

From

GOOD TROUBLE

stories by

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The World of Cheese

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It had never occurred to Breda Morrissey that things might go seriously wrong between herself and her son, Patrick. But back in the fall he had declared her “persona non grata”—his actual expression—and pronounced that she was no longer permitted to have contact with her grandson, Joshua, on the grounds that she would be “an evil influence.” It was a crazy, almost unbelievable turn of events, and all about such a strange matter—a scrap of skin.

Patrick disputed this. “This is not about *skin*, Mom,” he said during the first session of the mother-son therapy they jointly underwent in New York. “Can’t you see? That’s not what this is *about*.”

Breda turned to the therapist, Dr. Goldstein—Dan, her son called him—for help. But Dr. Goldstein, whose dramatic beard and small pointy nose gave him, Breda thought, the look of a TV judge, was regarding her so severely that Breda was silenced.

Breda’s reliving of this moment, as she sat in a window seat on the flight back to California, was interrupted by a nudge—a barge, almost—from her neighbor. This per-

son was an obese woman of Breda's own age, mid-fifties, who from moment one had been tangling and fidgeting with carry-on luggage and safety instruction documents and in-flight entertainment gadgets. "Sorry," the woman breathed, continuing her struggle with the wires of her earphones. At the woman's other elbow, in the aisle seat, sat a littler person in a red sweater, a man. When drinks were served, the fat woman, as Breda thought of her, wordlessly helped herself to the little man's mini-pretzels packet. Breda understood with revulsion that they were a couple.

She looked out the window. An immense cloud floor covered the bottom of the void. Brilliant stacks of white vapor rose here and there, and pink haze lay beneath the blue upper atmosphere. It was a glorious, otherworldly spectacle of the kind that Breda, when she was a girl, would have found suggestive of winged horses and unknown realms; but what it came down to, when you grew up and looked through it all, Breda thought, was rain, rain falling on the fields and the forests and the houses and the people.

Breda kept gazing out. Something about the bumpy spread of cloud reminded her of cottage cheese, which in turn reminded her: Patrick had developed an interest in, as he put it, the world of cheese. During her stay, her son had each evening approached the dinner table with a cheeseboard, making bugling and fanfare noises. "Try this one, Mom," he said, pointing to one of the half-eaten, slightly stinking varieties, and Breda, who wondered whether these foodstuffs were legal, took a mouthful. "Nice," she said, refraining from any other comment—for example, that Patrick was obviously gaining weight as a result of his new hobby—for fear of pro-

oking another outburst on his part. (And of course his wife, Judith, would no doubt be touchy, too. Everybody was touchy these days.) One night, Patrick announced that he and Judith and baby Joshua were taking a cheesing trip to Ireland. The plan was to go to the Kinsale International Gourmet Festival and then to drive from farmhouse to farmhouse, tasting semisoft rind-washed cheeses. "I'm not interested in hard cheeses," her son said importantly. If they found the time, he said, they'd drive up to County Limerick and maybe look up whoever was left of the ancestral Morrissey family.

"That'll be nice," Breda said.

In the early seventies, she and Patrick's father, Tommy, had taken the kids to a wonderful-sounding but actually sour-looking village near the Shannon River, and had met remote Morrissey cousins of his, amorphous types who led unimaginable existences in cheap modern homes at the edge of the village and were nonplussed by their visitors. As she looked down at the clouds, Breda recalled two big things about that trip: it had rained the whole time, and everywhere they ran into people named Ryan. "It's raining Ryans," Tommy joked. "It's Ryaning hard."

Tommy, who a week after Patrick's wedding quit his biotech job and ran away to Costa Rica with the German woman. Packing his bags, he was the wronged furious one. "You make me feel like I'm vermin," he said, scrunching into his suitcase underpants Breda had just ironed. "With Ute I can bring up anything, absolutely anything. I can *be* anything. Jesus, I never knew what it was to feel alive. To think I've wasted all these years being made to feel a jerk, a creep. You want to know what we talked about last night? We talked about cunts

