

OLIVE KITTERIDGE

Elizabeth Strout



R A N D O M H O U S E



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RANDOM HOUSE | NEW YORK

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*For my mother
who can make life magical
and is the best storyteller I know*

Pharmacy

For many years Henry Kitteridge was a pharmacist in the next town over, driving every morning on snowy roads, or rainy roads, or summertime roads, when the wild raspberries shot their new growth in brambles along the last section of town before he turned off to where the wider road led to the pharmacy. Retired now, he still wakes early and remembers how mornings used to be his favorite, as though the world were his secret, tires rumbling softly beneath him and the light emerging through the early fog, the brief sight of the bay off to his right, then the pines, tall and slender, and almost always he rode with the window partly open because he loved the smell of the pines and the heavy salt air, and in the winter he loved the smell of the cold.

The pharmacy was a small two-story building attached to another building that housed separately a hardware store and a small grocery. Each morning Henry parked in the back by the large metal bins, and then entered the pharmacy's back door, and went about switching on the lights, turning up the thermostat, or, if it was summer, getting the fans going. He would open the safe, put money in the register, unlock the front door, wash his hands, put on his white lab coat. The ritual was pleasing, as though the old store—with its shelves of toothpaste, vitamins, cosmetics, hair adornments, even sewing needles and greeting cards, as well as red rubber hot water bottles, enema pumps—was a person altogether steady and steadfast. And any unpleasantness that may have occurred back in his home, any uneasiness at the way his wife often left their bed to wander through their home in the night's dark hours—all this receded like a shoreline as he walked through the safety of his pharmacy. Standing in the back, with the drawers and rows of pills, Henry was cheerful when the phone began to ring, cheerful when Mrs. Merriman came for her blood pressure medicine, or old Cliff Mott arrived for his digitalis, cheerful when he prepared the Valium for Rachel Jones, whose husband ran off the night their baby was born. It was Henry's nature to listen, and many times during the week he would say, "Gosh, I'm awful sorry to hear that," or "Say, isn't that something?"

Inwardly, he suffered the quiet trepidations of a man who had witnessed twice in childhood the nervous breakdowns of a mother who had otherwise cared for him with stridency. And so if, as rarely happened, a customer was distressed over a price, or irritated by the quality of an Ace bandage or ice pack, Henry did what he could to rectify things quickly. For many years Mrs. Granger worked for him; her husband was a lobster fisherman, and she seemed to carry with her the cold breeze of the open water, not so eager to please a wary customer. He had to listen with half an ear as he filled prescriptions, to make sure she was not at the cash register dismissing a complaint. More than once he was reminded of that same sensation in watching to see that his wife, Olive, did not bear down too hard on Christopher over a homework assignment or a chore left undone; that sense of his attention hovering—the need to keep everyone content. When he heard a briskness in Mrs. Granger's voice, he would step down from his back post, moving toward the center of the store to talk with the customer himself. Otherwise, Mrs. Granger did her job well. He appreciated that she was not chatty, kept perfect

inventory, and almost never called in sick. That she died in her sleep one night astonished him, and left him with some feeling of responsibility, as though he had missed, working alongside her for years, whatever symptom might have shown itself that he, handling his pills and syrups and syringes, could have fixed.

“Mousy,” his wife said, when he hired the new girl. “Looks just like a mouse.”

Denise Thibodeau had round cheeks, and small eyes that peeped through her brown-framed glasses. “But a nice mouse,” Henry said. “A cute one.”

“No one’s cute who can’t stand up straight,” Olive said. It was true that Denise’s narrow shoulders sloped forward, as though apologizing for something. She was twenty-two, just out of the state university of Vermont. Her husband was also named Henry, and Henry Kitteridge, meeting Henry Thibodeau for the first time, was taken with what he saw as an unself-conscious excellence. The young man was vigorous and sturdy-featured with a light in his eye that seemed to lend a flickering resplendence to his decent, ordinary face. He was a plumber, working in a business owned by his uncle. He and Denise had been married one year.

“Not keen on it,” Olive said, when he suggested they have the young couple to dinner. Henry let it drop. This was a time when his son—not yet showing the physical signs of adolescence—had become suddenly and strenuously sullen, his mood like a poison shot through the air, and Olive seemed as changed and changeable as Christopher, the two having fast and furious fights that became just as suddenly some blanket of silent intimacy where Henry, clueless, stupefied, would find himself to be the odd man out.

But standing in the back parking lot at the end of a late summer day, while he spoke with Denise and Henry Thibodeau, and the sun tucked itself behind the spruce trees, Henry Kitteridge felt such a longing to be in the presence of this young couple, their faces turned to him with a diffident but eager interest as he recalled his own days at the university many years ago, that he said, “Now, say. Olive and I would like you to come for supper soon.”

