

Oklahoma r e v i e w

Donna D. Vitucci

The Jeweler

Without a coin in his pocket for the bus, Frederick walked two miles in autumn drizzle from the rented house in Clifton Hills, following Vine until he took his place in the unemployment line that wound around Court Street, past Bob's Place that encouraged, "Eat Here. Complete Meals 15 Cents." Fifteen cents Frederick didn't have. In the downstairs of the courthouse, after two hours of waiting and answering questions that shamed a proud man, they passed him a half piece of paper. Frederick read the assignment, then blinked at the official in his cubbyhole behind the window with the cut out half moon at the bottom.

Other sad sacks standing behind Frederick watched him lift his palms and say, "But my hands are my livelihood." He invited them to look.

The man behind the glass reached into that scoop for exchanging money but Frederick hadn't even a streetcar token to bribe with. "It's all we got. You want to pass it to the next guy?"

A desperate breath grabbed from behind: "I'll do it, whatever it is--"

"No, I'll do it." Frederick crumpled the address in his fist.

The city needed a laborer at Spring Grove Cemetery. He walked into a completely different day, where the weather had reversed to clear and sunny, as if to trumpet his fortune. The switch from dungeon to ten o'clock glare demanded he shutter his eyes, and he bet those bumping him on the sidewalk thought he'd started drinking early, or maybe hadn't yet stopped

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yesterday's binge. His visage in the plate glass of Hamilton Bakery on Ninth Street gave him pause.

His one grey wool suit disguised Frederick's thin physique, a slightness that had often set him up for schoolyard taunts: *sissy*; and bullying by his own father: *you're nothing but a lightweight*. But wearing a suit he looked dapper, Mary had said that morning, adjusting his hat as she kissed him goodbye, her breath and her lips especially heated on his. His reflection in the bakery window, with opaque crullers and turnovers ghosting through his suit coat, didn't betray the shininess at the pants' knees from overwear and Frederick's habit of rubbing his hands on those bony knobs when he sat waiting for a streetcar -- that is, when he had tokens.

Talk along the line towards Court Street had been peppered with "hope" and "looking up," but no one clamored for Frederick's expertise so far in this New Deal. Even the rich weren't paying to have their pearls re-strung. He and his wife had already taken in a boarder, a doctor.

In bed with Frederick, Mary had touted the merits of it. She whispered so as not to wake the boys. "Someone's always in need of an incision, a dosage, a declaration of death or some health regimen."

They needed more than noodles to make a meal of; even the baby had quit nursing and wanted his own cup of milk to gulp. Frederick allowed that the need for a doctor's services would probably ever be so. Senseless to dismiss a tenant with dependable income, but Doc Hadley was too often toppled by drink, never mind he was near flat broke. Before they knew this though, they gave him their back room, set a cot where Mary used to do her sewing, and the old man joined the family for most meals, cooking being part of what they provided him. A jowly, taciturn man among them wasn't what Frederick would have dreamt when orders for wedding bands and diamond settings were bountiful, but a German jeweler had to take what he could get. These days Doc Hadley used that parlor more for sick exams than

Frederick ever had when he'd cajoled rich customers with jewel samples he'd long ago sold off.

Frederick moved Mary's Singer under the parlor's front window so she could watch the boys play on the stoop while she stitched. She'd begun with mending, then alterations, then she began sewing dresses according to patterns she cut from newspapers. Doc and Mary, they worked out a compromise on the front room. Mary kept an appointment book and consulted with Doc each night before to make sure he wouldn't be ushering in the sick when she'd scheduled dress-fittings. Frederick half thought she might charge their boarder extra for office space.

He loved that she was as shrewd in small business arrangement as she was parsimonious with the household funds, yet funneling an overflow of her other gifts to him in private, husband-wife moments. She had an eye for what could be saved. "Waste not, want not," she'd say, scraping leftovers onto a plate and covering them with a towel to store in the icebox to stretch into one more miraculous meal. She'd keep a stray thread if its length looked to be useful. But in Frederick's case she shelved thriftiness. With Frederick her cup runneth over. Mary's charms turned him drunk, the two of them overwhelmed not by spirits, but by fierce affection that had not diminished even after she'd birthed their children.

Frederick had gone downtown to find work to support this family he loved, but how might he wield a shovel for more than a few hours without raising calluses on the sensitive skin that could, by feel alone, discern the purity of gold or flaw in a stone?

He walked the incline of Victor Street, half-dazed at what he'd committed to. Up the hill there he could see his first born, Richard, hanging on the wrought iron gate. Still six houses away, he heard it squeaking back and forth from the momentum of his son's body. Next to Richard, on the step, sat Mary with Albert in her lap.

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The baby was teething and last night they finally let Doc slit the baby's gums for all their relief.

"But we have nothing to pay you with."

Doc waved his hand at Mary. "You can do my shirts." With five words he'd reduced her from land lady to wash-woman.

