

## Sinking House

T. Coraghessan Boyle

When Monty's last breath caught somewhere in the back of his throat with a sound like the tired wheeze of an old screen door, the first thing she did was turn on the water. She leaned over him a minute to make sure, then she wiped her hands on her dress and shuffled into the kitchen. Her fingers trembled as she jerked at the lever and felt the water surge against the porcelain. Steam rose in her face; a glitter of liquid leapt for the drain. Croak, that's what they called it. Now she knew why. She left the faucet running in the kitchen and crossed the gloomy expanse of the living room, swung down the hallway to the guest bedroom, and turned on both taps in the bathroom there. It was almost as an afterthought that she decided to fill the tub too.

For a long while she sat in the leather armchair in the living room. The sound of running water—pure, baptismal, as uncomplicated as the murmur of a brook in Vermont or a toilet at the Waldorf—soothed her. It trickled and trilled, burbling from either side of the house and driving down the terrible silence that crouched in the bedroom over the lifeless form of her husband.

The afternoon was gone and the sun plunging into the canopy of the big eucalyptus behind the Finkelsteins' when she finally pushed herself up from the chair. Head down, arms moving stiffly at her sides, she scuffed out the back door, crossed the patio, and bent to turn on the sprinklers. They sputtered and spat—not enough pressure, that much she understood—but finally came to life in halfhearted umbrellas of mist. She left the hose trickling in the rose garden, then went back into the house, passed through the living room, the kitchen, the master bedroom—not even a glance for Monty, no: she wouldn't look at him, not yet—and on into the master bath. The

taps were weak, barely a trickle, but anyway, then flushed the toilet and float with the brick Monty had used and then finally, so weary she could barely lean into the stall and flipped on the

Two weeks after the ambulance came next door, Meg Terwilliger was doing exercises on the prayer rug in the sun, a cigarette glowing in the ashtray on the new CD by Sandee and the Sharps, the big speakers in the corners. Meg with the fine bones and haunted eyes. She wore her black hair cut close around in front, and she used a sheeny black to out the hunger in her eyes. In half an hour to pick up Tiffany at nursery school, at the veterinarian's, take Sonny's shoes, buy a pound and a half of thresher's flour tortillas at the market, and start supper. But now, she was stretching.

She took a deep drag on the cigarette, right foot, and brought it up snug against the left foot in its place. One palm flat on the floor, bobbing vaguely to the beat of the radio, a dozen repetitions, then paused to rest. It wasn't until she turned over to do the other leg that she noticed the dampness in the

Puzzled, she rose to her knees and bent to rub at the twin wet spots on the rug. She lifted the corner of the rug, suspiciously, there was no odor of urine. Looking down, the concrete floor was a shade darker, as if it were bleeding moisture as in the winter. But this wasn't winter, this was in Los Angeles and it hadn't rained for months. Sonny—he'd promised her ceramic tiles, he'd run all over town to get the best price, a floral pattern, he still hadn't found it, she'd shot back the sliding door to the yard to investigate.

Immediately, she felt the Bermuda

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taps were weak, barely a trickle, but she left them on anyway, then flushed the toilet and pinned down the float with the brick Monty had used as a doorstop. And then finally, so weary she could barely lift her arms, she leaned into the stall and flipped on the shower.

Two weeks after the ambulance came for the old man next door, Meg Terwilliger was doing her stretching exercises on the prayer rug in the sunroom, a menthol cigarette glowing in the ashtray on the floor beside her, the new CD by Sandee and the Sharks thumping out of the big speakers in the corners. Meg was twenty-three, with the fine bones and haunted eyes of a poster child. She wore her black hair cut close at the temples, long in front, and she used a sheeny black eyeshadow to bring out the hunger in her eyes. In half an hour she'd have to pick up Tiffany at nursery school, drop off the dog at the veterinarian's, take Sonny's shirt to the cleaner's, buy a pound and a half of thresher shark, cilantro, and flour tortillas at the market, and start the burritos for supper. But now, she was stretching.

She took a deep drag on the cigarette, tugged at her right foot, and brought it up snug against her buttocks. After a moment she released it and drew back her left foot in its place. One palm flat on the floor, her head bobbing vaguely to the beat of the music, she did half a dozen repetitions, then paused to relight her cigarette. It wasn't until she turned over to do her straight-leg lifts that she noticed the dampness in the rug.