He drove home, past the tall pines, past the glimpse of the bay, and thought of the Thibodeaus driving the other way, to their trailer on the outskirts of town. He pictured the trailer, cozy and picked up—for Denise was neat in her habits—and imagined them sharing the news of their day. Denise might say, “He’s an easy boss.” And Henry might say, “Oh, I like the guy a lot.”

He pulled into his driveway, which was not a driveway so much as a patch of lawn on top of the hill, and saw Olive in the garden. “Hello, Olive,” he said, walking to her. He wanted to put his arms around her, but she had a darkness that seemed to stand beside her like an acquaintance that would not go away. He told her the Thibodeaus were coming for supper. “It’s only right,” he said.

Olive wiped sweat from her upper lip, turned to rip up a clump of onion grass. “Then that’s that, Mr. President,” she said. “Give your order to the cook.”

On Friday night the couple followed him home, and the young Henry shook Olive’s hand. “Nice place here,” he said. “With that view of the water. Mr. Kitteridge says you two built this yourselves.”

“Indeed, we did.”

Christopher sat sideways at the table, slumped in adolescent gracelessness, and did not respond when Henry Thibodeau asked him if he played any sports at school. Henry Kitteridge felt an unexpected fury sprout inside him; he wanted to shout at the boy, whose poor manners, he felt, revealed something unpleasant not expected to be found in the Kitteridge home.

“When you work in a pharmacy,” Olive told Denise, setting before her a plate of baked beans, “you learn the secrets of everyone in town.” Olive sat down across from her, pushed forward a bottle of ketchup. “Have to know to keep your mouth shut. But seems like you know how to do that.”

“Denise understands,” Henry Kitteridge said.

Denise’s husband said, “Oh, sure. You couldn’t find someone more trustworthy than Denise.”

“I believe you,” Henry said, passing the man a basket of rolls. “And please. Call me Henry. One of my favorite names,” he added. Denise laughed quietly; she liked him, he could see this.

Christopher slumped farther into his seat.

Henry Thibodeau’s parents lived on a farm inland, and so the two Henrys discussed crops, and pole beans, and the corn not being as sweet this summer from the lack of rain, and how to get a good asparagus bed.

“Oh, for God’s *sake*,” said Olive, when, in passing the ketchup to the young man, Henry Kitteridge knocked it over, and ketchup lurched out like thickened blood across the oak table. Trying to pick up the bottle, he caused it to roll unsteadily, and ketchup ended up on his fingertips, then on his white shirt.

“Leave it,” Olive commanded, standing up. “Just leave it alone, Henry. For God’s sake.” And Henry Thibodeau, perhaps at the sound of his own name being spoken sharply, sat back, looking stricken.

“Gosh, what a mess I’ve made,” Henry Kitteridge said.

For dessert they were each handed a blue bowl with a scoop of vanilla ice cream sliding in its center. “Vanilla’s my favorite,” Denise said.

“Is it,” said Olive.

“Mine, too,” Henry Kitteridge said.

As autumn came, the mornings darker, and the pharmacy getting only a short sliver of the direct sun before it passed over the building and left the store lit by its own overhead lights,

Henry stood in the back filling the small plastic bottles, answering the telephone, while Denise stayed up front near the cash register. At lunchtime, she unwrapped a sandwich she brought from home, and ate it in the back where the storage was, and then he would eat his lunch, and sometimes when there was no one in the store, they would linger with a cup of coffee bought from the grocer next door. Denise seemed a naturally quiet girl, but she was given to spurts of sudden talkativeness. "My mother's had MS for years, you know, so starting way back we all learned to help out. All three of my brothers are different. Don't you think it's funny when it happens that way?" The oldest brother, Denise said, straightening a bottle of shampoo, had been her father's favorite until he'd married a girl her father didn't like. Her own in-laws were wonderful, she said. She'd had a boyfriend before Henry, a Protestant, and his parents had not been so kind to her. "It wouldn't have worked out," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Well, Henry's a terrific young man," Henry answered.

She nodded, smiling through her glasses like a thirteen-year-old girl. Again, he pictured her trailer, the two of them like overgrown puppies tumbling together; he could not have said why this gave him the particular kind of happiness it did, like liquid gold being poured through him.

She was as efficient as Mrs. Granger had been, but more relaxed. "Right beneath the vitamins in the second aisle," she would tell a customer. "Here, I'll show you." Once, she told Henry she sometimes let a person wander around the store before asking if she could help them. "That way, see, they might find something they didn't know they needed. And your sales will go up." A block of winter sun was splayed across the glass of the cosmetics shelf; a strip of wooden floor shone like honey.

He raised his eyebrows appreciatively. "Lucky for me, Denise, when you came through that door." She pushed up her glasses with the back of her hand, then ran the duster over the ointment jars.

