

Birds of Illinois

Maud began having sex dreams about the retarded bag boy at the start of April. She woke to gray pressing against the window, a light, even rain falling on the muddy grass outside, no mercy in sight. In her dream, the retarded boy's open, dull grin loomed above her.

She rose, finally, and drew the blinds closed against the clouds, pulling her robe on and stepping out of the bedroom. Her husband Donald, who always woke early, was already in the kitchen burning breakfast. He had retired from the telephone company last Christmas and now, with spring approaching, Maud found him standing at the sink watching the rain through the window. He had planned to spend his retirement working full-time in the yard and was aggravated by the soggy weather.

"Morning," Maud said, approaching.

He startled, turning from the window. "Morning yourself," he answered, slipping his hands into his sweatpants pockets as he used to do in his suit and tie, a composure he quickly assumed when someone caught him alone and preoccupied. Maud was ashamed of her dream, unable to stop thinking of it, but she maneuvered easily past her husband, reaching for a mug in the cupboard in a natural movement, calm. It was a talent she had

developed early in their marriage, the ability to converse on daily matters while her mind skipped far away. Donald never guessed anything beyond what she said, and he rarely gave question to what she was thinking. Maud's sister Nancy, whose own husband was anything but pleasant, once observed that Donald was a most agreeable bastard.

"Been like this all week," he commented, as if Maud had just arrived from far away and didn't know the local weather conditions. There was nothing but corn and soybean out there beyond the grass and the other houses—rows and rows of ordered agriculture, bent only for the horizon deep against the turn of sky. Donald's job for the past thirty-four years had been to plan out the system of telephone wires across the endless farmland, and sometimes Maud pictured him stringing them along the poles like threading so many tall, wooden needles, him swinging from pole to pole like a trapeze artist. She imagined him working this way though she knew he rarely went out with the work crew, that most of his tasks were completed at a desk, him penciling in his calculations over computer-drawn blue lines—tidy work.

Maud murmured acknowledgement—stubborn weather—and poured herself a cup of Donald's too-strong coffee, then took a seat at the table. The foggy visions from her dream stayed with her so that even as she sat there, sipping, Donald giving her the space and quiet she needed to fully awaken, she was thinking of the bag boy, a young man named Tyler who, in reality, was somewhere in his twenties, his having bagged groceries past his teenage years. She called him retarded though she wasn't completely certain on that count—there was something very simpleton about a boy so desperate to please, all those smiles and alert attention to his bagging. She could not get over the surprise of the dream, not just its scandalous content, but also its insistence, its realness, compared with this, sitting down to gritty coffee, the bacon still cooking, black, while Donald returned to the window.

"It would be nice," Maud said, "if the rain let up by next

weekend.” Janie, their daughter, and their sons, with their families, were coming home for Easter. “For the egg hunt,” she said.

Donald nodded, not yet turning away from the window. “I expect they’ll come, rain or shine.” Then, after a moment, he said, “I’ll be going into town this morning, to Harold’s.” This was the town’s hardware store, little more than a couple of aisles of nails and washers arranged in coffee tins, a variety of screwdrivers. “I can stop by Star’s,” he offered, and for a moment, Maud pictured it: Donald shuffling along the aisles, trying to distinguish between cans of French-cut green beans and the standard variety, finally choosing the wrong thing and then carrying it and a package of chocolate-covered peanuts to the checkout. He’d nod glibly at Tyler, having no idea just what feats this boy was capable of in his wife’s imagination, and smile at the checkout girl, a divorcee in her forties who always gave a little wink to her male customers, even the babies.

Donald was looking at her now, waiting. Outside, the rain dripped from the eaves.

“No, thank you,” Maud answered. “We’ll get by.”

