Light Rock

The graveyard is always quiet. Nights, when they call up for requests, you know that they are lonely. Sometimes, they are lonely and sad. Girls, worried about what they did wrong at prom. A married man, working as a security guard, looking out the window. At night, they always call Angelica, and always she is polite.

“Hi,” she says. “This is Angelica.”

“Will you play a song? For Joe?”

Her actual name is not Angelica, but Wendy. Her program manager once explained that it is often safer to be someone else. She once had a great-aunt Angelica who kept a secret diary, and this caller, a young girl, has been a regular for months—always calling in the middle of the night. Wendy imagines the girl small and quiet, living sleepily in a suburb with her radio.

“Of course I’ll play a song for Joe. I’ll play a song for you, too.”

“That’s okay. Just for Joe. I hope he’s listening.”

At first it was the music, and then later the idea, which drew her in, here to radio, and the songs she likes to play—nothing that fits too easily into a genre. Tonight a young sleepy girl wants to hear a song by Stevie Wonder, a song which still requires cueing up, not yet acquired by her employer on CD. Sometimes, listening to Mozart, or Haydn, Wendy begins to feel oppressed by mass marketing and publicity; music seemed far more driven, and less absolute, when one could listen to it privately with a king. It’s an
argument she has often with the rock star, Leon, who has briefly returned to Phoenix with his young wife, Sissy.

A long time ago, before Wendy became Angelica, she and Sissy went to school together; they shared a dormitory room and dreamed of writing novels. Now Sissy lives off her trust fund and lies often to her parents: most recently, she is writing a biography of her husband, though of course the book will not be written, let alone published, unless Leon becomes a born-again Christian or dies of AIDS. As for the here and now, Sissy wants to live happily with her husband, who is struggling, not altogether successfully, to remain faithful and kick his coke habit.

This morning, sitting around the kitchen table, drinking margaritas, Leon says, proudly, “There is nothing new under the sun.”

“Cliché,” says Sissy, nodding.

“Ecclesiastes,” Wendy says. “All is vanity.”

“Even clichés have become predictable,” Sissy says. Now she giggles like a girl. In general she is a pale and tiny woman—a mouth the size of a small flower, or coin.

And Wendy, who has just returned home from her shift, sits awkwardly at the counter, watching her friends enjoy their breakfast. She is slightly hungry, though mostly she wants to finish off another glass of water with another Valium and then go in to bed. Lately she has been sleeping in the guest room, which Leon has also set up as a working studio. His guitars and keyboard lean against the wall, covered with dust. Wendy says, lifting her head, undoing the top button on her blouse, “How’s the water?”

“Wet,” says Leon, looking out at the pool. The pool is sitting there beneath the hot and rising sun. Inside the water is blue and clean, delicious. The water is just the way people like it, and now Leon says, raising his glass, “I suggest we spend the day celebrating the fine fact of water.”

Sissy says, “Water, water everywhere. But don’t forget the sunscreen!”
Wendy is standing now, holding her glass of water, beginning to sway. “I’m tired,” she says. “God, I’m really tired. Did Paul call?”

Paul is Wendy’s husband, who lives in New York City, working as an assistant tech director for a remarkably far off-Broadway play. He has lately decided he is not returning west, though Paul is also not certain he wants to stay with theater: mainly, it’s hard to make a living. First DC, then Chicago, now this. Usually he calls late at night, while Wendy is in the studio, doing her own show. Based on the size of his phone bill, she is pretty certain Paul is sleeping with the girl he lives with. If Wendy moves to New York City next fall, as previously arranged, the girl is supposed to be moving out.

Sissy says, looking at the pool, “If you go, I’ll follow.”

Sissy means the water in the pool, which in this neighborhood is not uncommon. It takes Wendy a moment to realize what is meant—the pool, and all the clean water—and Leon is stroking his goatee, admiringly. Before she married Paul, in a small chapel near New Haven, somebody had told her it was time to take the plunge.

“Go,” Leon says to Sissy. “Go.”