Jerry McCarthy, the boy who delivered the pharmaceuticals once a week from Portland—or more often if needed—would sometimes have his lunch in the back room. He was eighteen, right out of high school; a big, fat kid with a smooth face, who perspired so much that splotches of his shirt would be wet, at times even down over his breasts, so the poor fellow looked to be lactating. Seated on a crate, his big knees practically to his ears, he'd eat a sandwich that had spilling from it mayonnaisey clumps of egg salad or tuna fish, landing on his shirt.

More than once Henry saw Denise hand him a paper towel. "That happens to me," Henry heard her say one day. "Whenever I eat a sandwich that isn't just cold cuts, I end up a mess." It couldn't have been true. The girl was neat as a pin, if plain as a plate.

"Good afternoon," she'd say when the telephone rang. "This is the Village Pharmacy. How can I help you today?" Like a girl playing grown-up.

And then: On a Monday morning when the air in the pharmacy held a sharp chill, he went about opening up the store, saying, "How was your weekend, Denise?" Olive had refused to go to church the day before, and Henry, uncharacteristically, had spoken to her sharply. "Is it too

much to ask,” he had found himself saying, as he stood in the kitchen in his undershorts, ironing his trousers. “A man’s wife accompanying him to church?” Going without her seemed a public exposure of familial failure.

“Yes, it most certainly is too goddamn much to ask!” Olive had almost spit, her fury’s door flung open. “You have no idea how tired I am, teaching all day, going to foolish meetings where the goddamn principal is a moron! Shopping. Cooking. Ironing. Laundry. Doing Christopher’s homework with him! And *you*—” She had grabbed on to the back of a dining room chair, and her dark hair, still uncombed from its night’s disarrangement, had fallen across her eyes. “*You*, Mr. Head Deacon Claptrap Nice Guy, expect me to give up my Sunday mornings and go sit among a bunch of snot-wots!” Very suddenly she had sat down in the chair. “Well, I’m sick and tired of it,” she’d said, calmly. “Sick to death.”

A darkness had rumbled through him; his soul was suffocating in tar. The next morning, Olive spoke to him conversationally. “Jim’s car smelled like upchuck last week. Hope he’s cleaned it out.” Jim O’Casey taught with Olive, and for years took both Christopher and Olive to school.

“Hope so,” said Henry, and in that way their fight was done.

“Oh, I had a wonderful weekend,” said Denise, her small eyes behind her glasses looking at him with an eagerness that was so childlike it could have cracked his heart in two. “We went to Henry’s folks and dug potatoes at night. Henry put the headlights on from the car and we dug potatoes. Finding the potatoes in that cold soil—like an Easter egg hunt!”

He stopped unpacking a shipment of penicillin, and stepped down to talk to her. There were no customers yet, and below the front window the radiator hissed. He said, “Isn’t that lovely, Denise.”

She nodded, touching the top of the vitamin shelf beside her. A small motion of fear seemed to pass over her face. “I got cold and went and sat in the car and watched Henry digging potatoes, and I thought: It’s too good to be true.”

He wondered what in her young life had made her not trust happiness; perhaps her mother’s illness. He said, “You enjoy it, Denise. You have many years of happiness ahead.” Or maybe, he thought, returning to the boxes, it was part of being Catholic—you were made to feel guilty about everything.

The year that followed—was it the happiest year of his own life? He often thought so, even knowing that such a thing was foolish to claim about any year of one’s life; but in his memory, that particular year held the sweetness of a time that contained no thoughts of a beginning and no thoughts of an end, and when he drove to the pharmacy in the early morning darkness of winter, then later in the breaking light of spring, the full-throated summer opening before him, it was the small pleasures of his work that seemed in their simplicities to fill him to the brim. When Henry Thibodeau drove into the gravelly lot, Henry Kitteridge often went to hold the door open for Denise, calling out, “Hello there, Henry,” and Henry Thibodeau would stick his

head through the open car window and call back, "Hello there, Henry," with a big grin on a face lit with decency and humor. Sometimes there was just a salute. "Henry!" And the other Henry would return, "Henry!" They got a kick out of this, and Denise, like a football tossed gently between them, would duck into the store.

When she took off her mittens, her hands were as thin as a child's, yet when she touched the buttons on the cash register, or slid something into a white bag, they assumed the various shapes of a graceful grown woman's hands, hands—thought Henry—that would touch her husband lovingly, that would, with the quiet authority of a woman, someday pin a baby's diaper, smooth a fevered forehead, tuck a gift from the tooth fairy under a pillow.