I have known. *Cunts I have known*. How they smell differently, how they're shaped differently, how they behave differently. Including your cunt. Oh yes. Do you know how special that is? Do you realize the level of trust and intimacy that takes?" On and on he went, appalling her. He began to shout. "Remember when I was alone in the Ukraine? All alone in that goddamn hotel and I get on the phone to my wife, my fucking *wife*, my one and only partner till death do us fucking part, and I asked you to say something for me, something with feeling, something that might connect us, anything at all. I'm not telling you to scrub floors or stick your hand in a pile of shit. I'm not ordering you to do anything. I'm *asking*. I'm *begging* for a sentence or two, that's all, just a few words, words a husband is entitled to expect from his wife. What do I get? Nothing! 'You know I don't do that kind of thing, Tommy.' *That kind of thing?* I'm howling for a drink in the fucking desert and you give me that shit? Well, fuck you, you uptight daddy's girl."

Breda was reexperiencing this horrifying episode because something about her son's recent harangues had put her in mind of his father.

As for the daddy's girl taunt, that went back forty years, to 1967, the year Breda traveled to Notre Dame for Tommy's graduation. Notre Dame was so Catholic and male that people on campus mistook her for a nun. After the ceremony, she and Tommy—they'd met six months before, at a wedding in Newport—set off on a cross-country drive to San Francisco. The plan was to return east in the fall so that Breda herself could start college. She started to feel sick just west of the Indiana border.

At first she thought it was the weed they'd been smoking, or maybe carsickness, but by the time they reached Missouri she knew she was pregnant. To celebrate, she and Tommy drove on to Reno and got married. When Breda rang home, her father answered the phone. He was a Boston lawyer. He found the whole thing—the trip to California, the jokey shotgun wedding, the long-distance pay phone shenanigans, the premarital sex—shocking. "Goddamn punk bullshit," he said, and hung up with a sob. When Breda tearfully redialed, her mother answered. "You'll have to forgive your father, sweetheart," she said. "It's just that these things have consequences. Maybe that's something you can't really understand at your age."

Breda patched things up with her parents, who came to see that she had married Tommy out of a sense of responsibility and not out of romantic whimsy. "It's a wonderful thing," Dad said when she became a mother. "And you're a wonderful girl."

Siobhan was born in the spring of 1968. Patrick came along two years later, named by Tommy for his father even though, to hear Tommy tell it, Grandpa Pat had barely acknowledged his own son. "He'd treat you like you'd treat a dog: ruffle your hair, take you for a walk in Van Cortlandt Park." This conversation took place one night soon after her father-in-law's death in 1975, when Tommy and she lay in the darkness of their Santa Barbara bedroom. "The best thing about Dad was he was a terrific whistler," Tommy whispered. "Oh, Jesus, he could whistle. He'd stick a thumb or pinkie in his mouth and shoot out this real earsplitter. He stopped taxis like they do in the movies." Tommy, shifting on his side, said, "You ever hear me whistle?"

"I think so," Breda said. "Sure."

"He taught me," Tommy said in a low voice. "He taught me how, Breda." His shoulder started to tremble, and Breda touched it.

Grandpa Pat was a New Yorker and passed his last years in a Midtown residential hotel. After his death they found his room filled with pepper shakers and salt shakers taken from the diners and bars in which he'd whiled away his days. Tommy displayed the shakers on a shelf at home. "Some families inherit sterling silver, others stolen restaurant utensils," he said. Later he asked Breda to box away the shakers because they made him think of the sands of time and depressed the hell out of him.

After Tommy disappeared to Costa Rica, Breda stayed put in the matrimonial home in Santa Barbara, unclear about where things stood. When it became apparent that her husband wasn't returning, she sold up and moved into an apartment in Atherton to be near Siobhan. Siobhan had urged the move. But within a year, Siobhan and her family headed east to Alexandria, Virginia. "Well, that's how it goes, I guess," Breda said when her daughter broke the news. "If you have to go, you have to go." Breda stayed in Atherton, working as an administrator for a medical practice. She took a weekly (and straightforward and pleasant) call from her son, and a biweekly (and difficult and tetchy) call from her daughter. Inevitably the latter put her through to the grandchildren. She called their names down the line and listened for a response. "Talk to Grandma," an adult instructed in the background. Then a child's voice, small and stubborn and distinct: "Don't want to."