Nodding, he drew his hands from his pockets, readying for departure. He took a sip of his coffee, then examined the oily contents of his mug before emptying it into the sink. He pointed to the backyard. “Look,” he said, “a cardinal.” Maud followed his gaze; there in the bare sycamore was a spot of bright red, flown away almost as soon as Maud glimpsed it. “What a beautiful creature,” Donald noted, and Maud pictured him again hanging from his telephone poles, pointing out the birdlife against a clear, blue sky, gazing down on the fields so far below him. Marveling again at the bird’s impressive beauty, he turned off the burner under the destroyed bacon and left, walking back into the bedroom to dress while Maud pulled herself upright and stepped across the slick linoleum to the stove. She took the pan to the sink and filled it with sudsy water, not caring that it was still hot and the bottom would warp. It was the third frying pan Donald had ruined in his retirement.

Though she had promised herself she would wait until her usual shopping day to go to Star's, by noon, Donald had not yet returned and Maud found herself putting on lipstick at the bathroom mirror. She pinched her cheeks, a cosmetic ritual from her girlhood, one that still worked—somewhat—to restore color to her features, some trick at inspiring blood flow. The bag boy, she thought ruefully, was another trick.

Star Grocery's parking lot, just a side alley of maybe thirty spaces, was not even half full. Maud, parking her Toyota and checking her makeup once more in the rearview mirror, felt foolish and old. She gathered her purse and made sure to lock the doors, a habit instilled by Donald who held caution in the highest importance, even in tiny Brinkley.

The air inside the store was bright and cool, easy listening music piped in. Maud raised her hand to wave at a harried mother with small children clinging to her—one of Maud's neighbors—at the checkout, and Tyler, lifting a plastic bag with a family-sized box of sugar cereal bulging out the top, turned to smile at her, a slack-jawed grin, his head cocked to the side. He was tall with bushy dark hair, broad shoulders, and long arms that seemed somewhat loosely attached to his body. Maud nodded at him, struggling to free a cart, and he returned to his bagging, her watching the back of his neck, thick and red with a v of dark, coarse hairs. Maud had always been careful to trim away that excess when cutting her own boys' hair years ago. She remembered it—setting one of them down on the stool in the kitchen, towel draped around his neck. She snipped and chatted, the boys twitchy from the word go. Now, Maud wondered who cut this bag boy's hair, if he lived on his own or was cared for yet, some mother or aunt her own age, someone she would most likely recognize, distantly, as someone she'd gone to high school with, maybe a year or two older, more likely younger. Despite herself, she caught a glimpse of her dream, and, thinking of it, it was really more of a sensation than anything she saw, and not even that—a sense of closeness

rather than the actual feel of him. He was a large person in real life, awkward and deliberate, but in her dream, he was more than that—he filled the entire room.

Maud hastily set about her shopping, going first for the green beans, then collecting various other goods, antacids and oatmeal, a box of graham crackers, a bag of jelly beans from an Easter candy display, a package of ground beef. She exchanged hellos with the rooster-headed butcher, a man she had known since high school, one she had never much liked for reasons so old she no longer remembered them, and picked up a package of margarine and cottage cheese, a pitiful winter tomato. It was nothing she could make a meal of, but now, it seemed a disastrously odd endeavor to come shopping on a Tuesday. She hurried with her selections, saying hello to the checkout girl, nodding again at Tyler who, spreading open a plastic shopping bag, tossed in her loaf of white bread and pronounced, “Bread.” He gave a short laugh, and pointed, “Jelly beans. That would make one heck of a sandwich.” As he spoke, his Adam’s apple bobbed in his thick, trunk-like neck. He leaned closer and she stared at his blunt white teeth, his pink gums. “A candy sandwich.”

She gave a tiny nod. “What’s this?” he asked, peering closely at the bottle of fruit-flavored Tums. “Hey, I get it. You’ll need it after the candy sandwich.” He glanced up at her, waiting for her to acknowledge his small joke. She murmured yes, she always took Tums with everything and he gave her a funny look. “O-kay,” he said, and shook his head, amused.

Maud touched her cheeks; her face felt warm. She was unable to stop herself from remembering again the feel of him from her dreams, in scattered flashes, as she watched Tyler scoop up the tiny produce bag of tomatoes and let it slide down his palm into a grocery bag. He stacked her cans of green beans, her peanut butter, and Maud watched his fingers work, the intent look on his face, his mouth open a little in his concentration. She felt a prickle run up her spine as she caught sight of his lips, a little chapped, full.