Then the man proceeded to strip from his back what he'd worn three days in a row, paraded among them with his beefy arms sprouting from the sleeveless undershirt, practically shoving the tattoo of a mermaid on his bicep under Mary's nose as he handed her the laundry.

Frederick had kept silent and pretended to study the swirl in the dark carpet. It was either the baby or Mary and this time he sided with the baby because he didn't know how much more of Albert's howling he could stand.

Mary nodded. "Of course." She went to start water boiling in the kitchen next to the wringer, trailing Doc's sleeves on the floor behind her.

"Thank you, kind lady," Doc said to her straight, proud back.

Mary did not respond.

You don't owe him a thing, Frederick wanted to say, but they'd never be able to make the rent payment without Doc.

First Doc rubbed the baby's gum with whiskey-soaked cotton. Frederick had thought that was to numb the child, but no, more likely an antiseptic. He hoped so, considering all the places Doc could have put his fingers that day. The old man used one of his wicked fingernails, yellowed and thick as they were, to do the slicing.

"There," Doc said. "No scalpel needed." He laughed, flaunting the gold in each of his molars, and the joke launched him into a coughing fit he quelled with a shot of the same whiskey with which he'd dosed the baby. Within the hour both Albert and Doc were snoring in the front room. The baby lay on the rug, wrapped tightly in his blanket. Doc sprawled in the chair where his patients waited. His head was flung back in the kind of

crooked sleep that might leave his neck aching for days. Frederick hoped such pain would edge in there.

Richard leapt from the wrought iron and onto his leg, stuck there like a burr to dog's fur. He both hugged the boy and tried to disengage his clutches.

"What are you doing out here?" he said.

Mary had been jostling the baby in her lap, in a lap full of roses. She usually wore an apron to protect the few good things she had, but this flowered skirt was not one of those. Many times washed out, the reds had faded to rose and pink, the greens pale as new grass. It was a dress she'd worn often during their courtship after Frederick had remarked it was one of his favorites.

Mary raised her face to Frederick. She'd been crying.

"What?" He took his hand from inside his pants pocket where his fingers had been softening the crumpled job assignment with sweat. He sat next to her and touched her shoulder. Richard pounced on his knee and it was all Frederick could do not to buck the boy.

"We haven't a match to light the stove," she said. "We're waiting for the post man, to ask him for a borrow."

Mary was no complainer. The world had wheeled into depression and stuck there. They took in Doc as their boarder.

Frederick prized his abilities, his craftsmanship, his jeweler's skill. The devil lay in idle hands, his father back in Boston would say. Tomorrow, in this Midwest river city a thousand miles away from that ball-breaker, Frederick would crush a spade into the ground, shovel work on his shoulders, on his back, he'd take it in his tender hands, trading sensitive touch for milk and a book of matches.

It wasn't grave digging they wanted him for. He'd misunderstood.

The job sent Frederick on a clerical scavenger hunt among the dead. No one told him why or what mistakes had been made before he entered the scene, only that now the government was placing men desperate for a dollar in public works projects. His methodical way of plodding forward, his shrewd eye for detail, he had it all working for him as he paced, seeking the lost by section, by lot, pacing off Spring Grove's arboreal grid, searching for saucer-sized markers that identified some poor souls by number alone. Those who'd perished in the Great War, for whatever reason, these men had been buried without proper headstones.

"Your job," Mr. Philburn said, "is to locate the markers, transcribe the ID number, return the records to me here at the desk. We'll do the cross reference."

Work contrived for a pansy, he could imagine Doc Hadley pronouncing once he'd heard the details, but he was grateful for it, for the wandering solitude it afforded him among the peony bushes and great oaks and maples and weeping willows. He appreciated the solemnity of the place, the elegant wild ivy grown up over summer and now curling back to reveal whole clans, the straight edge of stone and chisel, the exactitude of letters and numbers, some grooves so old and lichen-covered they could no longer be read. Whole families disappeared, wiped out by disease, it could happen.

"Pushing up daisies," Doc Hadley would say. He was callous, had a bedside manner the ill would face the wall to escape. What soft words he managed, he saved up for Mary.

As Frederick stepped over the threshold, a clump of caked mud fell from his shoe, and he thought he'd sneak down the hall before Mary caught him. He'd sweep up whatever he tracked in so she'd never know. He calculated the steps required, the amount of dirt he'd shed between here

and there. One light in the house, from the kitchen, and as he moved toward it Frederick had the odd feeling that he'd brought the dark of graveyard home with him, that it chased him down the hall even as he hopped on the balls of his feet to lift his muddy soles from the carpet runner.

The air of the house, each dust mote, had wed itself to the aroma of Mary's last batch of tomato sauce -- how he loved happening upon a lingering pocket of it in the alcove where he hung his coat and heeled off his shoes. He imagined drawing this feeling of home close, a protective cloak to buffer what waited past the kitchen doorway. He was nervous and chilled though he was inside now and should have been feeling the warmth of this hallway that seemed to run on forever, the kitchen lamp far off, with its burning news.