From time to time, her children brought back news from the Switzerland of Central America, as Costa Rica

was apparently known. It was so humid down there, Breda learned, that a paperback would practically rot overnight. It was also amazing. There were monkeys and colored birds and sloths and waterfalls and rocky beaches. Tommy, who had never been interested in the Californian ocean, allegedly took up surfing. There was a story that he'd saved a woman from being drowned, which Breda found hard to believe. More plausibly, he became a nature guide. He led groups into the forest and pointed out birds and termite hills. He had one trick, Patrick said, where he swung his machete into the bark of a tree, and sap—was it rubber?—came oozing out. When the hike was over, he took the surfers and eco-tourists and movie stars (apparently Tommy had rubbed shoulders with Woody Harrelson) for a bite to eat at the Crazy Toucan, which was the restaurant owned by the German woman. Patrick showed his mother snapshots of a wooden house with colored lights strung across the front porch. "See? That's where the bar is, right there. That outbuilding, that's the kitchen." "Nice," Breda said. "And there's Ute, with the blonde hair. She's a great cook. Fusion food." He pronounced the woman's name (Ootah, as if he were an expert on Germany).

"Fusion food," Breda said. "Sounds good."

Breda and Tommy did not divorce. For a time, Breda was unsure which was worse: the mortification of divorce or the mortification of being so forgotten about that one's husband could not even bother to place one's breakup on a proper legal footing. Then Breda came to think, What difference does it really make, in the end? This question, she discovered, was increasingly applicable to a lot of things. It was true, as her mother had once remarked, that the consequentiality of things

became clearer as you grew older, so that actions and especially omissions assumed an importance they never used to have; and so one grew more hesitant. But on the other hand it seemed to matter so much less whether you wound up with outcome A or outcome B.

Four years into their marriage, Patrick and Judith bought a house in the Bronx, not far from where Tommy had grown up. They held a housewarming party and Patrick made a big deal of it, insisting Breda fly over. "Bring your boyfriend, Mom," he joked. His father also turned up, with the German woman. When Breda offered to help out with the refreshments, Patrick said, "Just relax, Mom. Enjoy yourself. Leave the cooking to Ute. It's what she does for a living."

For an hour Breda mingled with the young people and played an agonizing game of hide-and-seek with the Costa Ricans. But a conversation with Tommy was inevitable. Emerging from the kitchen, he said jovially, "Hello, Breda." It was their first conversation since their separation, which also was four years old. He looked quite different. There was a beard and a ponytail, and his hands were cracked and brown. He was heavier, in spite of the surfing and the fusion food. "Good of you to come, Breda," he said, making her feel like an interloper. They made small talk. Breda noticed that Tommy made repeated use of a new expression. "The roads are kinda funky down there," he said of Costa Rica; and, "It's kinda funky meeting up again like this, isn't it?" No doubt this was beach talk or bar talk or surf talk. He had lost that exact, scientific air she'd once found attractive. A memory suddenly seized her: Tommy's liking for sniffing and snouting her ass while she took up a position on all fours; even, once, when she was menstruating

and blood trickled down her inner thigh. "It's passion, honey," he mumbled. "This is passion."

As Breda ate parts of her in-flight meal, her thoughts circled again around the business with the foreskin.

It started when Judith learned from the ob-gyn that she was carrying a boy. Judith being Jewish, this raised the question of circumcision. Patrick was very against it. For two months it was all he wanted to talk to his mother about. "I'm saying *he* can circumcise himself," he said. "Let him grow up and let *him* decide."

"I guess," Breda said. She had her own preference, of course, but she didn't want to get involved.

"You *guess*?"

"No, no. You're right," Breda said.

Too late. He was off again, yelling. This business had turned him into a yeller. Sometimes she had to move the phone away from her ear. "There's no *guessing* here. It's either a yes or a no. Can he or can he not decide to become a Jew when he's older? *Yes*. Can he or can he not at that point have a circumcision if that's what he wants? *Yes*. If he grows up and decides to be a Christian, can he get his foreskin back? *No*. Case closed. End of discussion. But apparently not. You know what? I'm going to the doctor right now and I'm going to get it done on myself. I'm going to *demonstrate* it can be done, and then I'm not going to hear one more fucking word about it."