Puzzled, she rose to her knees and reached behind her to rub at the twin wet spots on the seat of her sweats. She lifted the corner of the rug, suspecting the dog, but there was no odor of urine. Looking closer, she saw that the concrete floor was a shade darker beneath the rug, as if it were bleeding moisture as it sometimes did in the winter. But this wasn't winter, this was high summer in Los Angeles and it hadn't rained for months. Cursing Sonny—he'd promised her ceramic tile and though she'd run all over town to get the best price on a nice Italian floral pattern, he still hadn't found the time to go look at it—she shot back the sliding door and stepped into the yard to investigate.

Immediately, she felt the Bermuda grass squelch be-

neath the soles of her aerobic shoes. She hadn't taken three strides—the sun in her face, Queenie yapping frantically from the fenced-in pool area—and her feet were wet. Had Sonny left the hose running? Or Tiffany? She slogged across the lawn, the pastel Reeboks spattered with wet, and checked the hose. It was innocently coiled on its tender, the tap firmly shut. Queenie's yapping went up an octave. The heat—it must have been ninety-five, a hundred—made her feel faint. She gazed up into the cloudless sky, then bent to check each of the sprinklers in succession.

She was poking around in the welter of bushes along the fence, looking for an errant sprinkler, when she thought of the old lady next door—Muriel, wasn't that her name? What with her husband dying and all, maybe she'd left the hose running and forgotten all about it. Meg rose on her tiptoes to peer over the redwood fence that separated her yard from the neighbors' and found herself looking into a glistening, sunstruck garden, with banks of impatiens, bird of paradise, oleander, and loquat, roses in half a dozen shades. The sprinklers were on and the hose was running. For a long moment Meg stood there, mesmerized by the play of light through the drifting fans of water; she was wondering what it would be like to be old, thinking of how it would be if Sonny died and Tiffany were grown up and gone. She'd probably forget to turn off the sprinklers too.

The moment passed. The heat was deadening, the dog hysterical. Meg knew she would have to do something about the sodden yard and wet floor in the sunroom, but she dreaded facing the old woman. What would she say—I'm sorry your husband died but could you turn off the sprinklers? She was thinking maybe she'd phone—or wait till Sonny got home and let him handle it—when she stepped back from the fence and sank to her ankles in mud.

When the doorbell rang, Muriel was staring absently at the cover of an old *National Geographic* which lay beneath a patina of dust on the coffee table. The cover photo showed the beige and yellow sands of some distant desert, rippled to the horizon with corrugations that might have been waves on a barren sea. Monty was dead

and buried. She wasn't eating either. The sympathy cards in the kitchen, where the tap had plunged to the floor with redemption. When it was late at night—she could hear each with its own voice—and trickled from the far side of suspended hours she could glimpse of the toilet in the gutter the tub as water cascaded down the dam, the quickening rush as it shot like a miniature waterfall the floor vent . . . she could hear the bedroom, the distant hiss of the eternal sizzle of the sprinklers.

But now she heard the doorbell.

Wearily, gritting her teeth, she pushed her lower legs and the damp carpet up from the door. The carpet pushed through like a sponge—and she regretted it—but most of the way to the heating vents, where Monty had miscalculated the board. She heard it drip in the house and for a moment she was still in a shadowy lag of the house poised on its bell sounded again. "All right, I'm coming."

A girl with dark circles under her eyes stood on the doorstep. She looked vaguely familiar. Muriel thought she recognized about a streetwalker who had once liberated all the other leathers of the neighborhood, but Muriel realized her mistake. She saw that her shoes were muddy. Neighbor? Meg Terwilliger?

Muriel was listening to nothing. The girl looked at her, uh, just wanted to tell you

erobic shoes. She hadn't taken her face, Queenie yapping frantically in the pool area—and her feet were those running? Or Tiffany? She had the pastel Reeboks spattered with mud. The hose. It was innocently coiled and firmly shut. Queenie's yapping was a constant beat—it must have been ninety-nine. Her feet felt faint. She gazed up into the sky to check each of the sprin-

g in the welter of bushes along the fence. An errant sprinkler, when she opened the next door—Muriel, wasn't that her husband dying and all, maybe she was being and forgotten all about it. She tried to peer over the redwood fence and see what the neighbors' and found a garden, sunstruck garden, with a variety of paradises, oleander, and lo-fer shades. The sprinklers were running. For a long moment Meg was struck by the play of light through the leaves. She was wondering what it would be like if Sonny were up and gone. She'd probably have the sprinklers too.