"The fever's on Mary," Doc Hadley said.

He tended an egg bubbling in a pot of water as the boys watched sand spill through the glass on the kitchen table. They yelled through the last of the three minutes, as if time was running out on a horse race.

Doc hitched his gruesome yellowed thumbnail at the boys, long and curved like the one he'd used to rip open Albert's gum. "My little helpers," he said.

The sand mesmerized Frederick.

"Almost," Richard yelled. "Pretty soon. Going, going, gone!" The boy's voice pitched through the roof. He pounded the table and Albert pounded because Richard did.

"Shhh!" Frederick flicked them both on their fine young skulls with his forefinger and thumb, as his own father would have done. It was the way his old man had taught him to shoot marbles. Against the head, he knew, it hurt.

The boys flinched and ran from the table, whooping like Indians out the back door and into the evening. Frederick thought Albert in his unsteady

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toddling might fall on his face, but no, the boys' voices faded as they fled to the far part of the backyard where the elderberries grew. It wasn't seven yet. No one had eaten, or been bathed.

Doc Hadley drained the water off and wrapped the egg in a towel.

"After she made your breakfast she went back to bed," he said. He seemed to cower as he cracked the egg and scooped out the soft innards, and then had to peer closely to pick out the pieces of shell splintered in, the way Frederick felt his shoulders hunch when he inspected a jewel. It took patience he didn't think Doc had in him. Then the old man shifted his weight to his other foot and sighed, cutting the egg with the edge of a spoon and mashing it up with salt and plenty of pepper. Frederick could see the smoke lift from the bowl, a favorite of Mary's, with a thick blue band at its lip. Doc Hadley squared himself tall and took up the bowl with both hands. He edged his drooping hair back out of his eyes so it looked like he kissed his own shoulder when he did it.

He pressed the bowl into Frederick's gut. "Make her eat," he said.

"What did you do for her?" Surely, with a doctor in the house, they were ahead of the game.

"Me?"

"It's your line of work."

Doc Hadley started to shuffle past Frederick, then elbowed him. "Feed her before it's stone cold."

Liquor and carbolic soap and rubbing alcohol crowded Frederick through the narrow passage ahead of Doc. He heard the man's slippers scuff the front room carpet as Frederick himself rounded the banister with Mary's egg, the bowl warm in his hands, but not for much longer. He was torn between delivering her meal and his need to round up the boys before they, too, caught a chill.

Then he continued up the stairs, his stocking feet and the thin carpet accomplices in stealth. Because he couldn't hear his own footsteps, he was plagued by the feeling that he had no weight in the world.

The graveyard shadowed him more under his own roof than when he'd walked among its headstones and monuments. He seemed to bring its damp into the bedroom with him. He fed it to Mary with her egg, one drippy spoonful at a time. Her weak smile at him when she swallowed, shy and half-cast through her wet eyelashes, was her apology for being laid up. This same glance, when they were younger and courting, had sapped his strength. It made him blurry even now. They could both be laid up here in bed, give in to all they'd been battling –debt, lack of work, the obligations of rent and IOU's, the things they forfeited so in the end they could have just a little to cup in their hands and marvel at.

"I'll bathe and feed Albert and Richard," Frederick said. "You rest."

He nodded and she nodded, though hers was absorbed into her pillow. Exhaustion had erased her usual blush. He touched her sweaty, matted hair, and she put her hand to his.

"The boys," she said, her voice a whispery gurgle. She cleared her throat and pointed at her neck. "The egg's made me phlegmy."

He nodded. "I'll get them to bed. You rest now, Mary."

"I'm cold," she said.

He felt her feverish forehead, and rested his palm a moment at the open throat of her nightgown. Her rapid pulse scared him.

"I'll take care of it."

He ran the tap until hot water coursed through the bathroom pipes. How the water bottle flopped in his hands as he tried to fill it, then he had trouble threading the screw lid on correctly. He didn't want it leaking and scalding Mary, or soaking her night dress.

Why'd she take such a turn? Was today so different? Then he remembered how she'd fled into the kitchen to start boiling water to wash Doc's shirts night before last. How she was up late sudsing the old man's dirt from his cuffs and collars in the sink, her knuckles scraping when she shoved the fabric against the washboard and then rinsing and winding it through the wringer, wet thrown on the lap of her dress and up past her elbows. It was a messy job. When Frederick went to bed she was still at it. He'd laid the plan to go downtown and find work, had to get some sleep or otherwise he'd help her, he'd thought to say, but then forgot.

Nice of Doc to boil up that egg, though couldn't he give her something to break the fever? Cantankerous old man around the house, at their table, in their front room where they had to shush the boys while Doc rustled the newspaper – "Trying to read," he'd mutter.