When Patrick came to the phone in a calmer mood, he was able to state Judith's case. "She's saying, what is he, a Jew or a pagan?" Maybe this is something they should have thought about earlier, Breda thought. "I'm saying,

leave the kid alone. Then she says, It's more complicated. You have to carve out a Jewish space. There isn't any Jewish space out there. You have to carve it out."

Really? Breda felt like asking. In New York?

"I see," she said.

"Then there's her dad, of course. She says she doesn't know how he'd take it."

The dad, Harry, had spent three years as a little boy in a camp for Jews in Romania. But did he actually count as a Holocaust survivor? Breda wasn't a hundred percent sure. Unless she was mistaken, nobody in that camp got gassed or anything. It wasn't Auschwitz. But you could understand why he might take this issue seriously. And it made some of her son's arguments look a little lightweight, especially the ones having to do with penises. "Circumcision means loss of sensitivity," Patrick said. He'd looked it up on the Internet. He also said, "My son's dick should look like my dick. It's a father and son thing." Breda's judgment was that, come what may, Harry would live. Parents are a pretty sure bet.

She tried to inform herself. Her best friend in Atherton, Stacey Levingstone, who was Jewish, explained vaguely that cutting off the foreskin was all about removing a barrier to God—"impediment" was the word she used. Another friend, a Christian, told her that sometimes the mohel—the fellow who carried out the operation—cut the membrane beneath the foreskin using a long, sharp fingernail grown especially. Breda did not know what to make of this. Then Dr. Kentridge, one of the doctors at the practice where she worked, told her that Jewish circumcision was really a form of ritual bloodletting: Jewish law, he said, provided that a Jewish boy born without a foreskin must nevertheless have a drop of blood drawn

from his penis. "Blood sacrifice, Breda," he said ominously, as if this should mean something to her.

Then everything suddenly turned upside down. Patrick saw it from Judith's point of view. His son would be named Joshua and would be a Jew. He could always convert to Christianity if he didn't like it. There would be a bris.

This was where Breda got into trouble. She e-mailed Patrick and Judith that she wouldn't be able to make it over for the bris. She gave no reasons.

Patrick replied:

I WILL NEVER FORGIVE YOU FOR THIS.

Terrified, Breda telephoned her son on three consecutive days. Each time he hung up. On the fourth day he consented to speak to her. "What?"

"I'm so sorry, my love," Breda said, in tears. "I've bought a ticket. I'm going to be there."

"We don't want you here. You're not welcome. Judith agrees."

"But why, honey? I've said sorry. I want to be there. I didn't know it meant so much to you."

"Are you out of your mind? Do have any idea what's going on here?"

Breda said, "Don't bully me, Patrick. Please."

"Bully? Is that it? You're calling me a bully?" The line went dead.

Breda rang her daughter. Siobhan, to whom impatience and certainty came easily, said, "Mom, it's totally his fault. He's just acting up."

"You really think so?" Breda gladly asked.

"Of course," Siobhan said. Breda heard a child

screaming in the background. "Can't you see what's going on here? He still hasn't grown up. He's still the baby of the family. He still has these infantile expectations about your responsibilities and your power. He has to have this big dramatic relationship with his mother. That's what you get if you treat him like a baby."

Breda was familiar with the complaint: how unfairly arduous Siobhan's life had been by comparison with her younger brother's, how Patrick always contrived to take the benefit of freebies—loans, airplane tickets, gifts—denied to Siobhan, how Patrick was the apple of her eye. "I guess," Breda said.

"I hate to say it, Mom, but you reap what you sow. Clark, stop it!" The boy kept on bawling. "Look, I've got to go," Siobhan said, and she hung up.

When Breda phoned Tommy in Costa Rica, he said, "I spoke to the kid already. He seemed kinda devastated, to be honest with you. You know, being here, surrounded by all these forests and wild places, it teaches you something. You learn to value the spiritual world." What junk! Breda silently shouted. You fraud! You and that fraud slut! "I kinda see why Patrick might have gotten worked up. The Jewish thing, Harry, the bris, Judith . . . You got to admit," Tommy said, "it's kinda funky."

Breda was upset. She, not Tommy, had always been the one Patrick spoke to when he needed to talk something over. And why hadn't Tommy gotten into trouble when he'd said he couldn't go to the bris because Ute would be in Germany and he had to look after the restaurant? Were employees nonexistent in Costa Rica?