The heat was deadening, the dog would have to do something about the wet floor in the sunroom, the old woman. What would she do if he died but could you turn off the sprinklers? Thinking maybe she'd phone—she'd call him and let him handle it—when she saw the fence and sank to her ankles.

g, Muriel was staring absently at a *National Geographic* which lay on the coffee table. The cover was a mix of red and yellow sands of some dishorizon with corrugations that looked like a barren sea. Monty was dead

and buried. She wasn't eating much. Or sleeping much either. The sympathy cards sat unopened on the table in the kitchen, where the tap overflowed the sink and water plunged to the floor with a pertinacity that was like a redemption. When it was quiet—in the early morning or late at night—she could distinguish the separate taps, each with its own voice and rhythm, as they dripped and trickled from the far corners of the house. In those suspended hours she could make out the comforting gurgle of the toilet in the guest room, the musical wash of the tub as water cascaded over the lip of its porcelain dam, the quickening rush of the stream in the hallway as it shot like a miniature Niagara down the chasm of the floor vent . . . she could hear the drip in the master bedroom, the distant hiss of a shower, and the sweet eternal sizzle of the sprinklers on the back lawn.

But now she heard the doorbell.

Wearily, gritting her teeth against the pain in her lower legs and the damp lingering aches of her feet, she pushed herself up from the chair and sloshed her way to the door. The carpet was black with water, soaked through like a sponge—and in a tidy corner of her mind she regretted it—but most of the runoff was finding its way to the heating vents and the gaps in the corners where Monty had miscalculated the angle of the baseboard. She heard it dripping somewhere beneath the house and for a moment pictured the water lying dark and still in a shadowy lagoon that held the leaking ship of the house poised on its trembling surface. The doorbell sounded again. "All right, all right," she muttered, "I'm coming."

A girl with dark circles round her eyes stood on the doorstep. She looked vaguely familiar, and for a moment Muriel thought she recognized her from a TV program about a streetwalker who rises up to kill her pimp and liberate all the other leather-clad, black-eyed streetwalkers of the neighborhood, but the girl spoke and Muriel realized her mistake. "Hi," the girl said, and Muriel saw that her shoes were black with mud, "I'm your neighbor? Meg Terwilliger?"

Muriel was listening to the bathroom sink. She said nothing. The girl looked down at her muddy shoes. "I, uh, just wanted to tell you that we're, uh—Sonny and I,

I mean—he's my husband?—we're sorry about your trouble and all, but I wondered if you knew your sprinklers were on out back?"

Muriel attempted a smile—surely a smile was appropriate at this juncture, wasn't it?—but managed only to lift her upper lip back from her teeth in a sort of wince or grimace.

The girl was noticing the rug now, and Muriel's sodden slippers. She looked baffled, perhaps even a little frightened. And young. So young. Muriel had had a young friend once, a girl from the community college who used to come to the house before Monty got sick. She had a tape recorder, and she would ask them questions about their childhood, about the days when the San Fernando Valley was dirt roads and orange groves. Oral history, she called it. "It's all right," Muriel said, trying to reassure her.

"I just—is it a plumbing problem?" the girl said, backing away from the door. "Sonny . . ." she said, but didn't finish the thought. She ducked her head and retreated down the steps, but when she reached the walk she wheeled around. "I mean you really ought to see about the sprinklers," she blurted, "the whole place is soaked, my sunroom and everything—"

"It's all right," Muriel repeated, and then the girl was gone and she shut the door.

"She's nuts, she is. Really. I mean she's out of her gourd."

Meg was searing chunks of thresher shark in a pan with green chilies, sweet red pepper, onion, and cilantro. Sonny, who was twenty-eight and so intoxicated by real estate he had to forgo the morning paper till he got home at night, was slumped in the breakfast nook with a vodka tonic and the sports pages. His white-blond hair was cut fashionably, in what might once have been called a flattop, though it was thinning, and his open, appealing face, with its boyish look, had begun to show signs of wear, particularly around the eyes, where years of escrow had taken their toll. Tiffany was in her room, playing quietly with a pair of six-inch dolls that had cost sixty-five dollars each.