Frederick wrapped a thin towel around the water bottle and was about to say "My love—" when he paused at the bedroom door. There sat Doc, where Frederick had earlier leaned over, Doc whispering to Mary, the greasy strands of his hair separating and hanging over his forehead. "You've got to do as I say."

She was at the end of swallowing something he'd given her. An elixir or a tablet, Frederick hoped, as he entered the room. Doc shrank back from Mary, reseated himself, and the bedside chair creaked where Frederick had re-glued the joints. Frederick lifted the hot water bottle, brandished it as excuse to enter.

The old man had cuffed his sleeves and rolled them, constricting his forearms at the elbows. He looked like a saloon keeper or a telegraph operator. Frederick half expected him to flick the dish towel tucked in his belt and start polishing the dresser top.

"Did you give her something for pain?"

"Shhh." Doc's hand shot up and Frederick gave him the hot water bottle.

Doc lifted Mary's covers, lifted Mary's back. Her dressing gown caught in the sheet, baring her thigh.

Frederick blushed for his wife. She'd be appalled at the liberties Doc was taking. She coughed some, Frederick turned his face to the wall, Doc slid the hot water bottle under her. She seemed unable to lift her hips without help.

"She says her chest hurts," Frederick said.

Doc shrugged. "Substernal tightness and pain."

Frederick stood as dumb as a post.

"You can hear the congestion when she coughs," Doc said.

I must be deaf, Frederick thought.

The old man stood. "If you'll sit with her, I'll put together a mustard plaster, help loosen what's stuck there."

A remedy Frederick was familiar with. He'd watch Mary assemble one for Richard when he had the croup, watched her lovely hands stir the mustard and wheat flour with warm water and spread it between two squares of muslin. It was something a mother could do for her son without calling outside help.

Doc Hadley's bulk in the doorway blotted most of the hallway light. Frederick preferred to let the shadows blunt Mary's sickness. Watching her eyelids flutter in that first layer of fragile sleep, he said, "She keeps the muslin in the drawer under the dish towels."

"If she wakes give her as much water as she'll take."

Frederick nodded but the man continued to shadow Mary's bed.

"I gave her aspirin for the fever, barbitol for pain so she'll sleep and quit worrying about those boys."

"I'll take care of them," Frederick said. "You take care of her."

Doc's glasses had slipped down his nose during his exertion in lifting Mary's hips, and their wire frames still perched low, so when he looked at Fredrick his bloodshot eyes were in no way camouflaged. His smug expression seemed to say, "Well, aren't we each well-suited to our tasks? I, the medical professional, and you the nursemaid."

Jewels were frivolous indulgence, where surgery was noble and necessary, even if performed by a drunk, a drunk who retreated to slap together a mustard plaster he'd then lay upon Mary's chest. He'd need to bare her breasts to do this. Frederick would stand off to the side and watch Doc hold the sticky muslin in place until Mary's skin reddened, up to thirty minutes, while heat did its work.

"We want the cough to be loose but not dry," Doc said, his hand curled at her breast. "Believe it or not, we want her to cough some. We don't want to suppress it so a complication like pneumonia sets in."

Pneumonia and influenza, two diseases that swept through in waves, winnowing neighborhoods, crowding family plots like those Frederick had walked among and nearly shed tears over, in a sentimental and totally removed manner, that very morning.

"It's complications that more often take patients than the disease."

Out in the dark, Frederick collared his boys, laced with grime and clammy from running, the chill of night on their skin and in their clothes. He held them fast and stripped them in the kitchen, left their clothes on the floor, carried them like two squealing pigs up the steps to the bath.

"Your mother needs to sleep. If I have to get the belt out I will," he said. By the time he'd climbed to the second floor, with their grabby hands trailing along the banister, they'd locked into his seriousness. He put them in the tub together, and scrubbed their soft boy bodies. His sons were

slippery fish, drying them took patience, a trick Frederick had never learned though he'd watched Mary, so adept, it seemed hundreds of times.

"Now we'll eat," Frederick said. He took each boy's hand and they walked as a threesome down to the kitchen. He had to prevent Richard from jumping down each step with a crash and keep Albert from wobbling, but overall he'd mastered them for an hour and a half now. He deposited them on the kitchen floor and released their bath-damp hands, so exhausted that Spring Grove might as well have set him out with a shovel all day. Some things were harder than digging graves, he thought.

He lit the stove with another match they couldn't spare. When butter sizzled in the skillet he spooned some leftover maccheroni and smashed it with the back of a fat wooden spoon. Dinner heated, the noodles softened, and the sauce, with its bits of meat, onions, bay leaves and oregano—*the gravy*, Mary called it—it bubbled. The sweetness of her leftover cooking invaded, doubled him up, as if he'd cut himself from the inside.