She rang her son again. He said, "I'm not changing my mind. I want you to admit what's going on here."

Amazed by his vengefulness, she said, "This is a very

emotional thing. You're very upset. I understand completely."

"Yeah, right," Patrick said.

"Patrick, please, it was an honest mistake."

"Yeah, like the Holocaust was an honest mistake."

"I don't understand," Breda said. She felt ill. She had no idea how to extricate herself from this. "What am I supposed to be admitting? What have I done that's so wrong?"

Patrick became excited. "It's what you *didn't* do. You never took this thing seriously. You kept your distance. You stood by. I know why now. It's super-clear. You never liked it when I married Judith and you can't accept that Joshua is being brought up as a Jew. You resent it. That's what this is all about. Anti-Semitism. It killed six million people. It would have killed my own son. I can't live with that."

And so, using the phrase "persona non grata," he banned her from having dealings with his family. After the bris, it took Tommy's far-off intervention to set up an encounter at the office of Dr. Goldstein, in New York. (At Breda's expense. Patrick said, "I really, really don't see myself picking up the tab here.")

Patrick repeated his accusation of anti-Semitism in the second of the three sessions they had with Dr. Goldstein. Breda denied it but, seeing that Dr. Goldstein and Patrick were not going to let the matter drop, and dreading any prolongation of the discussion, she quickly stated that maybe at some level she was opposed to Patrick's marriage to a Jewish woman and that maybe she had found the whole business with the foreskin distasteful and that maybe this did have something to do with what had happened. Dr. Goldstein said, "Well

done, Breda. That must have been hard for you." He explained, "Because of the Holocaust and slavery and everything we now know about prejudice, there's a kind of taboo about acknowledging group preferences. But actually everybody is naturally biased in favor of their own kind and their own traditions." A further session and a half were devoted to this subject and to Patrick's "feelings of disappointment." (God, how sensitive men were—on the subject of themselves.) Undertakings of mutual compassion were exchanged, and Dr. Goldstein privately suggested to Breda that "a gesture of reparation" might be a good idea. And that, it appeared, was that. The crisis was over. Speaking for himself, Patrick said, he would forgive and forget. "But, Mom, I'll just say one last thing: one day, your grandson will know that you never came to his bris. That's something you'll always have to live with."

Well, Breda said to herself on the plane, if Joshua at some point in the future cared to think about the episode at all, he would no doubt understand that she was not in any way to blame.

It was around ten PM California time, and dark outside. Ordinarily they would have been landing right about now, but their departure from New York had been delayed by thunderstorms. Breda closed her eyes. She was on the point of falling asleep when the fat woman, reaching for an overhead button, jolted her. "Excuse me," the woman called loudly to a flight attendant. "Excuse me."

"Myra, stop it," her husband hissed.

"Well, I'm not like you. You'd wait years."

"You have to learn to be patient. And I wouldn't wait years. That's an exaggeration."

Breda opened her eyes and closed them again. Now her neighbors were talking about the wife's recent visit to a doctor.

"I'm so fat," the wife said, "they couldn't draw my blood."

"Sometimes they have problems finding a vein in a person with more flesh on their arm," the husband said.

"I feel like I don't have any blood," the woman wailed.

"Myra, that's stupid," the husband said.

"I didn't know I didn't have a vein there."

"It's not that you don't have a vein. It's that they can't find it. Come on, baby, you know that."

"Yes, well, I don't like it."

Wholly sleepless, Breda thought about the question of reparation. She didn't like the word one bit. It made her sound like a war criminal. But an idea nonetheless came to her: why not commission a special wooden bench for her son and grandson? They could sit on it, talk, whatever. It could be their spot. A bench would be easy to maintain. They could place it in the garden or, better still, in a public space—like Van Cortlandt Park, where Tommy and Grandpa Pat had walked together. The bench would have an inscription, of course, recording a grandmother's gift. That way three, maybe even four generations would be united. The idea came to Breda from what she'd seen in London, where the parks and squares seemed to be filled with benches donated by Americans who had fallen in love with that city. The benches evoked long-gone people and times—the war years, so often—but in their beautiful English setting

they seemed indestructibly romantic. Breda, whose one trip to London had taken place in the aftermath of her father's death, had considered dedicating such a bench over there to his memory, but she eventually decided that it wouldn't make much sense since Dad had only been to London for two business trips and had no real ties to the place—Dad, who now lay with Mom in a treeless Boston graveyard.