“You like this rain?” he asked. Maud nodded, said she supposed it was good for them, that they needed it. She wrote a check and handed it to the check-out lady who punched at the register, giving little notice to Tyler. He shook his hair out of his eyes as he loaded the last of the plastic bags into Maud’s cart. “Yeah,” he answered. “We have to have rain. People don’t like it, but we can’t go too long without it.” He grinned at her, his lips curling back, and it was this gesture, this simple earnestness that brought Maud back to the opinion that while he may not be full-out retarded, he displayed a sort of childishness that didn’t match his ruddy features. Here was a young man, twenty-something and large, talking to her with the same easy excitement her children used to bounce about in, their happiness spilling endlessly out of them. This boy seemed to enjoy her attention; Maud imagined he wouldn’t mind if she stood there chatting with him at the check-out for the rest of the day.

Having finished, he clasped his hands behind his back and stretched. He asked, “You need help with these?”

Maud hesitated; he always offered but she’d never accepted before. Yet, today, she found herself answering yes, that would be so nice, and again felt ridiculous, following his broad person out in the drizzle, his lugging her few bags. Tyler strode straight to her Toyota, and Maud felt a tiny thrill at this—he knew which car was hers. She hurried ahead to open the trunk. He loaded the groceries, then turned back to Maud, giving her another sloppy, blunt grin, and a salute, good-bye. Once more, she sensed the bigger-than-life dream of him, and before she could stop herself, she reached out and touched his wet arm. She felt the curls of hair beneath her fingers, the clench of muscle, the warmth of skin. He pulled back, his simple, stupid face set in gaping confusion, and he turned back to the store, an odd little smile lighting across his face. Maud leaned against her car, watching him walk under the light sprinkle of spring rain, a flock of blackbirds scattering across the sky above Tyler’s head.

Springtime on Mars

As she drove the narrow streets of downtown, passing the shops, the high school, the baseball field, before she turned onto her road, she thought of cutting the bag boy's hair, maybe even shaving his face at her kitchen sink. She imagined the thick, white shaving cream and the scraping away, the smooth, soft cheek below. In this picture, she was young, wearing a pressed salmon-colored dress, one she remembered from years ago when the children were small and clamoring at her knees. No matter the years that had gone by, Maud yet recalled how it felt to carry each of her babies, the places within her, the tumble of budding arms and legs and feet against her insides, between the bones of her rib cage. The launch began those years ago, at the impatient shifting inside her, a sensation Donald didn't know a thing about. Once home, Maud parked her car in the driveway and sat for a long moment, wishing so desperately for sunshine her teeth ached.

Over the next few days, the dreams continued. They grew murky, full of dark, foggy purples and blues and greens, as if the action was happening deep in the ocean, distant beads of light swelling from above. She woke Saturday morning so caught up in the hazy dimensions of her sleep that she hardly recognized her surroundings.

Donald had risen early and taken off to the lumber yard to pick up supplies for some new project Maud didn't want to think too much about, and she was slow to rise, resting in bed far longer than she usually did. Later, when the phone rang, she was jerked back to her real life by the sound of her daughter's voice.

"Janie," Maud said into the telephone, "I was just thinking of you. I'm getting all ready for the weekend. Tell me, when does your flight arrive? Do you know it yet?"

"Listen, Mom, that's why I was calling."

Maud's heart sank. "You're still coming, aren't you? You and Alan?" Over Christmas, Janie had brought home a boyfriend from Boston, a fellow law student in gray wool slacks, tiny wire glasses

perched on his long, thin nose, and Maud had not warmed to him as Donald had. She watched as the boy listened to Donald speak of the birds of Illinois with a mildly amused expression on his face, the way one listens to a child, raising his eyebrows in mock interest when Donald went into the flight patterns of the golden finches, the feeding habits of hummingbirds.