Watching her, as she poked her glasses back up onto her nose while reading over the list of inventory, Henry thought she was the stuff of America, for this was back when the hippie business was beginning, and reading in *Newsweek* about the marijuana and "free love" could cause an unease in Henry that one look at Denise dispelled. "We're going to hell like the Romans," Olive said triumphantly. "America's a big cheese gone rotten." But Henry would not stop believing that the temperate prevailed, and in his pharmacy, every day he worked beside a girl whose only dream was to someday make a family with her husband. "I don't care about Women's Lib," she told Henry. "I want to have a house and make beds." Still, if he'd had a daughter (he would have loved a daughter), he would have cautioned her against it. He would have said: Fine, make beds, but find a way to keep using your head. But Denise was not his daughter, and he told her it was noble to be a homemaker—vaguely aware of the freedom that accompanied caring for someone with whom you shared no blood.

He loved her guilelessness, he loved the purity of her dreams, but this did not mean of course that he was in love with her. The natural reticence of her in fact caused him to desire Olive with a new wave of power. Olive's sharp opinions, her full breasts, her stormy moods and sudden, deep laughter unfolded within him a new level of aching eroticism, and sometimes when he was heaving in the dark of night, it was not Denise who came to mind but, oddly, her strong, young husband—the fierceness of the young man as he gave way to the animalism of possession—and there would be for Henry Kitteridge a flash of incredible frenzy as though in the act of loving his wife he was joined with all men in loving the world of women, who contained the dark, mossy secret of the earth deep within them.

"Goodness," Olive said, when he moved off her.

In college, Henry Thibodeau had played football, just as Henry Kitteridge had. "Wasn't it great?" the young Henry asked him one day. He had arrived early to pick Denise up, and had come into the store. "Hearing the people yelling from the stands? Seeing that pass come right at you and knowing you're going to catch it? Oh boy, I loved that." He grinned, his clear face seeming to give off a refracted light. "Loved it."

"I suspect I wasn't nearly as good as you," said Henry Kitteridge. He had been good at the running, the ducking, but he had not been aggressive enough to be a really good player. It

shamed him to remember that he had felt fear at every game. He'd been glad enough when his grades slipped and he had to give it up.

"Ah, I wasn't that good," said Henry Thibodeau, rubbing a big hand over his head. "I just liked it."

"He was good," said Denise, getting her coat on. "He was really good. The cheerleaders had a cheer just for him." Shyly, with pride, she said, "Let's go, Thibodeau, let's go."

Heading for the door, Henry Thibodeau said, "Say, we're going to have you and Olive for dinner soon."

"Oh, now—you're not to worry."

Denise had written Olive a thank-you note in her neat, small handwriting. Olive had scanned it, flipped it across the table to Henry. "Handwriting's just as cautious as she is," Olive had said. "She is the *plainest* child I have ever seen. With her pale coloring, why does she wear gray and beige?"

"I don't know," he said, agreeably, as though he had wondered himself. He had not wondered.

"A simpleton," Olive said.

But Denise was not a simpleton. She was quick with numbers, and remembered everything she was told by Henry about the pharmaceuticals he sold. She had majored in animal sciences at the university, and was conversant with molecular structures. Sometimes on her break she would sit on a crate in the back room with the Merck Manual on her lap. Her child-face, made serious by her glasses, would be intent on the page, her knees poked up, her shoulders slumped forward.

Cute, would go through his mind as he glanced through the doorway on his way by. He might say, "Okay, then, Denise?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine."

His smile would linger as he arranged his bottles, typed up labels. Denise's nature attached itself to his as easily as aspirin attached itself to the enzyme COX-2; Henry moved through his day pain free. The sweet hissing of the radiators, the tinkle of the bell when someone came through the door, the creaking of the wooden floors, the *ka-ching* of the register: He sometimes thought in those days that the pharmacy was like a healthy autonomic nervous system in a workable, quiet state.

Evenings, adrenaline poured through him. "All I do is cook and clean and pick up after people," Olive might shout, slamming a bowl of beef stew before him. "People just waiting for me to serve them, with their faces hanging out." Alarm made his arms tingle.

"Perhaps you need to help out more around the house," he told Christopher.

“How dare you tell him what to do? You don’t even pay enough attention to know what he’s going through in social studies class!” Olive shouted this at him while Christopher remained silent, a smirk on his face. “Why, Jim O’Casey is more sympathetic to the kid than you are,” Olive said. She slapped a napkin down hard against the table.

“Jim teaches at the school, for crying out loud, and sees you and Chris every day. What *is* the matter with social studies class?”

“Only that the goddamn teacher is a moron, which Jim understands instinctively,” Olive said. “You see Christopher every day, too. But you don’t know anything because you’re safe in your little world with Plain Jane.”

“She’s a good worker,” Henry answered. But in the morning the blackness of Olive’s mood was often gone, and Henry would be able to drive to work with a renewal of the hope that had seemed evanescent the night before. In the pharmacy there was goodwill toward men.