He spooned food into squirmy Albert, held him best he could on his lap. Albert leaned to one side then the other, Frederick's knee his rocky boat, and the spoon finding its target real luck.

Richard smeared sauce around his mouth and then licked his tongue wide to draw it back in to entertain Albert, who squealed and squirmed.

"Quit playing and just eat it," Frederick told Richard.

Doc stood in the doorway, the newspaper misfolded and held at his side. From over his spectacles he dismissed them with a shake of his head. "You're a mess without her," he said. He used his knuckles to shove his glasses to the bridge of his nose so it looked like he'd put a melodramatic "Alas" hand to his forehead.

"You could help," Frederick muttered, but Doc had already walked out.

"What?" Richard said.

He balanced Albert on his other knee. "Nothing. Let's get done."

Once Fredrick put the boys down for the night, he thought he'd sit with Mary. Maybe she'd smile at him, if only in dream, and he quietly pushed the bedroom door open to find Doc in the chair at her side.

A chill traveled Frederick's spine and pooled at the back of his throat. He could barely whisper, "Is she all right?"

Doc said, "We'll see how she does overnight."

Frederick's voice pitched frantic. "Is there nothing else you can do?"

"You think I'm God, playing some game?"

"I think you're a stinking, useless drunk, and now with Mary needing you most."

"Maybe, but there's no voodoo in this. The fever breaks or it doesn't. And her heartbeat could stand to come down some."

The glow from the bathroom light down the hall illuminated Mary's profile in her shallow-breath sleep, and Doc's as he sat there, ignoring Frederick, ignoring the presence of him, all three of them reduced to voice and pale and shadow. Once the boys had stopped chattering in their beds as Frederick had demanded, color dropped from the world. He felt he probably exhibited to them too much of his own father. Tomorrow would be different, he'd be kinder to his sons, if only Mary showed him clear and open eyes, if she'd lean up on her elbows and announce, *look*, she needed to take newspaper and ammonia to the streaks on the window glass at once. *It's only a little arm waving, she'd say. It won't tire me.*

Frederick wanted to take her and soothe her, to assume the fever himself, but he couldn't slip between the sheets with Doc sitting right there. He retreated into the hallway, to the bathroom, to survey the little they had in the medicine chest.

Norwich Aspirin, Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, Hostetter's Bitters, Ayer's Cherry Pectoral -- the usual druggist remedies for pain, cough, and

fever anyone could buy. But Doc should have been their ace in the hole. What he gave Mary should have been more than the ordinary cure-all. And layman that he was, Frederick wanted to have a hand in it.

In his stocking feet, he went downstairs. The front room, the examining room, the dressing room, the front parlor -- all the names for it tripped through his brain. He glanced at the mismatched newspaper Doc had tossed aside. Frederick's eyes were unable to settle on one line of type long. A little worm in his head was squirming, eating up what sense he had left after this drawn out day that had begun among the dead. His gaze skipped around the room until it settled on Doc's black bag. Since he shared this room with Mary, she'd made him store away his pills and salves and potions. She didn't want her ladies scared off by rubber tubing and the alcohol lamp and the sharpening stone for the man's needle; she wanted them gay, so they'd be moved to purchase more than the one dress that had sent them to her stoop.

To please her, Doc snapped everything up in his black satchel, leather and worn and with a broken latch. Frederick's foot nudged the bag where it sat on the floor, so the sides parted, revealing the stuffed-in paraphernalia, no order to it, and atop it all, Doc's own medicine, clear, and half gone.

Frederick uncapped it, took a swig, then set it on the floor as he squatted to investigate the rest. Much of it he'd seen before: stethoscope, razor, gauze pads, metal tray, eyedropper, the fearsome syringe. Once the cumbersome items were removed, the sides of the bag revealed the potent part of doctor magic. Over a dozen skinny tubes -- four of them bundled together might equal the width of Frederick's forefinger -- these slender vials contained grains and tablets that relieved pain or returned temperate skin and color to the body. The vials might easily be held and hidden in a man's closed palm. Frederick tested this, but he'd also seen Doc at work with these hypodermic tablets. Strychnine sulphate, nitroglycerin, digitalis,

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morphine, atropine, and codeine, all of them needed the needle, and anyway Frederick didn't know the dosages, how much water to add, warmed in a spoon over a flame or straight out of the faucet, the proportion of grains to milliliters, or even how to eyeball the equal to that amount. The smallest measure they had in this house was a quarter teaspoon.

Frederick lifted out larger bottles whose names he recognized and lined them up on the carpet: paregoric, syrup of ipecac, merthiolate for wounds, elixir of turpin hydrate codeine for a rough cough. These remedies he knew. But here, a same-sized bottle as the others, about four ounces, medicine called *aconite*, with smaller type that read "wolf's bane."

Doc Hadley had a book he referred to, his bible he called it, and Frederick seized it from the shelf near the examining table.