But to where, or to what, do we have ties? Breda wondered. The world seemed more dreamlike by the day. Mornings were fine: waking up, driving to work, applying herself to her work, eating lunch. But then, sallying on through the afternoon and into the evenings, she would find herself doubting the solidity of everything around her. Each moment, it seemed, was barely distinguishable from some past or even prospective moment. And during her visit to New York, she had been persistently attacked by a sense that the family scenes taking place around her, each an intense variation on some previous scene, were no more or less substantial than a TV rerun. She found herself depressed by Joshua's musical plastic turtle, which, its batteries dying, emitted a slow and gasping and terrible rendition of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." When her son and grandson and daughter-in-law kissed her goodbye at the airport, she heard herself blurt out, "You're here now, and yet in a minute you'll all be gone."

Breda, eyes closed, found herself thinking of a childhood friend, Cynthia Byrne, who not long ago had gone back to college to take a Biblical Studies course. Cynthia had been a churchgoing Catholic all her life, and Breda was a little shocked to hear her announce, a year into her

studies, that the Bible was a relatively youthful, and certainly plagiaristic, set of myths. Breda could not remember the details of Cynthia's statements, but it came down to this: much of the Old Testament was derived from preexisting Syrian or Assyrian or Babylonian sources. The Jews never fled from Egypt and had always lived in Israel. Moses was as make-believe as Mickey Mouse. King David, too, probably. The great stories of the Old Testament had been dreamt up in order to boost certain Jewish tribes at the expense of other Jewish tribes. "Like so much history," Cynthia told her, "those myths were essentially an exercise in self-glorification and self-legitimization. Beautiful, yes; powerful, yes; but factually bunk." "Well, if you say so," Breda said. "*I'm* not saying anything," Cynthia said sharply. "This is standard scholarship. Ask anybody who knows anything about it."

Although Breda's capacity for belief in God had long since abandoned her, she was troubled by Cynthia's dismissal of the ancient faiths. Then again, she had always felt that there was something fishy about Judaism, a religion that, unless she was mistaken, offered little or no prospect of life after death. The Jews were supposed to twist up their lives with prayers and wig-wearing and food rules—for what? Christianity and Islam were strange, too, but at least they promised heaven. Of course, any confidence in heaven began to crumble once you gave it thought; but then everything crumbled once you thought about it, everything you'd been led to believe was true and transcendent.

Her eyes were now open. She felt the plane thudding down through clouds, then saw earthly lights, patterned

and hopeful. She felt ashamed. Her son wanted a world with a further dimension for him and his family. She made it difficult for them. She dragged them down.

The plane landed in Oakland at one o'clock in the morning, three hours behind schedule. There followed an infuriating delay with the baggage, and it was not until three that Breda was finally able to push her cart toward the taxi stand. But there were no taxis, and the line seemed miles long. As Breda stood despairingly by the curb, a black man walked by muttering, "Taxi, taxi," and Breda tried to summon the courage to take up his offer, even though he was illegal-looking. Then another traveler, a businessman, appeared from behind her and decisively signaled to the black man. "Park Plaza Hotel," the businessman said.

The taxi driver waved his hand. "No, no, I not driving for just one mile."

The businessman had anticipated this answer and waved a twenty-dollar bill. This struck Breda as an act of awesome worldliness.

The driver hesitated, then said, "OK," and walked off to collect his car.

It occurred to Breda that she was a few minutes away from a clean hotel bed, whereas it might be two exhausting hours before she arrived home. She looked again at the businessman. She opened her mouth for a second or two, then finally spoke. "Excuse me," she said, "but did I hear you say you're going to a hotel?"

The man turned to her. He was pale-haired, sturdily built, mid-forties. "I guess I am." He paused. "You, ah, need a ride?"

The accent was southern. "Well, I was thinking," Breda said, "it doesn't look like there's much sense in waiting here."

"I'd be happy to take you," he said, looking neither happy nor unhappy.

"Thank you," Breda said.