“It’s funny,” Wendy says, blinking. “I’m not used to all this light.”

In 1893, her great-aunt Angelica took a lover, in Memphis, Tennessee, who worked at the town bank. The banker eventually left his wife and caused a scandal; months later, a boy found the banker’s body swinging in a barn. Today, the bereaved might sell the story to a television network, in the spirit of redemption, or revenge, but in 1893, her aunt, writing in her diary, asked merely for forgiveness. *It has been wrong*, Angelica wrote. *And I pray God forgives this wretched place*.

Mostly, a hundred years later, Wendy wants to feel clean and alive, lighter than air. In the water, she leans against the
rim of the pool, her arms spread out onto the hot deck behind her. Her ribs feel sharp and alert. Years ago, swimming naked with her friends would have seemed impossible; she lets her legs float and reminds herself, repeatedly, that medication is often comforting. Leon, who is standing on the diving board, taking pictures, is not allowed to drink.

Sissy scoops a glassful of ice and throws it on the water.

“I love the way it floats,” Sissy says. “Ice, I mean.”

Leon says, “Where’s the ice?”

“The house,” Sissy says, pointing.

The house belongs to Sissy’s family, though Wendy has been living here for the past three years. Sissy and Leon prefer to stay in LA, New Orleans and Manhattan, in that order. Sometimes, flying across the country, Leon will stop in Phoenix to spend a couple days. At first he brought women with him—girls, actually, future voices of the industry; he’d leave condoms on the couch, by the poolside. He has been in and out of detox twice in the past year alone. Sissy, of course, knows only about the detox, and it makes Wendy nervous, knowing so much about a man her friend has wed for life. On his latest video, you can see Sissy in the side-lights of Trump Plaza, swooning in adoration. If Leon’s band goes on tour next fall, something which Leon does not want to do, then Sissy says she will go along to keep him clean.

“Assuming,” Sissy said, laughing, “he’s clean to begin with.”

Leon always looks clean. He is returning from the house with a bucket of ice and a sophisticated camera. Usually, he keeps himself well-groomed and politely distant. Even when he’s undressed, Leon looks more like a disinterested professor of art, or a successful architect, than he does a rock star. In Chicago, where he grew up, the Ukrainian Village, he spent a lot of time learning other trades—auto mechanics, drug dealing. The usual, he calls it, and since that time he has bought his mother several mink coats and a new pink house across the street from where he grew up. Sometimes,
when Leon stops by on his way to Los Angeles, he visits Wendy’s room at night. Usually he is wasted to his knees.

In the pool, admiring the water and the heat, Wendy says, “I have to sleep.”

Leon says, adjusting a lens, “Paul wants a divorce. He made jokes about it last night.”

“Paul always jokes about divorce,” Sissy says. “He believes in monogamy.”

“Like you?” Leon says to Sissy. He is looking at his camera, which seems to have a lot of switches and knobs. “Hold that, there.”

When Paul says he wants a divorce, it means he’s afraid that Wendy’s going to leave him. Leon takes the picture, while Sissy holds, and smiles. Sissy is standing on the top step, also naked, looking like a little girl. She has no breasts to speak of, and she likes to shave. Charming, Wendy thinks. And sexually illicit. This tiny girl in her tiny body all grown up. She can’t weigh more than ninety-three.

“Monogamy,” says Sissy, “works only if you believe in it. And if you believe in it, then you simply cannot screw around without feeling guilty. And if you feel guilty, Leon, then you might as well get divorced, because who wants to feel what anybody else can have?”

“Like your husband,” Leon says, nodding.

Sissy sits on the top step and splashes her face. She sets her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands, and says, leaning forward, “It’s not about sex, Leon. It’s about me.”

Wendy knows that Sissy has been loyal. Not once, Sissy claims, not once since her marriage to Leon has she been tempted by another. At the ceremony, in Buenos Aires, Madonna’s secretary wore pink and blue. One night, after Leon hit Sissy in a Manhattan club, Sissy called Wendy at the studio. Sissy was sitting in her bathtub, fully clothed in club gear, using the cordless phone. There were bubbles everywhere, she explained, and it was then that Sissy said, “Sometimes, sometimes he’s so right!”