"Who?" Sonny murmured, the gold chain he wore around

"Muriel. The old lady near a thing I've been saying?" On her wrist, Meg cut the heat, clapped a lid over it. "It's flooded, for god's sake." She stepped into the kitchen in her bare feet. "The rug is ruined. Or almost."

Sonny slapped the paper down. "Right! Just let me relax a minute."

She put on her pleading face, pouted lips, pouting eyes, and it always had its effect. She murmured, "That's all right. I'll see the backyard."

She took him by the hand and led him to the living room to the sunroom, contemplating the damp spot on the wall. She was surprised herself at how much she had grown in three times what it had. She seemed to have sprouted a new nose, a mous Rorschach. She pictured a crow or bat. She would have made of it.

Outside, she let out a long breath. The earthworms in the yard had died. And the lawn wasn't soaked through, puddled. Sonny muttered, sinking in across the yard to where the post leaning drunkenly, "What at this?" he shouted over the worms, Meg stood at the goddam fence is falling down.

He stood there a moment, shoes, a look of stupefaction on the look. It stole over his face, as when he tore open a mysterious twenty-dollar bill. Greenleaf, Mississippi, or day escrow was to close the deal. He was a seller and wondered if S

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"Who?" Sonny murmured, tugging unconsciously at  
the gold chain he wore around his neck.

"Muriel. The old lady next door. Haven't you heard  
a thing I've been saying?" With an angry snap of her  
wrist, Meg cut the heat beneath the saucepan and  
clapped a lid over it. "The floor in the sunroom is  
flooded, for god's sake," she said, stalking across the  
kitchen in her bare feet till she stood poised over him.  
"The rug is ruined. Or almost is. And the yard—"

Sonny slapped the paper down on the table. "All  
right! Just let me relax a minute, will you?"

She put on her pleading look. It was a look com-  
pounded of pouty lips, tousled hair, and those inevitable  
eyes, and it always had its effect on him. "One minute,"  
she murmured. "That's all it'll take. I just want you to  
see the backyard."

She took him by the hand and led him through the  
living room to the sunroom, where he stood a moment  
contemplating the damp spot on the concrete floor. She  
was surprised herself at how the spot had grown—it was  
three times what it had been that afternoon, and it  
seemed to have sprouted wings and legs like an enor-  
mous Rorschach. She pictured a butterfly. Or no, a hov-  
ering crow or bat. She wondered what Muriel would  
have made of it.

Outside, she let out a little yelp of disgust—all the  
earthworms in the yard had crawled up on the step to  
die. And the lawn wasn't merely spongy now, it was  
soaked through, puddled like a swamp. "Jesus Christ,"  
Sonny muttered, sinking in his wingtips. He cakewalked  
across the yard to where the fence had begun to sag, the  
post leaning drunkenly, the slats bowed. "Will you look  
at this?" he shouted over his shoulder. Squeamish about  
the worms, Meg stood at the door to the sunroom. "The  
goddam fence is falling down!"

He stood there a moment, water seeping into his  
shoes, a look of stupefaction on his face. Meg recognized  
the look. It stole over his features in moments of extrem-  
ity, as when he tore open the phone bill to discover  
mysterious twenty-dollar calls to Billings, Montana, and  
Greenleaf, Mississippi, or when his buyer called on the  
day escrow was to close to tell him he'd assaulted the  
seller and wondered if Sonny had five hundred dollars

for bail. These occasions always took him by surprise. He was shocked anew each time the crisply surveyed, neatly kept world he so cherished rose up to confront him with all its essential sloppiness, irrationality, and bad business sense. Meg watched the look of disbelief turn to one of injured rage. She followed him through the house, up the walk, and into Muriel's yard, where he stalked up to the front door and pounded like the Gestapo.

There was no response.

"Son of a bitch," he spat, turning to glare over his shoulder at her as if it were her fault or something. From inside they could hear the drama of running water, a drip and gurgle, a sough and hiss. Sonny turned back to the door, hammering his fist against it till Meg swore she could see the panels jump.