Denise asked Jerry McCarthy if he planned on going to college. “I dunno. Don’t think so.” The boy’s face colored—perhaps he had a little crush on Denise, or perhaps he felt like a child in her presence, a boy still living at home, with his chubby wrists and belly.

“Take a night course,” Denise said, brightly. “You can sign up right after Christmas. Just one course. You should do that.” Denise nodded, and looked at Henry, who nodded back.

“It’s true, Jerry,” Henry said, who had never given a great deal of thought to the boy. “What is it that interests you?”

The boy shrugged his big shoulders.

“Something must interest you.”

“This stuff.” The boy gestured toward the boxes of packed pills he had recently brought through the back door.

And so, amazingly, he had signed up for a science course, and when he received an A that spring, Denise said, “Stay right there.” She returned from the grocery store with a little boxed cake, and said, “Henry, if the phone doesn’t ring, we’re going to celebrate.”

Pushing cake into his mouth, Jerry told Denise he had gone to mass the Sunday before to pray he did well on the exam.

This was the kind of thing that surprised Henry about Catholics. He almost said, God didn’t get an A for you, Jerry; you got it for yourself, but Denise was saying, “Do you go every Sunday?”

The boy looked embarrassed, sucked frosting from his finger. “I will now,” he said, and Denise laughed, and Jerry did, too, his face pink and glowing.

Autumn now, November, and so many years later that when Henry runs a comb through his hair on this Sunday morning, he has to pluck some strands of gray from the black plastic teeth before slipping the comb back into his pocket. He gets a fire going in the stove for Olive before he goes off to church. “Bring home the gossip,” Olive says to him, tugging at her sweater while she peers into a large pot where apples are burbling in a stew. She is making applesauce from the season’s last apples, and the smell reaches him briefly—sweet, familiar, it tugs at some ancient longing—before he goes out the door in his tweed jacket and tie.

“Do my best,” he says. No one seems to wear a suit to church anymore.

In fact, only a handful of the congregation goes to church regularly anymore. This saddens Henry, and worries him. They have been through two ministers in the last five years, neither one bringing much inspiration to the pulpit. The current fellow, a man with a beard, and who doesn’t wear a robe, Henry suspects won’t last long. He is young with a growing family, and will have to move on. What worries Henry about the paucity of the congregation is that perhaps others have felt what he increasingly tries to deny—that this weekly gathering provides no real sense of comfort. When they bow their heads or sing a hymn, there is no sense anymore—for Henry—that God’s presence is blessing them. Olive herself has become an unapologetic atheist. He does not know when this happened. It was not true when they were first married; they had talked of animal dissections in their college biology class, how the system of respiration alone was miraculous, a *creation* by a splendid power.

He drives over the dirt road, turning onto the paved road that will take him into town. Only a few leaves of deep red remain on the otherwise bare limbs of the maples; the oak leaves are russet and wrinkled; briefly through the trees is the glimpse of the bay, flat and steel-gray today with the overcast November sky.

He passes by where the pharmacy used to be. In its place now is a large chain drugstore with huge glass sliding doors, covering the ground where both the old pharmacy and grocery store stood, large enough so that the back parking lot where Henry would linger with Denise by the dumpster at day’s end before getting into their separate cars—all this is now taken over by a store that sells not only drugs, but huge rolls of paper towels and boxes of all sizes of garbage bags. Even plates and mugs can be bought there, spatulas, cat food. The trees off to the side have been cut down to make a parking lot. You get used to things, he thinks, without getting used to things.

It seems a very long time ago that Denise stood shivering in the winter cold before finally getting into her car. How young she was! How painful to remember the bewilderment on her young face; and yet he can still remember how he could make her smile. Now, so far away in Texas—so far away it’s a different country—she is the age he was then. She had dropped a red mitten one night; he had bent to get it, held the cuff open and watched while she’d slipped her small hand in.

The white church sits near the bare maple trees. He knows why he is thinking of Denise with this keenness. Her birthday card to him did not arrive last week, as it has, always on time, for

the last twenty years. She writes him a note with the card. Sometimes a line or two stands out, as in the one last year when she mentioned that Paul, a freshman in high school, had become obese. Her word. "Paul has developed a full-blown problem now—at three hundred pounds, he is obese." She does not mention what she or her husband will do about this, if in fact they can "do" anything. The twin girls, younger, are both athletic and starting to get phone calls from boys "which horrifies me," Denise wrote. She never signs the card "love," just her name in her small neat hand, "Denise."

In the gravel lot by the church, Daisy Foster has just stepped from her car, and her mouth opens in a mock look of surprise and pleasure, but the pleasure is real, he knows—Daisy is always glad to see him. Daisy's husband died two years ago, a retired policeman who smoked himself to death, twenty-five years older than Daisy; she remains ever lovely, ever gracious with her kind blue eyes. What will become of her, Henry doesn't know. It seems to Henry, as he takes his seat in his usual middle pew, that women are far braver than men. The possibility of Olive's dying and leaving him alone gives him glimpses of horror he can't abide.