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Apparently, Leon had also hit a nerve. Once you married a man you were in love with, you weren’t allowed to wish you hadn’t. Otherwise, this was failure.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Sissy had said. “Want to know a secret?”

“No,” she said to Sissy. “Not really. Are you all right?”

“It’s a big one, Wendy. It’s a really big one.”

“Maybe you should stay somewhere else. For tonight.”

“His new record. It’s a flop. A bomb. You know, like they say on Broadway? It won’t even pay for the videos, and now they have to make another and use the Statue of Liberty. Then they say they have to go on tour, and Leon says, No. No, Sissy has to clean the house.”

“Can you come visit? Come stay in Phoenix?”

“No,” Sissy said, whispering, beginning to cry. “I can’t come. That’s the secret, Wendy. Don’t you see? I can’t come.”

Sometimes you have to let yourself let go. According to those who live there, the act of radio was invented in Murray, Kentucky, a place her great-aunt passed through on her way to Indiana. The family had been shooed away from Memphis by scandal and a legal writ. They settled once again in Bloomington, this time for a hundred years.

She thinks if a man thinks about divorce, then probably his wife does too. It starts with more than just a phone call. Paul, her husband in New York City, says it’s safe and doesn’t do anybody any harm. He often asks her to send money for the phone bill. Not their phone bill, but the bills he runs up on the 900 numbers. Hundreds of dollars a month. And while he never says the money goes to the phone company, she sends it nonetheless; if he is on the phone, she reasons, he is often harmless. Sometimes he special orders calls for her very own. A man will call her up at work, while she’s in the studio, and ask her if she likes to sweat.

Once, a woman called, who pretended to take a survey. The woman called early on a Saturday while Wendy was still in bed; the woman said she was working on her dissertation and needed some random sampling. “Do you talk with other women often?” the woman asked.

She sounded pleasant, like a friend. There wasn’t any static, and Wendy lay in bed, talking about herself and, after a while, lovers she had known.

“Do you like lingerie?” the woman asked, gently. “Would you describe the lingerie you’re wearing now?”

*None? You’re wearing none?*

That is when she knew it was a message straight from Paul. The woman was smooth and knew how to make you feel inspired, and hot, and far away from home. Even when he’s drunk, Paul is always harmless on the phone. Sometimes he is even charming, and afterwards, the woman said she knew him very well.

“Though of course we’ve never met,” the woman said. “I’m sorry, Wendy. But I can’t give you my real name.”

She knew exactly what she meant. Usually Paul won’t remember what he’s talked about unless it causes an awful lot of pain.

“I could leave him,” Wendy said to Sissy. “We don’t have to stay married.”

They were sitting on the pool deck. Leon was on a flight to Denver, supposedly to do a final shoot for the band’s forthcoming release of “Wicked Heart, Wicked Heart.” It was a song Leon wrote to show Sissy he was sorry for hitting her in a Manhattan club.

Sissy took a sip of her iced tea, listening, because she was a friend.

“It’s just hard because we’re so far away,” Wendy said, entirely by heart.

“You should leave him,” Sissy said. “Sayonara, Baby.”

If Sissy left Leon, she couldn’t be in any more of his
videos. Leon has sung a lot of songs about his wife. He says it comes with practice.

“If I leave him,” Wendy said. “I mean, if I decide to divorce Paul . . . if I do that, then what?”

“If you’re someplace you don’t want to be, you shouldn’t be there. We could go to Graceland. We could meet Leon in Rome.”

“I can’t speak Italian,” Wendy said. “Besides, he loves me.”

“Of course he loves you. That’s why it has to be your fault. You have to tell him what he already knows, Wendy. You have to do the hard part.” Now Sissy looked across the yard, where there stood a gardener, landscaping. The gardener was trimming bougainvillea along the stuccoed cinderblock wall. Most likely, he didn’t speak a word of English. Sissy said, “I know Leon doesn’t love me. But at least he’s faithful.”