Frederick reveled in the dream of himself as the source of his wife's return to wellness. Over the last six months, he'd suffered Doc's ingratiating behavior at the dinner table, his compliments and courtesy to Mary, his partnership with her in that front room business. Frederick felt in competition for his own wife, he felt it keenly.

Wolf's bane, Doc's bible proclaimed, "Increased the power of the heart by slowing it down."

Frederick's own heart sped as furiously as an animal's, the kind who kept moving just to stay alive, the small ones who were hunted and easily trapped.

Slow down and think.

The power of the heart. Frederick's chest swelled with the emotions contained there. Since the days with his father, he'd been fighting to measure up. How Doc Hadley had gained power in this household was a mystery. Frederick had observed the old man's hair mix with Mary's when they put their heads together over the calendar for front room appointments. Since she'd taken sick, Frederick had seen Doc hold Mary's

wrist long after he'd assessed her pulse. Now he sat vigil upstairs in a husband's chair.

Frederick snapped the small vials into the bag's two sides. As best he could, he packed in all the misshapen apparatus, and then the bottles he'd last removed. The aconite he slipped into his pants pocket alongside that piece of paper assigning him work at Spring Grove for the next month. The clock at the foot of the stairs sent ten chimes throughout the house. Frederick felt reverberations from the floor, up into his feet. He had no plan, only a murky feeling in his mind like a still, dark pond that cried out for a stone.

More difficult to conceal a four ounce bottle than one of those tiny tubes, and after he slid Doc's repacked bag half under the examining table with his foot, he shoved both of his clenched hands in his pants pockets. He held the wolf's bane in the left of those two fists and walked into the kitchen to clean up the mess from dinner.

Running the tap water and rinsing the plates helped distract Frederick from stewing about what Doc might notice missing. But no worry, the old man soon scuffed his way into the kitchen, as disparaging as he'd been when he'd eavesdropped on their supper. He shook his head, then lifted his bottle to his mouth. Once thirsty, he had eye for little else, so Frederick figured he was in the clear at least for the night. But he had to pry some information out of the man before gin blurred all his sense.

"What about Mary's heart? Is it easing up a bit?" Frederick said.

Doc slumped into a chair, pushed back the sauce pot to make room for his liquor. "I told you we'll see how it goes."

"But what will be your next step, if things don't turn soon?"

He drank again and eyed Frederick standing there swabbing the plates with an old piece of flannel. "I've already treated the fever."

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"But what did you do to calm her pulse? I mean, what would you recommend if she just doesn't--"

Doc waved his hand, dismissing Frederick or perhaps showing off his power. "Maybe strychnine, maybe aconite. Either would help slow her down. Give her a chance to get strong."

"You have that? How will you give it to her?"

"What do you mean, how will I give it to her?"

"Is it a tablet or will you need to stick her?" Frederick was testing his own knowledge.

"The strychnine I'd inject." Doc removed his glasses and rubbed his watery, red-rimmed eyes.

"Mary hates needles," Frederick said. "And the other, aconite did you call it?"

"A liquid."

Frederick nodded. "I think that would be better." He set the dry plates in the cabinet even though they bore lint from the towel and then lifted the crusty sauce pot from under Doc's nose. "How much do you think she'd take?"

"Huh? What do you care?"

"I want her to get well as quick as she can."

Doc shrugged and took another slug, smacking his lips after swallowing like Richard did earlier over Mary's warmed up cooking. "A little goes a long way."

He could have been referring to anything in this world, Frederick thought—the drugs in his bag, the liquor in his hand, sweet talk between lovers, or love itself. Most anything but jealousy and grief.

"How little and how far?" Frederick scrubbed at the sauce pot, wondering if he'd swung too far in his appearance of unconcern.

"What?" Doc appraised him, squinting. His eyes disappeared in his swollen face. "Angling to apprentice, are you?" That set him laughing. Then his usual coughing fit aptly punctuated the ridiculous notion.

Frederick didn't mind being the butt of a joke.

"A man can never know too much about things he doesn't understand. Asking is the only way to learn. It's what I tell Richard."

"Boy sure took that to heart. Questions never stop. Like driving nails into my head."

Crust of tomatoes and burned onions covered the bottom of the sink in a scabby mess. Frederick ran the faucet and pointed the handle end of a spoon down the drain to unclog it. He wondered how he'd ever agreed to let Doc Hadley under their roof. Persuasion, of course, by Mary, his wife and her good heart, a heart that was outrunning the rest of her, a heart that had to quiet so she could gain strength. Inside his pants pocket, the bottle of wolf's bane was a weight against his leg.

"A usual dose would be what, Doc?" A slip -- he never called the man by title or name. He shut off the water, dried his hands, and turned to face Doc's curiosity, but the man had his head in his arms crossed atop the table. He mumbled into his sleeve, rolled halfway up in that bartender look of earlier.