And then his mind moves back to the pharmacy that is no longer there.

"Henry's going hunting this weekend," Denise said one morning in November. "Do you hunt, Henry?" She was getting the cash drawer ready and didn't look up at him.

"Used to," Henry answered. "Too old for it now." The one time in his youth when he had shot a doe, he'd been sickened by the way the sweet, startled animal's head had swayed back and forth before its thin legs had folded and it had fallen to the forest floor. "Oh, you're a softie," Olive had said.

"Henry goes with Tony Kuzio." Denise slipped the cash drawer into the register, and stepped around to arrange the breath mints and gum that were neatly laid out by the front counter. "His best friend since he was five."

"And what does Tony do now?"

"Tony's married with two little kids. He works for Midcoast Power, and fights with his wife." Denise looked over at Henry. "Don't say that I said so."

"No."

"She's tense a lot, and yells. Boy, I wouldn't want to live like that."

"No, it'd be no way to live."

The telephone rang and Denise, turning on her toe playfully, went to answer it. "The Village Pharmacy. Good morning. How may I help you?" A pause. "Oh, yes, we have multivitamins with no iron.... You're very welcome."

On lunch break, Denise told the hefty, baby-faced Jerry, “My husband talked about Tony the whole time we were going out. The scrapes they’d get into when they were kids. Once, they went off and didn’t get back till way after dark, and Tony’s mother said to him, ‘I was so worried, Tony. I could kill you.’ ” Denise picked lint off the sleeve of her gray sweater. “I always thought that was funny. Worrying that your child might be dead and then saying you’ll kill him.”

“You wait,” Henry Kitteridge said, stepping around the boxes Jerry had brought into the back room. “From their very first fever, you never stop worrying.”

“I *can’t* wait,” Denise said, and for the first time it occurred to Henry that soon she would have children and not work for him anymore.

Unexpectedly Jerry spoke. “Do you like him? Tony? You two get along?”

“I do like him,” Denise said. “Thank goodness. I was scared enough to meet him. Do you have a best friend from childhood?”

“I guess,” Jerry said, color rising in his fat, smooth cheeks. “But we kind of went our separate ways.”

“My best friend,” said Denise, “when we got to junior high school, she got kind of fast. Do you want another soda?”

A Saturday at home: Lunch was crabmeat sandwiches, grilled with cheese. Christopher was putting one into his mouth, but the telephone rang, and Olive went to answer it. Christopher, without being asked, waited, the sandwich held in his hand. Henry’s mind seemed to take a picture of that moment, his son’s instinctive deference at the very same time they heard Olive’s voice in the next room. “Oh, you poor child,” she said, in a voice Henry would always remember—filled with such dismay that all her outer Olive-ness seemed stripped away. “You poor, poor child.”

And then Henry rose and went into the other room, and he didn’t remember much, only the tiny voice of Denise, and then speaking for a few moments to her father-in-law.

The funeral was held in the Church of the Holy Mother of Contrition, three hours away in Henry Thibodeau’s hometown. The church was large and dark with its huge stained-glass windows, the priest up front in a layered white robe, swinging incense back and forth; Denise already seated in the front near her parents and sisters by the time Olive and Henry arrived. The casket was closed, and had been closed at the wake the evening before. The church was almost full. Henry, seated next to Olive toward the back, recognized no one, until a silent large presence made him look up, and there was Jerry McCarthy. Henry and Olive moved over to make room for him.

Jerry whispered, “I read about it in the paper,” and Henry briefly rested a hand on the boy’s fat knee.

The service went on and on; there were readings from the Bible, and other readings, and then an elaborate getting ready for Communion. The priest took cloths and unfolded them and draped them over a table, and then people were leaving their seats aisle by aisle to go up and kneel and open their mouths for a wafer, all sipping from the same large silver goblet, while Henry and Olive stayed where they were. In spite of the sense of unreality that had descended over Henry, he was struck with the unhygienic nature of all these people sipping from the same cup, and struck—with cynicism—at how the priest, after everyone else was done, tilted his beaky head back and drank whatever drops were left.

Six young men carried the casket down the center aisle. Olive nudged Henry with her elbow, and Henry nodded. One of the pallbearers—one of the last ones—had a face that was so white and stunned that Henry was afraid he would drop the casket. This was Tony Kuzio, who, thinking Henry Thibodeau was a deer in the early morning darkness just a few days ago, had pulled the trigger of his rifle and killed his best friend.

Who was to help her? Her father lived far upstate in Vermont with a wife who was an invalid, her brothers and their wives lived hours away, her in-laws were immobilized by grief. She stayed with her in-laws for two weeks, and when she came back to work, she told Henry she couldn't stay with them much longer; they were kind, but she could hear her mother-in-law weeping all night, and it gave her the willies; she needed to be alone so she could cry by herself.