“Of course he loves you. He adores you.”

“Yes, he does that,” she said, reaching for her tea. “He adores me. He used to be pretty good at that, too.”

“I believe in marriage,” Wendy said. “I just don’t believe it’s possible.”

“Of course it’s possible,” Sissy said. “Why else would it always go wrong?”

“You have to believe,” Wendy said, nodding.

Sissy pointed to the gardener, admiringly. “Of course,” Sissy said, pointing, “you also have to know when it’s time to walk away.”

Wendy has talked to men and women often, mostly at night, while playing songs for all the world to hear. *The Song of Solomon, The Book of Psalms*—the human voice was built to keep us out of danger. Desire, and the way it draws the body inward. Alone, living, one learns not to be excessive. To save and wait for rainy days. As a teenager, when she first realized she might be fat, and always lonely, she grew to
trust her instincts. By the age of seventeen she was vomiting twice a day.

In Phoenix it rains only when necessary, and often not at all. After a while, desire becomes a matter of faith, which is nothing more than the hope of things yet unseen, like voices on the telephone. If Sissy is doing something wrong with Leon, then maybe she should read some books, maybe take a couple courses in communication. This evening, while Wendy was in the shower, Leon stepped inside the bathroom and asked her what she’d like for dinner.

Wendy reached to turn down the spray. The shower was enormous, large enough to swim in. Half of it turned into a Jacuzzi, and Wendy said, “Where’s Sissy?”

“Taking a nap.”

“I thought you were in Denver?”

“ Took the Cessna,” Leon says. “We have it for another month.”

She reached for the shampoo. She thought of Paul, talking on the telephone. Most likely, Leon had flown to Denver just to meet his dealer.

“It snowed,” Leon said. “Ruined the entire shoot.” He looked at the floor, and then the towels.

“Wendy?” Leon said, looking up.

“Yes?”

“She’s too good for me. Sissy. She’s too good and she still can’t live without me.”

She poured too much shampoo into her palm and said, cautiously, “Maybe you should give her a try?”

And then he shrugged, turned into the mirror, watching her, and left.

It was the type of moment she will recall years later—a moment fraught with tenderness and lust—and tonight, on her way down the mountain, past the sturdy security office, and the sturdy man inside, reading, she listens to the radio.
There is music in the air, and pollen, and now there is a moment of silence, between songs—dead air.

Somebody at work clearly is not paying much attention. Her program director, a man who looks as if he is a deacon, has twice admonished her for deviating from the schedule. He threatens often to take her off the air. If it weren’t for advertising, the world would be another place—far away, and maybe less expensive. It used to be she couldn’t stand to be naked in front of anyone. Then she went to counseling, and spent a lot of time with Sissy. Among friends, we are taught, you are not supposed to hide.

When she and Sissy shared a dormitory room at a small, expensive college, they also shared their dreams: a lot of falling and running fast downhill. Together, Wendy and Sissy would grow up and become artists and have boyfriends who liked to break the smaller laws: boys who wouldn’t shave closely and always smelled of tobacco and wine. They could all be Bohemians, and beautiful, and die from a life of poverty, later to be described by a fine new school of art. But after graduation, Sissy flew to Monaco, and Wendy went home to Bloomington, Indiana. Her father had died. The estate was in arrears. Men in ugly clothes repossessed the family station wagon, and then the farm equipment; the department stores were last to be sold off. Throughout the process, Wendy spent a lot of time doing volunteer work for the church.

