feeling that he is in them after all. He's a blank in them, but the blank is bright.

She thinks now that he knew. Right at the last, he knew that she'd caught on to him, she understood what he was up to. No matter how alone you are, and how tricky and determined, don't you need one person to know? She could be the one for him. Each of them knew what the other was up to, and didn't let on, and that was a link beyond the usual. Every time she thinks of it she feels approved of—a most unexpected thing.

She puts one of the pictures in an envelope and sends it to Megan. (She tore the list of addresses and phone numbers off the wall, just in case.) She sends another to Don, and another, stamped and addressed, across town to Brent. She doesn't write anything on the pictures or enclose any note. She won't be bothering any of these people again, not even Brent. (The fact is, it's not long till she'll be leaving here.) She just wants to make them wonder. □

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