“Oh, yes. Yes, we’re still coming.” Janie hesitated. Maud realized she had been holding her breath, hoping Alan wouldn’t come, wishing he and her daughter had parted ways, and now she exhaled, waiting for Janie to say more. “It’s just that we have some news to share.” She paused. “Big news. We want to come a day or two early and spend some time with just you and Dad. Is that all right?”

“Of course,” Maud said, the idea of what her daughter’s *big news* might be closing like a vise around her chest. “We’ll be happy to have you.”

“Oh, and Mom,” Janie went on, “I’m sure you can guess about this, about what Alan and I have to tell you, but I wish you wouldn’t. I just want to tell you in person. For you to be surprised.” She sounded so hopeful.

Maud laughed. “Sure, honey. I can be surprised. I can be anything.” For a moment, she was in the ocean with Tyler again, the water filling her ears and turning her movements slow and weighty. Four days. Maud had four days to muster up a plausible replica of happy surprise. She told Janie good-bye and went for a cold wash cloth to press against her forehead while she rested on the sofa. The house felt small and overused.

Blessedly, today, she had somewhere to go. The community college in Hoopeston offered continuing education classes on Saturday afternoons, and over the past couple of years, Maud had attended sessions on Japanese pottery and Appalachian candle-dipping. Last summer, she had begun her memoir. This spring, the class was on Russian cuisine and was taught by a tiny pixie girl in her mid-thirties with short-cropped, greasy hair and close-set green

eyes nearly hidden beneath thickly mascaraed lashes. Her name was Olga, and she was born in St. Petersburg back when it was still Leningrad; she told how the old women who sold tickets in the train station refused to call the city by any other name. Maud wondered what those old women, the *babushkas*, thought about young girls like Olga moving to America to teach blini-making. During breaks, Maud watched Olga lean into the counter at the snack bar in the student union, smoking her foreign, sage-scented cigarettes, terrorizing the college boys with her sexy-haughty gazes. But Olga's husband—Maud had seen him just once—was only a pale-faced Midwesterner, a Caterpillar man from Peoria who now taught auto mechanics at the high school. To Maud, though, his homeliness only intensified the mystery surrounding Olga, her traveling so far just to marry a pasty farm boy. Maud's sister Nancy, who begrudgingly allowed Maud to register her for these classes, spoke of the primitive, scythe-wielding life still lived by post-Soviet Russians. "It's a lovely little convenience called a green card," she said.

When Nancy came to pick her up for class, Maud was still fretting over Janie's impending announcement. She stepped into Nancy's Plymouth and fastened her seatbelt, thinking, *marriage*. Despite herself, her thoughts snagged on the bag boy, his light fingers on her skin, the new, briny sort of buoyancy of her dreams. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind, but the hazy images had become a constant presence, a sort of haunting, and Maud felt Nancy squinting at her, wondering.

"What are you grinning about?" she asked, taking her cigarette from her mouth, a long, thin stream of smoke escaping her pursed lips. The farmland passed, tilled and ready but not yet planted and Donald's system of crisscrossed telephone wires floated above.

"It has to do with sex," Maud told her. "Sex and *me*."

"Oh, yeah?" Nancy asked, interested, then laughed. "What's Donald asking for?"

"It's not that," Maud said. The mention of Donald made her

stop. She thought of him sawing away in the garage, of the mess of lumber and nails he was creating, what Janie's Boston boy would think of the effort. "It's not anything," she sighed.

"What is it? What have *you* been asking for?"

Nancy laughed out loud, her smoker's gravel dragging along. Maud took a long, choking breath and finally Nancy realized she was upset. She leaned over to touch her sister's arm.

"Maud?" she tried. "I'm sorry." She pulled onto the shoulder and stopped the car. "Honey? What is it? What's the matter?"

Maud pictured the retarded boy leaning over her, felt his hands on her body. She thought of Donald coming home with his arms full of lumber, taking a serious look at things from the perspective of his frayed flannel shirt, happy in his retirement.