They stood awkwardly together until the car arrived. The businessman helped Breda with her luggage. There was something appealing about him, Breda thought—something about the athletic swing he gave her suitcase, something about his purposeful air. Breda got into the backseat and waited while the businessman placed his own things into the trunk. Then he eased down next to Breda and slammed shut the passenger door with a slight bodily lurch. His shoulder made contact with hers, and Breda experienced a shock of sexual arousal of a kind she had no live memory of.

The hotel was almost comically close by, and they arrived after what seemed like a few seconds' drive. When Breda offered the man money, he said, "No, really, there's no need," and quickly got out of the car. He picked up his bags and walked immediately to the hotel, leaving Breda to handle her own suitcase.

Breda took no offense. When she entered the hotel lobby, the businessman was talking to the woman at the check-in desk. Breda got in line behind him.

"Marietta, Georgia," the woman was saying as she typed the man's address into her computer.

"That's right," the man said.

The woman typed on. "Guess you pronounce it Muh-retta, huh?"

"I might."

She tittered. She was a blonde, in her forties. "My

brother lived right there, in Marietta. Now he lives—you'd never guess where."

"I give up," the man said. Breda couldn't tell from his voice whether he was enjoying himself or not. She moved to one side to get a view of his face.

"Siberia," the receptionist said. "Bought some land there with his Russian girlfriend." She handed him a card-key for his room. Room 207, Breda had already noted.

"He bought a property in Siberia?" The man was now alert. "He can get his title insured over there?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"If I can't insure my title," the man said, "if I can't get copper-bottomed title insurance, I don't touch it."

Breda found the man's strong opinion on title insurance impressive. She watched him as he walked over to the elevator.

She was given room 214, which was, it turned out, only two doors across the corridor from room 207. It was almost four o'clock, but Breda took a shower. Afterward, she examined her body in the bathroom mirror. Her face she had never liked—she saw a thin upper lip, hair that had never, not even for ten minutes, been cut or styled right—but she could quite neutrally say that her body had not really changed in a couple of decades. Not significantly. As she fastened the towel around her chest, Breda wondered, and allowed herself to doubt, if the businessman's wife could claim as much. That was assuming he had a wife, which was uncertain, since he hadn't worn a wedding band. Breda decided to proceed on the footing that he was unmarried, or at least unattached.

She caught herself. Proceed? Proceed where? And how, and to what end? She closed her eyes with embar-

rassment. He had shown no sign of being attracted to her, was at least five years younger, and by now was almost certainly asleep. What was she thinking of doing? Tip-toeing out into the hallway and knocking on his door? It was crazy, out of the question; but it seemed also out of the question to not do anything. Not to be with this man seemed a grotesque impossibility, like the impossibility of perpetual death.

Breda splashed cold water on her face. What was happening to her? She had lost all sense of the real and the unreal. Wake up! she urged her reflection. But here was a reality: the man was only thirty feet away. Thirty feet! And if she went out and stood by his door, it would only be twelve feet! And if she knocked on his door, well, the worst that could happen would be a rejection; whereas the upside . . . Breda unfastened the towel and let it fall to the floor. Still looking into the mirror, she arched her back and stuck out her ass. White, like a cloud, she thought. She wished it were rounder, though. She wished . . . She shut her eyes. Enough.

But once back in the bedroom, she found herself fumbling into a bra and panties. They were new from Garnet Hill and though perhaps not sexy, then certainly pretty. What to wear with them, though? Her nightgown, with its faded floral, was out of the question, and there was no hotel bathrobe. Breda picked up her raincoat. A raincoat over underwear. It was a combination that brought to mind Faye Dunaway. Faye Dunaway—the most stylish woman in the world, in Breda's eyes, at least before all that plastic surgery—would walk right over to room 207, knock on the door, and, with a bra cup showing beneath her mackintosh, ask for a light.

The raincoat felt cold against her skin. It laid bare

her neck and the pleated skin near her collarbone. Breda turned up the collar, tightened the belt, and examined herself again. She left the bathroom.

She lay down on the bed in her raincoat. She was suddenly exhausted and, in that increasingly familiar and frightening way, adrift—from the world of Faye Dunaway, of children, of cheese. She would be buried with her father and mother in the Boston graveyard. It was with this thought that she found calmness and, still wearing her raincoat, sleep.