She had read Boethius, had understood the whims of Fortune, which had now become a magazine. America, she soon discovered, did not pay much attention to the history of the world. One day, you’re stealing car stereos on Lake Street, the next you’re making popular entertainment and coming across a pair of Delco speakers. Even Leon has had a song or two on the charts. Ten years from now, someone might play one of the deeper cuts. May 20th, 1993. Where were you? . . . and tonight she is in the valley, which is dark.
and illustrated by light, the low-wattage ambiance of smog. If she stays in Phoenix, then she will not have a reason to leave it for her husband. Clearly, resurrection is the theme here. A second chance. Hollywood after Rehab... Can’t we try again? ... and she is driving through the city, down Twenty-fourth Street, with the top down. The air can carry radio and disease, water and even light. Living her life with Paul, however separately and alone, living this life has taught her to watch for the way light falls. The way it can instruct the stage to bend. Theater is light, Paul says. Life is dark.

On the air, she opens with that comment. It’s late, she says, does anybody mind if she smokes? Sound, she has always imagined, moves far more gently than illumination.

Eventually she spent a couple years in seminary, just to try things out; her advisor was coming out and very Theologically Correct. God for the Environment. Christ for Disenfranchised Congregations. When asked by her advisor if she had a calling, Wendy had said, “Sometimes I hear voices in my head. But I don’t think that’s exactly what you have in mind.”

“You no longer wish to be ordained?”
“I believe in God,” she said. “What’s left to be ordained?”

She finished her degree, conspicuously taking the non-ordination route, and knew she’d never find a job. Nonetheless, people noticed she had gained some weight. A few days later, she stumbled into Paul, who was drunk—a social gathering for distant members of the college. He was doing summer theater, and bartending; in college they had slept together often. Her father had been alcoholic, the harmless type who drinks alone in order best to avoid his creditors, as well as his wife, who also drank, and Wendy had decided when she fell in love with Paul for the second time to never drink again, which made it hard, sometimes, living with
Paul: practice, and a lot of painful and late-night conversations. Eventually, a second summer theater ended right on time, and in the fall, they moved to Phoenix, because there she had a job selling time for a television network; they moved to Phoenix because he was going through a bad time, and because in Phoenix it was easier for him to go through a bad time all by himself. At least here he didn’t know anybody. He wasn’t going to lose any friends over it. The bad time lasted for several months. Each morning, Wendy went off to work.

“So I’m not doing Broadway,” he would say, often, sitting in a comfortable chair. “At least I’m not teaching high school.”

Sissy asked them to live inside of her enormous house, on top of Camelback Mountain, and sometimes Wendy knew Paul wouldn’t mind teaching high school. Anything to get him up and off the mountain. Eventually, he began to work out; he bought some new clothes on the Visa and then one day decided he should try again. He was going to turn thirty soon. One last try before he gave it up for good and started building furniture. With all his experience on the set, most likely he could teach himself to build a coffee table, or a chair. It’s not as if they were about to have kids. Wendy didn’t want kids, but still she liked them. She still liked people who weren’t afraid to blink. If she had been a better person, less self-involved, then maybe she could have some? At twenty-nine, she’s had several root canals already. Her teeth are swollen with decay. She once went two years without a period. What they don’t tell you in school about bulimia is this: it often feels good.

And now, in the morning, after finishing her log, she knows precisely what she wants to do, though she knows she will not do it. Even so, she wants to do it all over again—empty herself out, make herself clean. At first, as a young girl, you become friendly with your fingers—it only takes two—and then you learn to control the other muscles in
your body. You teach your stomach to pay attention to your mind. You take it all in, and then you give it all back before anything can hurt you. Like a man who still wants to be your husband, living in a foreign city, already plotting another life for you. Like your best friend, decorating house in Manhattan or New Orleans. Like all those people who call up each and every night with their requests.

This one’s going out to a good friend in Paradise Valley, you might say, because if they call you up, if they listen to you in the middle of the night, then they are always, always going to be good friends. Good friends, who have nothing left to hide.

In bed and still not quite awake, she knows that somebody else is in the room. She considers sitting up and feels a hand come across her mouth. The hand lifts, gently, and Wendy knows she doesn’t have to be alert. The light is bright enough to sleep through. She could pretend to be still asleep, to fall back into the comfort of the sheets, which belong to Sissy. Always before, Sissy has been far away, and Wendy is supposed to be asleep.