It frightened her, this sudden rage. Sure, there was a problem here and she was glad he was taking care of it, but did he have to get violent, did he have to get crazy? "You don't have to beat her door down," she called, focusing on the swell of his shoulder and the hammer of his fist as it rose and fell in savage rhythm. "Sonny, come on. It's only water, for god's sake."

"Only?" he snarled, spinning round to face her. "You saw the fence—next thing you know the foundation'll shift on us. The whole damn house—" he never finished. The look on her face told him that Muriel had opened the door.

Muriel was wearing the same faded blue housecoat she'd had on earlier, and the same wet slippers. Short, heavyset, so big in front it seemed as if she were about to topple over, she clung to the doorframe and peered up at Sonny out of a stony face. Meg watched as Sonny jerked round to confront her and then stopped cold when he got a look at the interior of the house. The plaster walls were stained now, drinking up the wet in long jagged fingers that clawed toward the ceiling, and a dribble of coffee-colored liquid began to seep across the doorstep and puddle at Sonny's feet. The sound of rushing water was unmistakable, even from where Meg was standing. "Yes?" Muriel said, the voice withered in her throat. "Can I help you?"

It took Sonny a minute—Meg could see it in his eyes: this was more than he could handle, willful destruction

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sudden rage. Sure, there was a chance he was glad he was taking care of it, but what, did he have to get crazy? "You shut her door down," she called, "on his shoulder and the hammer of God in a savage rhythm. "Sonny, come on God's sake."

inning round to face her. "You know you know the foundation'll hold the damn house—" he never finished. "I told him that Muriel had opened

the same faded blue housecoat and the same wet slippers. Short, it seemed as if she were about to go to the doorframe and peered at her face. Meg watched as Sonny turned to her and then stopped cold at the interior of the house. The door was now, drinking up the wet in clawed toward the ceiling, and red liquid began to seep across at Sonny's feet. The sound of a faucet, even from where Meg Muriel said, the voice withered in her ear.

—Meg could see it in his eyes: he could handle, willful destruction

of a domicile, every tap in the place on full, the floors warped, plaster ruined—but then he recovered himself. "The water," he said. "You—our fence—I mean you can't, you've got to stop this—"

The old woman drew herself up, clutching the belt of her housedress till her knuckles bulged with the tension. She looked first at Meg, still planted in the corner of the yard, and then turned to Sonny. "Water?" she said. "What water?"

The young man at the door reminded her, in a way, of Monty. Something about the eyes or the set of the ears—or maybe it was the crisp high cut of the sideburns . . . Of course, most young men reminded her of Monty. The Monty of fifty years ago, that is. The Monty who'd opened up the world to her over the shift lever of his Model-A Ford, not the crabbed and abrasive old man who called her bonehead and dildo and cuffed her like a dog. Monty. When the stroke brought him down, she was almost glad. She saw him pinned beneath his tubes in the hospital and something stirred in her; she brought him home and changed his bedpan, peered into the vaults of his eyes, fed him Gerber's like the baby she'd never had, and she knew it was over. Fifty years. No more drunken rages, no more pans flung against the wall, never again his sour flesh pressed to hers. She was on top now.

The second young man—he was a Mexican, short, stocky, with a mustache so thin it could have been penciled on and wicked little red-flecked eyes—almost reminded her of Monty. Not so much in the way he looked as in the way he held himself, the way he swaggered and puffed out his chest. And the uniform too, of course. Monty had worn a uniform during the war.

"Mrs. Burgess?" the Mexican asked.

Muriel stood at the open door. It was dusk, the heat cut as if there were a thermostat in the sky. She'd been sitting in the dark. The electricity had gone out on her—something to do with the water and the wires. She nodded her head in response to the policeman's question.

"We've had a complaint," he said.

Little piggy eyes. A complaint. *We've had a complaint.* He wasn't fooling her, not for a minute. She knew what



they wanted, the police, the girl next door, and the boy she was married to—they wanted to bring Monty back. Prop him up against the bedframe, stick his legs back under him, put the bellow back in his voice. Oh, no, they weren't fooling her.

She followed the policeman around the darkened house as he went from faucet to faucet, sink to tub to shower. He firmly twisted each of the taps closed and drained the basins, then crossed the patio to kill the sprinklers and the hose too. "Are you all right?" he kept asking. "Are you all right?"