She couldn't speak, and after a moment, she heard Nancy rifling around in her purse. There was the scratch of her lighter catching and then quiet, a few cars drifting by, the sky thick with clouds that Maud imagined were made of steel, unimpressionable. She wouldn't tell Nancy after all, not even that small relief. She sniffed and looked long out the window, the plowed dirt stretching out wide and empty before her.

"I'm sorry," she finally said, turning to face Nancy who regarded her suspiciously, still waiting to find out what the problem was, and finally, Maud begged her to keep driving. During class, Maud felt Nancy watching her, snatching glances at her while Olga explained how to roll out the dough for palmeni. She explained the elasticity of the dough, how to work the pockets open, how to poke the ground mutton inside.

After class, Maud suggested a late lunch. "Or, how about an early dinner," she said as they left campus, "Whatever you want to call it."

They ate a meal of thick, grilled sandwiches at a coffee shop, and then, Maud asked Nancy if she had time to do some shopping. She sought out shoes, dresses, flatware, a new frying pan. They lingered over the shops at the mall, then slowly pushed a shopping

cart through the aisles of an enormous linens store. They stopped for coffee and perused the aisle of a book store. Maud purchased a book of Chinese poetry, and Nancy squinted at the title on a novel, flipped through the pages, asked her again if she was feeling all right.

Later, as they were driving home, Maud said, “Janie is bringing that Boston boyfriend home with her,” and Nancy talked the rest of the way, telling Maud how she ought to handle him, what she ought to say to him.

It was nearly nine o’clock when Nancy left Maud at the front of her darkened house, but it felt much later, midnight at least. She sucked in the crisp air, the rain gone but leaving an autumn-like chill, the dark smell of far-off livestock and feed, and stood before her house, shopping bags in hand. She made no motion to enter the house, and after a moment, Donald appeared, walking briskly across the drive, asking her, in a gentle, perplexed way, if she was okay, claiming she’d given him the fright of his life. Maud allowed him to guide her to the house, but answered only that she needed to do some shopping and she was sorry she hadn’t called. She noticed a splash of bright pink paint—pink!—on his cheek, and saw that his hair was disheveled from his figuring with a pencil on a board, him pushing his fingers through, thinking. There was the woodsy scent of sawdust about his flannel shoulders.

Maud said, “Well, the house is still here,” and Donald gave her a confused look, then one of relief, understanding. He brought her in to see what he’d started in the garage. “Birdhouses,” he said. “Half a dozen of them.” Though he hadn’t gotten much further than cutting the pieces and splashing a bit of paint on the board to test the color, she caught a glimpse of what he envisioned, those miniature cottages with their whistling, happy birds, blue jays and cardinals, maybe robins, flying in and out, building their nests, setting about the instinctual task of keeping house.

On Monday, Donald mentioned they were out of lunch meat. There were no more pickles in the jar, only a lone Pepsi in the refrigerator. Even the loaf of bread Maud had picked up just a few days earlier was nearly gone since she hadn't prepared a decent meal all week, just sandwiches and Donald's cheese toast. When the children were still at home, Maud planned out the family meals carefully, balancing vegetables and breads and always one glorious meat dish: a meatloaf or a roast or a fried steak. She had taught Janie how to cook—the two of them in the kitchen, cleaning this, cutting that, checking the oven, always this way. They did this even when Janie was a teenager and continuously performed her own disappearing act, there in the flesh, gone in spirit, and Maud was thankful for the cooking, for the collected hours of standing side by side, working towards a common goal: dinner.

After breakfast, Maud sat down to make a list. Besides the usual staples and a cut of roast, she added ground mutton and onions to her list. Cabbage. Fresh mushrooms—she'd have to consult her notes to locate the kind Olga had insisted on for gold mushroom soup. Sour cream, too, since Russians added a dollop of sour cream to everything. Olga had told the class this, speaking in her severe accent that had taken weeks for Maud to grow accustomed to. Since then, she had grown so used to the accent that as she made the list, she heard Olga speak the ingredients in her ear: *There is no compromising when it comes to mushrooms for the soup and mutton for the palmeni.* The boys were coming Saturday and would be home for Easter dinner: ham, potatoes, macaroni salad. Janie was coming with her boyfriend a day earlier and Maud thought it would be nice to serve a Russian meal.