Leon is naked and tall. He is holding his cock in his hand, tentatively, and now he strokes her hair. His eyes are brilliantly coked-up.

“Where’s Sissy?”

“You know what people want?” Leon says.

“No.”

“The king,” he says. “They all want to be the king.”

“Leon,” she says. “Where’s your wife?”

“We were in LA, at the airport, and I was looking right at her. There were all these people with their tickets. Waiting in line. Fighting at the counter. All these ugly people with their tickets and their Walkmans and then I saw her. I was looking right at her. We were in the airport and then I knew she was lost without me.”
“Okay,” she says, nodding. “But why do you want her to find out?”

“We’ve been married all my life,” Leon says. “This is about you.”

“I thought you did this with everyone. You being the king and whatnot.”

“If you catch a falling star,” Leon says, “you burn right up.”

It’s the first time they’ve ever talked about it. Later, she imagines she is somewhere near Jamaica. She is standing waist-deep in the water, which is blue and full of stardust, and she is waiting for the waves to break. The water is warm as semen, and eventually the sky is full of stars, falling, one and then another, burning across the sky, and she can feel her hair in the breeze; she can feel the end of the day, caught in her throat. She can feel Leon, giving up, beginning to recede. What happens to a man when he cannot find the shore? It is important to know the sea is never full. The sea, like the sun, always rises, even if it is entirely our fault. What is needed now is silence: because somewhere, down a hallway, a good friend is waiting by herself. Unable to breathe, it is impossible for her to come. Then the semen lingers on her collarbone and throat. The body of evidence, which is nothing more than a vague remark you learn to leave a while before waving it aside.

Sin is more easily justified than existence. One steals because one is often hungry—as in Newark, or Somalia, or all those people watching television all alone. And when two become one, she thinks the other half of each must surely die. Looking out the window, she understands the shape of things to come: there are those who do, and those who do not. A house divided cannot stand. A DJ is neither a musician nor a priest. If she wanted to play an instrument, then she should have taken lessons. Leon, the Rock Star,
taught himself to play guitar, and later the piano, just like Elvis. Certain critics who cannot play guitar often admire his technique, though they are always quick to mention that he is, nonetheless, unschooled. At school one learns the rules. One learns to play fair and pay attention. *To choose is to be*, wrote John Donne, among other things. *But to be a part of nobody is to be nothing.*

If she returns to Paul, in New York City, then clearly she will belong to something: marriage, that great institution of economy and deceit. Soon they will be buying cards for one another at Hallmark. *For a dutiful wife, a dissolute husband* . . . the script all loopy and polite. All in all, a thriving industry. She once told Paul if he didn’t check himself into an institution, then somebody else was going to have to. His lover, his boss—sooner or later, people were going to be quick to agree.

“It’s all in the mind,” Paul said, dismissing her. “Thinking makes it so.”

If such things are still possible, then she wants to be full of light. God is light, like a feather, or a shaft. In the desert people often die of sunstroke, and it’s the kind of thing she always did alone. She’d set out a few candles, giving herself up to the entire day. Take a little in, give a little back. Tit for tat. And even now the experience still lingers in the mind, especially on her darker days, because now she has her body under her control. Years ago her counselor spent a lot of time listening to her, and in the hospital, somebody decided that she did not want to die. She wanted to be light, like God, yes, and she wanted to make herself feel good . . . *certainly* . . . but she was willing to agree she did not want to die. Years later at a radio station in the center of the night, sipping at her iced water, she often wonders if she’s healthy. Probably she is just looking for a better way to disappear.

On the air, you cannot see the voices coming to you, but you can always feel them coming. Last summer, with Paul, in Leon and Sissy’s pool, he had whispered to her in the
water. He had put his arms around her and lifted her from the water. The entire visit, he drank only water and beer. They had the house to themselves, and she imagined one could hear them, inside the house, and out, and then he had to go away. Wendy drove him to the airport. He said he’d call her soon and that he loved her. He said, “Soon we will be all through this.”