She had to hold her chin in her palm to keep her lips from trembling. "If you mean am I in possession of my faculties, yes, I am, thank you. I am all right."

They were back at the front door now. He leaned nonchalantly against the doorframe and dropped his voice to a confidential whisper. "So what's this with the water then?"

She wouldn't answer him. She knew her rights. What business was it of his, or anybody's, what she did with her own taps and her own sprinklers? She could pay the water bill. Had paid it, in fact. Eleven hundred dollars' worth. She watched his eyes and shrugged.

"Next of kin?" he asked. "Daughter? Son? Anybody we can call?"

Now her lips held. She shook her head.

He gave it a moment, then let out a sigh. "Okay," he said, speaking slowly and with exaggerated emphasis, as if he were talking to a child, "I'm going now. You leave the water alone—wash your face, brush your teeth, do the dishes. But no more of this." He swaggered back from her, fingering his belt, his holster, the dead weight of his nightstick. "One more complaint and we'll have to take you into custody for your own good. You're endangering yourself and the neighbors too. Understand?"

Smile, she told herself, smile. "Oh, yes," she said softly. "Yes, I understand."

He held her eyes a moment, threatening her—just like Monty used to do, just like Monty—and then he was gone.

She stood there on the doorstep a long while, the night deepening around her. She listened to the cowbirds, the wild parakeets that nested in the Murtaughs'

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doorstep a long while, the r. She listened to the cow-at nested in the Murtaughs'

palm, the whoosh of traffic from the distant freeway. After a while, she sat on the step. Behind her, the house was silent: no faucet dripped, no sprinkler hissed, no toilet gurgled. It was horrible. Insupportable. In the pit of that dry silence she could hear him, Monty, treading the buckled floors, pouring himself another vodka, cursing her in a voice like sandpaper.

She couldn't go back in there. Not tonight. The place was deadly, contaminated, sick as the grave—after all was said and done, it just wasn't clean enough. If the rest of it was a mystery—oral history, fifty years of Monty, the girl with the blackened eyes—that much she understood.

Meg was watering the cane plant in the living room when the police cruiser came for the old lady next door. The police had been there the night before and Sonny had stood out front with his arms folded while the officer shut down Muriel's taps and sprinklers. "I guess that's that," he said, coming up the walk in the oversized Hawaiian shirt she'd given him for Father's Day. But in the morning, the sprinklers were on again and Sonny called the local substation three times before he left for work. She's crazy, he'd hollered into the phone, irresponsible, a threat to herself and the community. He had a four-year-old daughter to worry about, for christ's sake. A dog. A wife. His fence was falling down. Did they have any idea what that amount of water was going to do to the substrata beneath the house?

Now the police were back. The patrol car stretched across the window and slid silently into the driveway next door. Meg set down the watering can. She was wearing her Fila sweats and a new pair of Nikes and her hair was tied back in a red scarf. She'd dropped Tiffany off at nursery school, but she had the watering and her stretching exercises to do and a pasta salad to make before she picked up Queenie at the vet's. Still, she went directly to the front door and then out onto the walk.

The police—it took her a minute to realize that the shorter of the two was a woman—were on Muriel's front porch, looking stiff and uncertain in their razor-creased uniforms. The man knocked first—once, twice, three times. Nothing happened. Then the woman knocked.

Still nothing. Meg folded her arms and waited. After a minute, the man went around to the side gate and let himself into the yard. Meg heard the sprinklers die with a wheeze, and then the officer was back, his shoes heavy with mud.

Again he thumped at the door, much more violently now, and Meg thought of Sonny. "Open up," the woman called in a breathy contralto she tried unsuccessfully to deepen, "police."

It was then that Meg saw her, Muriel, at the bay window on the near side of the door. "Look," she shouted before she knew what she was saying, "she's there, there in the window!"

The male officer—he had a mustache and pale, fine hair like Sonny's—leaned out over the railing and gestured impatiently at the figure behind the window. "Police," he growled. "Open the door." Muriel never moved. "All right," he grunted, cursing under his breath, "all right," and he put his shoulder to the door. There was nothing to it. The frame splintered, water dribbled out, and both officers disappeared into the house.

Meg waited. She had things to do, yes, but she waited anyway, bending to pull the odd dandelion the gardener had missed, trying to look busy. The police were in there an awful long time—twenty minutes, half an hour—and then the woman appeared in the doorway with Muriel.