"Of course you do, Denise."

"But I can't go back to the trailer."

"No."

That night he sat up in bed, his chin resting on both hands. "Olive," he said, "the girl is utterly helpless. Why, she can't drive a car, and she's never written a check."

"How can it be," said Olive, "that you grow up in Vermont and can't even drive a car?"

"I don't know," Henry acknowledged. "I had no idea she couldn't drive a car."

"Well, I can see why Henry married her. I wasn't sure at first. But when I got a look at his mother at the funeral—ah, poor thing. But she didn't seem to have a bit of oomph to her."

"Well, she's about broken with grief."

"I understand that," Olive said patiently. "I'm simply telling you he married his mother. Men do." After a pause. "Except for you."

"She's going to have to learn to drive," Henry said. "That's the first thing. And she needs a place to live."

“Sign her up for driving school.”

Instead, he took her in his car along the back dirt roads. The snow had arrived, but on the roads that led down to the water, the fishermen’s trucks had flattened it. “That’s right. Slowly up on the clutch.” The car bucked like a wild horse, and Henry put his hand against the dashboard.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Denise whispered.

“No, no. You’re doing fine.”

“I’m just scared. Gosh.”

“Because it’s brand-new. But, Denise, *nitwits* can drive cars.”

She looked at him, a sudden giggle coming from her, and he laughed himself then, without wanting to, while her giggle grew, spilling out so that tears came to her eyes, and she had to stop the car and take the white handkerchief he offered. She took her glasses off and he looked out the window the other way while she used the handkerchief. Snow had made the woods alongside the road seem like a picture in black and white. Even the evergreens seemed dark, spreading their boughs above the black trunks.

“Okay,” said Denise. She started the car again; again he was thrown forward. If she burned out the clutch, Olive would be furious.

“That’s perfectly all right,” he told Denise. “Practice makes perfect, that’s all.”

In a few weeks, he drove her to Augusta, where she passed the driving test, and then he went with her to buy a car. She had money for this. Henry Thibodeau, it turned out, had had a good life insurance policy, so at least there was that. Now Henry Kitteridge helped her get the car insurance, explained how to make the payments. Earlier, he had taken her to the bank, and for the first time in her life she had a checking account. He had shown her how to write a check.

He was appalled when she mentioned at work one day the amount of money she had sent the Church of the Holy Mother of Contrition, to ensure that candles were lit for Henry every week, a mass said for him each month. He said, “Well, that’s nice, Denise.” She had lost weight, and when, at the end of the day, he stood in the darkened parking lot, watching from beneath one of the lights on the side of the building, he was struck by the image of her anxious head peering over the steering wheel; and as he got into his own car, a sadness shuddered through him that he could not shake all night.

“What in hell ails you?” Olive said.

“Denise,” he answered. “She’s helpless.”

“People are never as helpless as you think they are,” Olive answered. She added, clamping a cover over a pot on the stove, “God, I was afraid of this.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Just take the damn dog out,” Olive said. “And sit yourself down to supper.”

An apartment was found in a small new complex outside of town. Denise’s father-in-law and Henry helped her move her few things in. The place was on the ground floor and didn’t get much light. “Well, it’s clean,” Henry said to Denise, watching her open the refrigerator door, the way she stared at the complete emptiness of its new insides. She only nodded, closing the door. Quietly, she said, “I’ve never lived alone before.”

In the pharmacy he saw that she walked around in a state of unreality; he found his own life felt unbearable in a way he would never have expected. The force of this made no sense. But it alarmed him; mistakes could be made. He forgot to tell Cliff Mott to eat a banana for potassium, now that they’d added a diuretic with his digitalis. The Tibbets woman had a bad night with erythromycin; had he not told her to take it with food? He worked slowly, counting pills sometimes two or three times before he slipped them into their bottles, checking carefully the prescriptions he typed. At home, he looked at Olive wide-eyed when she spoke, so she would see she had his attention. But she did not have his attention. Olive was a frightening stranger; his son often seemed to be smirking at him. “Take the garbage out!” Henry shouted one night, after opening the cupboard beneath the kitchen sink, seeing a bag full of eggshells and dog hairs and balled-up waxed paper. “It’s the only thing we ask you to do, and you can’t even manage that!”

“Stop shouting,” Olive told him. “Do you think that makes you a man? How absolutely pathetic.”

Spring came. Daylight lengthened, melted the remaining snows so the roads were wet. Forsythias bloomed clouds of yellow into the chilly air, then rhododendrons screeched their red heads at the world. He pictured everything through Denise’s eyes, and thought the beauty must be an assault. Passing by the Caldwells’ farm, he saw a handwritten sign, FREE KITTENS, and he arrived at the pharmacy the next day with a kitty-litter box, cat food, and a small black kitten, whose feet were white, as though it had walked through a bowl of whipped cream.