Frederick put his hands in his pockets when he approached the table.

"I didn't quite hear. Say it again?" He bent so close he smelled Doc's body odor emanating from the open neck of his shirt, the filth of his unwashed hair, the blunt gin breath Frederick thought he probably carried a bit on his own tongue.

"I could snap you in two."

Frederick's pulse flew so fast he feared he'd black out. It's what he thought the man said, but with no malice pushing the threat and no anger

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ahead of it. Heavy-lidded, Doc began to snore. Frederick heard the sounds reshape themselves: *I said a drop or two.*

He slipped into the front room, knew exactly where he'd squirreled away the eyedropper when repacking the doctor's kit. But Doc had, during Frederick's kitchen work, accomplished his own squirreling away. The black bag had disappeared.

In this same house their neighbor's apartment mirrored their own. And in the divided basement, each side had its own coal bin for a furnace that needed feeding. As the only one awake, Frederick felt the burden of heat, food, health, pressing his shoulders, squashing him. It barely allowed him to tumble down the cellar steps under its weight.

"You exaggerate," his father would say. "Always have."

"What's dangering Mary's no exaggeration," Frederick muttered. He shoveled in an extra load of coal to help bury his father's disdain, and dashed upstairs to his wife, placed his hand on her forehead, wrote streaks across her brow before bothering to wash his hands. He fixed a cloth with tepid water to rinse clean where coal dust had marred her beauty. He drew the rag along her cheeks, beside her ears, down the cleft above her lips where they parted in her moan for breath, across her tender throat. He dabbed at the dark pouches under her eyes, then drew the sleeves of her nightdress to her elbows to swab the insides of her arms down to her wrists. If her right hand had not grasped him in some dream, he might have fully undressed her and bathed her right there in the bed, no curtain to shield Doc's drunken vision of his favorite patient if he managed to stumble up the stairs to look in on her.

Frederick would oblige whatever she asked -- he'd bring her a hot toddy, he'd coddle her -- but Mary didn't speak or wake, only held his arm with the rag still for a moment, making him think and remember: *The power*

of the heart. Once she released him he finished the washing, which had hardly worked to cool her down. Where she lay the sheet radiated warmth. Frederick slid into bed beside her and he melted into her heat. If the bed was one racing heart, Mary was galloping away on its back without him.

Eager to not be left behind, to slow his beloved and make her walk with him, he bolted from the bed, almost stumbling on the carpeted steps when the clock chimed eleven. The wolf's bane in his pocket thumped his right thigh as he took each step more slowly and carefully down and into the kitchen. Doc, half-stuporous, must have shifted his bulk from the chair where he'd passed out and now lay on the front room floor, the side of his face pressed flat, his lips slack with drool. Frederick could practically feel the itch of the carpet's wool on his own cheek, but instead of giving in to a sudden scratching he plunged his fingers into his pants pocket and touched the smooth curve of the medicine bottle.

The boys' clothes still sagged on the kitchen linoleum where he'd dropped them after peeling them from their antsy arms and legs, over their heads with the shirts that tugged their hair and their eyes into temporary China-men faces. There'd be time enough for laundry tomorrow. He thought of Mary pressed to do Doc's shirts.

In the silverware drawer he found the measuring spoons.

A drop, Doc said. Frederick could tap that miniscule amount onto the quarter teaspoon, support Mary's neck with his left hand, his elbow digging for balance in the mattress, and spoon feed her cure with his right. Or he could mix it in the whiskey and sugar and hot water he'd thought of before. His breath turned raggedy; he couldn't make his way upstairs with the drink fast enough.

What happened to the treads, or anything that might slow him down? He flew in stocking feet to Mary's bed, his and Mary's bed, where she dozed, her lips pursing words with no voice. She mouthed secrets no one would

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hear, especially not Doc Hadley, snoring a floor away, not even Frederick who stood bedside, trying his hardest to lip read.

He held his breath, he held hers, as he tapped a drop of aconite into the measure spoon, where it spread, one drop doubled, suddenly tripled. Then he stirred it into the hot toddy.

Mary mumbled, so close to the surface of waking her eyes were half open.

"Is that you?" she said.

"Yes." Frederick perched on the bed's edge and tilted the whiskey toward her. "Mary, Doc says we've got to keep you drinking."

"I *am* thirsty." She put her head to one side of the pillow and tried rising up on her elbows.

Frederick's arms rescued and held her, half-sitting and slumped into his neck, his chin. The drink sloshed some on the bedcovers. He tasted the smell of illness cooped-up inside her mouth. She was molten. Her pulse was a bird's he felt humming under her skin.

Her glassy eyes seemed focused on the door instead of here beside her, where he sloped the mattress and her body into his. Only the bathroom down the hall emitted light in the whole upstairs of the house. The lamp could be harsh on her feverish eyes and so he resisted his desire to see Mary more clearly, to know for himself what Doc knew.