“I know,” she said. They were standing in the airport, which was cold. The carpet was orange and the terminal had multicultural art upon the walls.

“Be good,” Paul said, which sometimes meant different things.

“Be careful,” she said.

“I’m worried about you. Not me, Wendy. It’s my turn to be worried about you.”

“I’ve gained three pounds,” she said. “I’m fine.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Paul looked at his watch and said, “We’re far away. We get lonely. People get lonely—”

“Do you want me to get tested? I mean, would it make you feel better?”

“People,” Paul said. He looked at the people waiting to board the flight. “People are not safe.”

“Nothing is safe, Paul. Safety is illusion.”

“Wendy, Leon is not safe. If you want to get tested,” Paul said, nodding, “I’d like that.”

“Okay.”

“But there’s no point in making it a habit.”

“Uh huh.”

“The testing,” he said. “It gets expensive.”

Her great-aunt Angelica died when she was thirty-two. She weighed less than ninety pounds and lived alone on her brother’s farm. The move from Memphis turned out to be a blessing in disguise: in Indiana, people dressed a little differently, and there was still a lot of land. It was a place rich in soil. Vegetables grew like weeds, even faster, and in 1893
it was still possible to believe that one could feed the world. Alone in her barn, living with her brother, Angelica never met the man who invented radio. She never even knew his name.

“Wendy,” Sissy said, in college. “You can’t keep throwing up.”

They’d lived together for two years before Sissy finally made her go and see a counselor. Then one night they sat together on a sofa in a common room and wept. Two young girls, crying in a dormitory, and by now they are each familiar with the signs: a symptom is not a cause. In the backyard, Leon is lying on the lawn, his belly tan as rosewood. He’s been good for three hours and several minutes, hasn’t had a single snort. Sissy is reading on the sofa, and entering the living room, the living room bright with flowers delivered each and every Tuesday, Wendy knows she has been wrong. She knows she has a secret to disclose, and she knows she never will.

“I’m bad,” she says to Sissy. “I need to be divorced.”

“You’re tired,” Sissy says, looking up. “You need to quit your job. Why don’t we take a trip?”

“Then what?”

“Move away. Tell Paul to follow you someplace nice. If he comes—”

Sissy sits up, puts away her book. She opens up her arms, and this time Wendy runs away. She runs out the door, across the granite lawn, into the driveway. She stands in the driveway on the asphalt, barefoot, and soon her feet begin to burn.


“My name is Angelica,” she says. Now she begins to laugh, hysterically, and then she falls down on the driveway. She lies on her back, her thin legs lifting up into the air, and looks into the sun. After a moment, she can’t see anything at all.

“Come inside,” Sissy says. “Please?”
“No.”
“Leon,” Sissy says. “Leon is leaving in the morning. I’m kicking him out.”

The bride of Christ is taught to love her husband dearly. As for Wendy’s father, he disappeared into a glass, darkly, and left behind a woman’s diary. Dust to dust—aside from combustion and the microchip, the world really hasn’t changed all that much, especially for a woman: she is still expected to want a man she’s married to, and not another, or none. Wendy has spent a lot of time figuring it out, and her great-aunt eventually starved herself of company. She lived on a farm in Indiana in a land of make-believe: if you make it, then certainly you must believe in it: corn, and wheat, the value of a hard day’s work. As for the man who invented radio, he never got the credit, because somebody beat him to the fair. That is, he simply did not show up first.

Tonight, Paul says he wants a divorce, which means he wants her to fly out to La Guardia tomorrow. Perhaps she could catch a flight with Leon, he says. “Aren’t there drugs in New York?”

It is late and she likes to be alone, which she knows is dangerous. She is in the studio, talking to Paul in New York City, which is all the way across the country. It is the kind of conversation which could turn either way, depending.

Now Paul says, sloppily, “What do you think?”
“I’m afraid.”

He takes this as a cue. “We are not going to make it,” he says, sounding it out. “It’s not working anymore.”