“We're having palmeni when Janie arrives,” Maud told Donald when he came in from the garage. He nodded though Maud knew he had no idea what palmeni was. She hesitated. “What do you think,” she asked, “of this boyfriend?”

Donald stood by the sink in his work jeans, filling a glass with tap water. Of course, she and Donald had discussed the boy before,

months ago when he visited with Janie, the awkward look of this boy, all dark and skinny. Maud remembered a shrug from Donald, a comment on the boy's grasp of contract law, how he'd seen a combine in disrepair on some farmer's back lot and called it a corn crib. Donald had been this way with the children since they'd reached adulthood, shrugging and complacent, just happy to let them be. On the day each left, Maud saw his shoulders droop. It was a part of the general winding down of their lives, the way his body relaxed at seeing each leave and Maud hated him a little, watching.

"Alan?" he asked, holding his glass to his lips. She nodded impatiently, laying her pen down to look up at him. For once, she would fully wait for an answer, insist on a fully stated opinion from her husband. "I just meant," he continued, "you didn't say his name. It's Alan."

She crossed her arms. "Yes," she said, "Alan. She said she had news. *Big news.*"

The rain had stopped near the end of last week and Donald had spent the weekend walking the backyard, squishing through the wet grass, coming in to comment to Maud on how long he thought it would take the soil to dry adequately, where he planned to plant the clematis, how it would grow to cover the posts on the birdhouses, what variety of birds he thought their yard would likely attract, what sort of wildflowers to plant to bring in the butterflies, which species loved the Midwest. Donald watched through the window now. Maud thought he was trying to spot a meadowlark pecking through the wet ground for a rain-loosened worm.

"I think he's smart, just like our Janie." He glanced at her, then looked back to the backyard. "You know," he continued, "none of them have ever chosen exactly what we've wanted for them. They have their own ideas about the way the world works." He took a long swallow and poured the rest of his water into the sink. "Janie more than the others. But she's always been right. Law school, the rest. It all works for her." He sighed, stretching, and Maud pictured

the boy in his polished shoes, his dark sweater-vest, his neatly pressed dress-pants. He must have hatched on a city train, wearing those kinds of clothes.

“We can get goldfinches and cardinals if we put out sunflowers,” Donald said, clearly finished with the talk about Janie and her news. “They might come,” Donald said, “if we put out hulled sunflower seeds.”

Maud wanted to go to Star’s alone, but Donald had something to pick up at the hardware store and reasoned they could drive to town together. She would do her shopping while he poked around Harold’s, and then, he could help her get the groceries into the car. Fine, Maud agreed. She only wanted the time inside the store, alone in the bright aisles, completing her tasks, to bask in her efficiency and spy on the bag boy when he wasn’t looking, hoping he wouldn’t remember the scene in the parking lot, if he even thought of it in those terms. Probably not.

When Donald dropped her off, Tyler was sitting out front on the bench, taking his break. He was talking to one of the checkout girls, a heavy girl wearing the sort of low-slung khaki pants that only accentuated her pudgy figure, made worse by the tight-fitting nylon *Stars Grocery* golf shirt. Yet she was pretty, in an overly made-up, back-alley sort of way that Maud noticed had become popular, and Tyler was talking to her, giving her those sort of goofy laughs that these young girls, Maud had seen, had so little patience for. Yet, this girl was smiling back. She still looked vaguely put-off, the prerogative of the young being constant boredom, but she seemed to be doing more than tolerating Tyler. Maud walked by, watching, but neither looked back at her.