"Sip."

And she did, her lips cherry red on the rim, as only fever could paint them, the amber sliding past her teeth, her tongue and her throat partners in steady swallowing. Her hot breath on Frederick's fingers also steamed the glass, turning it slippery, but he held on and he tilted it more.

"You've got to drink it all, honey. You're doing great. You'll be fine now." He refused to let up on pouring the whiskey into her mouth even when she seemed to need to take a breath. She coughed, they spilled

some, Frederick eased, took the glass with firmer grip, and then he pleaded with her to finish. "Doc says it's what will make you well."

A lucid moment in which she smiled ruefully, roused herself to participate in the old intimacy of ridiculing their tenant. He saw her eyes lock on his, her thoughts clear in their deep brown irises, her pupils a source of wit. "Well, if Doc says so, then . . ."

She left the fill-in-the-blank to Frederick as she relaxed, the drink done. His arms were burdened by the weight of her, nothing held back, all lovely sinew and bone and ample flesh. He needed both hands to hold her, to aid her slow recline. The glass, with its few last drops, fell to the floor and spun before stopping on its side.

Frederick lay beside his wife, imagined her pulse dawdling so he could catch her. Their two hearts were pistons. Beating the same miles per hour, they'd move at one speed, and even if Doc woke and stumbled upstairs to prescribe some new cure, they'd be lengths ahead of him. By then they'd be so far out of town that Mary, and the fact of her illness or her health, would be lost from view, as would be Doc's furtive, professional shuffling, all his medicine lore, and the shabby rent he pressed into Mary's apron pocket.

The clock needed winding so Frederick could rise for another day of cemetery work, but he thought he'd rest a minute on the pillow dipping towards Mary, her body shimmering with heat, but her breathing soothed now, thanks to the hot toddy and its extra dose. Given the chance, he could take care of his own wife. As exhaustion stole through his arms and legs, Frederick congratulated himself on the discovery that doctoring wasn't all chicanery -- yes, some of it was song and dance -- but he'd got hold of just . . . just . . . He drifted, the clock remained unwound.

In the dream, he walked among the stones at Spring Grove, and into a clearing. A woman sat on a bench, her head bowed and grieving. The markers around her looked freshly chiseled. Even though Frederick's body

did not seem to be in the dream, his consciousness could draw close without disturbing this stranger. No mistaking the names on the graves -- all his loved ones, Albert Louis, Richard Henry, Marianna Cecile. This was the Habermeyer family plot, with the last headstone set perpendicular to the others. He presumed it his own, but why he faced away from them perplexed him. His mind turned the corner and read the name engraved in rock: Charles Herbert Hadley. Even in death that damned doctor'd weaseled his way into Frederick's circle. His mind "walked around" the plot, inspecting, approving the good care gardeners bestowed.

"Your job," his father said, in Mr. Philburn's place behind the office desk, "is to return the names to the bodies."

Then the scene shifted from Spring Grove to a room where his father held his hand high to strike Frederick. As it was with dreams, Frederick knew so much more than occurred in the cinema before his eyes. He knew he'd enraged his father by packing his pockets with crystals and striated rocks he'd found at the quarry. He'd lined the found treasures neatly on the window sills in his bedroom and on his desk, and then had been so enrapt in the study of them that he forgot to clean up the mud he'd tracked into the house and down the hall, clues that led to this bedroom.

"Idiot!" His father lifted him from the bed, his shirt collar hiked above the back of his neck and the top button in the front, strangling. He shook the living daylight out of Frederick, then released him like a bug he'd like to step on. He had a grip that could pinch and he pinched Frederick's shoulders, shaking him again. "What have you done?"

A little dirt didn't deserve this proportion of outburst. Lucky Frederick had thought to keep the wolf's bane in his pocket, and hadn't set the bottle in the window with the rest of his booty.

"I'll take care of it," Frederick said, trying his best to bury his face in his own shoulder. I'll sweep the hallway, he thought, before the dirt I've brought in sets Mary frowning.

"You took care of it all right," Doc yelled.

His father's shaggy features blurred into Doc's bulk. Doc Hadley was pinching Frederick's shoulders, yelling that he'd beat him to death but death would be too easy on him, and just as in the dream, Frederick knew things without being told. Still shrouded by half-sleep, Frederick knew the old man had discovered his stint at playing medicine-man. He reached to touch Mary's face so smooth in its repose. He wanted to thump his finger into Doc's chest, *Because of me, her fever's passed, her heart has turned calm, and her body rests. Because of me.*

But Doc stumbled from the room, as if he was deaf and sealed off from Frederick's triumph, the bottle of aconite held loosely in his hands. He made the curve around the banister, heading downstairs, his arms hanging like some sad ape's. Frederick almost felt sorry for Hadley. The man was hung over, or maybe still drunk, so smug in his doctoring, he didn't know what hit him.