He is waiting for her to disagree, she knows that. She knows he wants to argue. She could still pack up her life and deliver herself to him early in the morning.

“Wait—” she says. “Is this an ultimatum, Paul? Wait—”

She reaches for the log, checks the clock, punches in a PSA. This one is about condoms and disease. She doesn’t want her life to be about disease; she thinks there must be
something necessary, something meaningful she still needs
to do. She says that now, into the microphone. She says to
all the midnight callers, “Life does not have to be an ultima-
tum, unless you make it one.”

She says, “The spirit is willing. To kill a virus, you have
to kill the cell, but stone walls do not a prison make. Look,
it’s still possible to phone home.” She says, reaching for her
glass, “I’d like to talk about home. If you want to talk about
home tonight, give me a call. If you’re sad, if you’re lonely,
give me a call. Give me a call and we’ll chat.”

“Wendy,” Paul says.

“Reach out and touch someone. So to speak.”

“Wendy?”

“The cell is the source of life, okay. Fine. We are prison-
ers to our condition. But what I’d like to know for sure are
the conditions. So who out there has got some good ideas?”

She is vaguely aware that Paul will not hang up, though
only God knows why. To reject the world is to reject the love
of God, but to divorce a man you love is not the same,
merely harder. The phone lies on top of the chart, and even-
tually, to her surprise, the line goes dead.

“Give me a call,” she says. “We’ll talk. The lines are open
now and we are on.

By now the phones are lighting up. At home, where her
friend Sissy lives with Leon, neither is sleeping in each
other’s arms. Leon is a rock star, and Sissy is a wife who now
belongs to Narc Anon. Paul, who lives in New York City,
still believes he needs a woman to hold onto, and if she
wanted to, then probably she could play another song. She
could turn a couple dials, push a button and make some
pretty music. She doesn’t have to let herself be fired in the
morning, though now the board is lit up like the sky, simply
irresistible. Hunger, she thinks, has made her realize she is
capable of being more. Because at night, before the longing
turns to bad, it often feels good for just a while longer. Even
alone, sitting all alone at night, working in a studio...
alone she knows that she can close her eyes and clasp her hands and feel it in the center of her ribs.

“This is the land,” she says. “We have our inheritance.”

Why do you feel bad? her counselor often asked.

Why do you feel anything at all?

The idea used to be to make yourself small as possible. Less surface contact, and friction. If she and Sissy take a trip, after packing Leon’s suitcase, then maybe they can all plan to meet up in New Orleans for Mardi Gras, or Christmas. Tomorrow, she will have to think about another job, because now it is the morning after, and still her life feels incomplete. Inside there is a big and hollow space, enough to fit the sky, and for the moment she is walking down a city street, the wind in her hair. The street is hot and full of traffic. To the left, the airport is only a few miles away. Madness, she now believes, is just a more efficient means of letting life go right on through you.

Eventually, and as a matter of course, she is startled by a long black car. It’s a limo with a sunroof, and the man driving wears a cap. He rolls down a window and asks her if she’d like to step inside.

“Where to?” asks the man.

“I’m not a hooker,” she says.

“No,” says the man, sadly. “I mean, did your car break?”

Somewhere overhead lingers the morning star, and in the back seat sits a woman with a little girl who is drinking orange juice. The easy choice would be to step inside, to let herself be carried off. Because once, a long time ago, there was a star who fell from grace. He descended into hell, and after a little while he rose again to investigate a garden. Then we learned too much and were compelled to plant our own: we had to develop irrigation, and a wheel, and then we had to make a bill of rights . . . Thou shalt take the body in order to let it go . . . because here, in a city just beneath the ozone, it is still possible to try again. It’s a song she’s often played
before, and now she’s waiting for the chorus. She’s waiting for a woman in a long black car to offer some advice. And she knows she’s going to have to carry her own weight. She knows the sky is also full of angels. She knows she’ll have to stay a while longer, here on earth, as it often is in heaven. Because things pass us by, like the speed of light.

Here, Leon had said, falling into her sheets. Catch.