In her dreams, she saw less and less of Tyler. Visuals of any kind had been washed away by the turbid dream-sea, and the last few nights there had been nothing to see, and nothing to hear. Only touch. They had become sea creatures with slick skin and unwieldy bodies, thumping against each other, and yet strangely amorphous, one

pouring into the other. It was hardly about sex anymore, yet it held its carnal pleasures, the slick sucking of water-soaked skin flapping against each other, twirling around in some dark space, something like water, something like endless space. Maud did not perceive the other person there to be Tyler by any physical signs; she couldn't see him and they were no longer murmuring to each other. Still, it was him, a knowledge as close to Maud as the sound of her own name. Upon waking, Maud half-existed in that swirling state, her waking to the same blue gauzy curtains that had been there for half, maybe more, of her marriage, her own bedroom having an ancient, distant feel, as if she were only waking to another dream.

And now, in her normal life, Donald was across the street at the hardware store, talking weather with the other old men, probably, rainfall for the month and obituaries, and here was Tyler, just coming in from his break. Maud glimpsed him smiling to himself, in love with that girl, all synthetic fabrics and fat. She pushed her cart down the grocery aisle, thinking: flour, eggs, meat.

In the refrigerated meat cases in the back, Maud searched the cellophaned packages. Olga had said ground mutton was the best for the palmeni filling, that in Russia, each kitchen was equipped with a meat grinder, and that it was best to grind the meat yourself, mix in a raw egg, cut the onions so fine they sting your hands, and add them with the mutton—one half kilo. Olga rolled her eyes. One pound, she explained.

There was only ground beef in the case, that and one single pound of ground pork, and Maud considered buying both, mixing them, figuring it was the best that could be done in a town as small as Brinkley, as American and heartland and beef-eating a place to be found anywhere on the globe. She touched the package, the pink meat squishing beneath the plastic, then changed her mind. The picture came to her: she and Janie in the kitchen, her explaining that only ground mutton could be used, Janie raising her eyebrows at that, nodding. Boston boy was in the back, nibbling a rolled blini dipped in whipped sour cream.

Maud motioned for the butcher behind the counter.

“Mrs. Holman,” he said, smiling. If he had seen her at church or a high school football game he would have called her Maud. She’d known Charlie Briggs since grade school, back when he was a skinny boy with an awkward gap between his front teeth. The gap remained, but his shoulders had thickened and his round belly pushed against his apron. He stood grinning at her, stooped over his chopping block, a good distance back so as not to disturb the shopper with the presence of raw animal flesh. Maud wondered if there was real blood back there, if he drained it in the sink. Just how raw was the meat that came to Charlie Briggs?

“What can I get for you today? The family coming to town? Those boys still eating good?”

Maud smiled, leaning against the case. “Yes, everyone’s fine.” She hesitated. “Charlie, I need two pounds of ground mutton. I’ll take a few chicken breasts as well. Maybe,” she thought, deciding, “a few pork chops.” Yes, she would cook this week. She would cook until she could hardly stand and here would come Janie and her boyfriend into a house that smelled of savory foods. At the front of the store, she glimpsed the checkout girl leafing through a magazine, and Tyler coming through the automatic glass doors with a few shopping carts wrangled from the parking lot.

Charlie Briggs looked at her. The whites of his eyes were yellowish, aged along with the rest of him. His screaming red hair had faded to rust. Maud remembered something about him from high school: Charlie was slow to learn in every subject—even gym class gave him trouble. Now, he stood looking at Maud, finally repeating her, “Mutton? You say ground mutton?”

Maud nodded. She had made up her mind. If a thing could be found in Soviet Russia, even post-Soviet Russia, whatever small changes that had brought in the availability of sheep meat, well, then, that same thing ought to be available here in Brinkley, Illinois. “Yes,” she answered. “I’m making a Russian dish. *Palmeni*,” she pronounced the word carefully. “Sometimes, it’s translated as

meat pies, but really, that's making it sound larger than what it is." Maud thought. "Meat pillows, maybe. Meat-filled clouds." She shrugged. "I'll need ground mutton. Or ground veal. Tell me," she said, squinting close, "do you have any veal back there?" Charlie put his pencil behind his ear and came around the partition, wiping his hands on his apron. He seemed larger as he came, larger and slower, moving something like how Maud imagined a buffalo would swagger. He glanced quickly at her and turned away, as if he were looking for help.