Muriel seemed heavier than ever, her face pouchy, arms swollen. She was wearing white sandals on her old splayed feet, a shapeless print dress, and a white straw hat that looked as if it had been dug out of a box in the attic. The woman had her by the arm; the man loomed behind her with a suitcase. Down the steps and up the walk, she never turned her head. But then, just as the police-woman was helping her into the backseat of the patrol car, Muriel swung round as if to take one last look at her house. But it wasn't the house she was looking at: it was Meg.

The morning gave way to the heat of afternoon. Meg finished the watering, made the pasta salad—bow-tie twists, fresh salmon, black olives, and pine nuts—ran her errands, picked up Tiffany, and put her down for a nap. Somehow, though, she just couldn't get Muriel out of

her head. The old lady maybe, and then the po the car. Meg had felt li then she realized that all—it was just sad. It it comes to. Fifty years

The backyard was an overhead. Queenie, def toenails clipped, was st beside the pool. It was Meg took off her Nike the sopping grass to th The post had buckled o ness into Muriel's yard. up onto the plane of th on the other side.

Her feet sank in the chocolate pudding, and toward the house the t filled with water. The it, dodging potted plant the back door; finding dow, shaded her face. The sight made her ca crumbling, wallpaper pe she knew it was bad, bu

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her head. The old lady had stared at her for five seconds maybe, and then the policewoman was coaxing her into the car. Meg had felt like sinking into the ground. But then she realized that Muriel's look wasn't vengeful at all—it was just sad. It was a look that said this is what it comes to. Fifty years and this is what it comes to.

The backyard was an inferno, the sun poised directly overhead. Queenie, defleaed, shampooed, and with her toenails clipped, was stretched out asleep in the shade beside the pool. It was quiet. Even the birds were still. Meg took off her Nikes and walked barefoot through the sopping grass to the fence, or what was left of it. The post had buckled overnight, canting the whole business into Muriel's yard. Meg never hesitated. She sprang up onto the plane of the slats and dropped to the grass on the other side.

Her feet sank in the mud, the earth like pudding, like chocolate pudding, and as she lifted her feet to move toward the house the tracks she left behind her slowly filled with water. The patio was an island. She crossed it, dodging potted plants and wicker furniture, and tried the back door; finding it locked, she moved to the window, shaded her face with her hands, and peered in. The sight made her catch her breath. The plaster was crumbling, wallpaper peeling, the rug and floors ruined: she knew it was bad, but this was crazy, this was suicide.

Grief, that's what it was. Or was it? And then she was thinking of Sonny again—what if he was dead and she was old like Muriel? She wouldn't be so fat, of course, but maybe like one of those thin and elegant old ladies in Palm Springs, the ones who'd done their stretching all their lives. Or what if she wasn't an old lady at all—the thought swooped down on her like a bird out of the sky—what if Sonny was in a car wreck or something? It could happen.

She stood there gazing in on the mess through her own wavering reflection. One moment she saw the wreckage of the old lady's life, the next the fine mouth and expressive eyes everyone commented on. After a while, she turned away from the window and looked out on the yard as Muriel must have seen it. There were the roses, gorged with water and flowering madly, the impatiens, rigid as sticks, oleander drowning in their own

yellowed leaves—and there, poking innocuously from the bushes at the far corner of the patio, was the steel wand that controlled the sprinklers. Handle, neck, prongs: it was just like theirs.

And then it came to her. She'd turn them on—the sprinklers—just for a minute, to see what it felt like. She wouldn't leave them on long—it could threaten the whole foundation of her house.

That much she understood.

## The C Sarah C

Just where the village mowing fields began, looking down the road way by two prim chimneys placed with an end to the you could follow a straight front door and find Mrs. dow of all in the kitchen, ping about, prolonging the housekeeping.

One day in early summer in Fairfield had put her were still three flower Mrs. Bickford spent but geranium and Jerusalem gained a kind of person. They rarely undertook the geously maintained life a pathetic but conscientious would carry them out of the time of frosts, under where they might make had to give.

The afternoon sun when the cherry-tree drooped its pale, when a neighbor the next house but one passed the parlor with room, also shaded carefully as she had done many times side the owner might have using so good and pleasant ways complained of having