"Now," he said, standing next to her at the meat case, spreading his hands to indicate the variety. "We have your ground chuck, ground beef. Round steak. Roasts. Any of these to your liking?" He squinted at her.

"I'm sure you've never had palmeni before," Maud said. "It really must have *just* the right sort of ingredients, you see?" She glanced at the front of the store. Tyler was nowhere to be seen though the checkout girl, the one he had fallen in love with today, looked up from her magazine. Maud realized she was raising her voice. "My daughter is coming into town," she said, trying to lower her volume. "She'll be announcing her engagement, and we'll need a special meal."

Charlie slapped his hands together. "I've got it," he cried. "Let's ground the steak. You can't get much fancier than that." He chuckled to himself.

"No," Maud said, and to her embarrassment, she did feel the start of tears at the back of her eyes. "*No.*"

Tyler approached the back of the store, pushing a wide broom across the bright tile. He glanced at Maud who felt as frail as tissue paper, as one of Donald's birds, her standing there, pleading with the butcher, the retarded bag boy lopping along. She thought of her dreams. Why, they were ocean mammals, she realized. Something like whales or dolphins or some other sea creature with a yearning for contact, beings who swam free and strong. Maud held out her hands to the bag boy, remembering how she

had touched his arm in the parking lot, and now tears came. She called to him, "Please, Tyler." She stepped towards him. "Please."

The boy stopped short, blinking. Maud took another step towards him. "Oh," she said, her face wet with tears, and she felt the reality of who she was, this old woman.

"Mrs. Holman," Charlie Briggs started, and already, Tyler had disappeared into the stock room. Escaped, Maud thought. "Let's just get our bearings here. All right?" The butcher looked around him and Maud cried into the palms of her hands. She tried to stop, to shore herself up, wipe her eyes and walk out the door, thinking she might just leave Brinkley forever. She wondered if Tyler was going after a chair for her to sit in, if he was glancing her way, concerned, and she knew that he was not. After a moment, she heard the slow, scuffling sounds of someone drawing near.

"Donald," Charlie Briggs said, his voice full of relief. "I'm afraid Maud is a little over-tired." The butcher chuckled, desperately uncomfortable. Here came her husband's hand on her back.

"What is it?" he asked. "Maud, what's happened?" "Ground mutton," the butcher said, whistling. Maud heard the mocking smile in his voice. Charlie Briggs had been the biggest fool in high school and now here he was, laughing at her.

Maud dabbed at her eyes with the tissue Donald had handed her and she wondered where it had come from. He was not the kind of man to carry tissues, and now, he had given her one and he was moving his hand, rubbing lightly across her back. The picture came to her of what Donald himself had looked like in high school, the person he had been, and she saw his calm, quiet manner, him sitting at the back of every classroom. She saw him stepping down the hallway, nodding politely at each pass. He was a neat dresser, with tidy, short-clipped hair. Donald had been voted most courteous. She thought of his birdhouses in the backyard, of how he had let the children go, of how he stood on the porch and looked back at their house and found something new to start each time.

She wondered if it was the same with her, if she ever seemed new to him, if there was anything more for them to do with each other.

“Your lady wants mutton,” Charlie Briggs said again. “For a Russian pie.”

“Then,” Donald replied evenly, “we’ll see about getting her some.” He took her elbow and led her away from the meats, through the sugar and flour aisle, past the young checkout girl, out of the store. Donald moved on, helping Maud step across the asphalt parking lot, guiding her into the car. He turned the key and let the engine idle, taking her hand and holding it between both of his as if it were an aching cold day, spring still months away.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, and she nodded, resting her head on his shoulder. She put her hand to his chest, and through his flannel shirt, through his skin, his bones, unseen flesh, there was his heart, beating soundly. Maud sucked in her breath, surprised by the strength of that instrument, her own heart quickened by the solid warmth of his body. She shifted in her seat to move her hand up across his collar bone and around his neck, slipping her fingers into his collar and bringing her palm back down in front, across his bare chest. Leaning closer, she kissed his cheek, then pressed the side of her face against his.