“Oh, Henry,” Denise cried, taking the kitten from him, tucking it to her chest.

He felt immensely pleased.

Because it was such a young thing, Slippers spent the days at the pharmacy, where Jerry McCarthy was forced to hold it in his fat hand, against his sweat-stained shirt, saying to Denise, “Oh, yuh. Awful cute. That’s nice,” before Denise freed him of this little furry encumbrance, taking Slippers back, nuzzling her face against his, while Jerry watched, his thick, shiny lips slightly parted. Jerry had taken two more classes at the university, and had once again received A’s in both. Henry and Denise congratulated him with the air of distracted parents; no cake this time.

She had spells of manic loquaciousness, followed by days of silence. Sometimes she stepped out the back door of the pharmacy, and returned with swollen eyes. “Go home early, if you

need to,” he told her. But she looked at him with panic. “No. Oh, gosh, no. I want to be right here.”

It was a warm summer that year. He remembers her standing by the fan near the window, her thin hair flying behind her in little undulating waves, while she gazed through her glasses at the windowsill. Standing there for minutes at a time. She went, for a week, to see one of her brothers. Took another week to see her parents. “This is where I want to be,” she said, when she came back.

“Where’s she going to find another husband in this tiny town?” Olive asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve wondered,” Henry admitted.

“Someone else would go off and join the Foreign Legion, but she’s not the type.”

“No. She’s not the type.”

Autumn arrived, and he dreaded it. On the anniversary of Henry Thibodeau’s death, Denise went to mass with her in-laws. He was relieved when that day was over, when a week went by, and another, although the holidays loomed, and he felt trepidation, as though he were carrying something that could not be set down. When the phone rang during supper one night, he went to get it with a sense of foreboding. He heard Denise make small screaming sounds—Slippers had gotten out of the house without her seeing, and planning to drive to the grocery store just now, she had run over the cat.

“Go,” Olive said. “For God’s sake. Go over and comfort your girlfriend.”

“Stop it, Olive,” Henry said. “That’s unnecessary. She’s a young widow who ran over her cat. Where in God’s name is your compassion?” He was trembling.

“She wouldn’t have run over any goddamn cat if you hadn’t given it to her.”

He brought with him a Valium. That night he sat on her couch, helpless while she wept. The urge to put his arm around her small shoulders was very strong, but he sat holding his hands together in his lap. A small lamp shone from the kitchen table. She blew her nose on his white handkerchief, and said, “Oh, Henry. Henry.” He was not sure which Henry she meant. She looked up at him, her small eyes almost swollen shut; she had taken her glasses off to press the handkerchief to them. “I talk to you in my head all the time,” she said. She put her glasses back on. “Sorry,” she whispered.

“For what?”

“For talking to you in my head all the time.”

“No, no.”

He put her to bed like a child. Dutifully she went into the bathroom and changed into her pajamas, then lay in the bed with the quilt to her chin. He sat on the edge of the bed, smoothing her hair until the Valium took over. Her eyelids drooped, and she turned her head to the side,

murmuring something he couldn't make out. As he drove home slowly along the narrow roads, the darkness seemed alive and sinister as it pressed against the car windows. He pictured moving far upstate, living in a small house with Denise. He could find work somewhere up north; she could have a child. A little girl who would adore him; girls adored their fathers.

"Well, widow-comforter, how is she?" Olive spoke in the dark from the bed.

"Struggling," he said.

"Who isn't."

The next morning he and Denise worked in an intimate silence. If she was up at the cash register and he was behind his counter, he could still feel the invisible presence of her against him, as though she had become Slippers, or he had—their inner selves brushing up against the other. At the end of the day, he said, "I will take care of you," his voice thick with emotion.

She stood before him, and nodded. He zipped her coat for her.

To this day he does not know what he was thinking. In fact, much of it he can't seem to remember. That Tony Kuzio paid her some visits. That she told Tony he must stay married, because if he divorced, he would never be able to marry in the church again. The piercing of jealousy and rage he felt to think of Tony sitting in Denise's little place late at night, begging her forgiveness. The feeling that he was drowning in cobwebs whose sticky maze was spinning about him. That he wanted Denise to continue to love him. And she did. He saw it in her eyes when she dropped a red mitten and he picked it up and held it open for her. *I talk to you in my head all the time*. The pain was sharp, exquisite, unbearable.

"Denise," he said one evening as they closed up the store. "You need some friends."

Her face flushed deeply. She put her coat on with a roughness to her gestures. "I have friends," she said, breathlessly.

"Of course you do. But here in town." He waited by the door until she got her purse from out back. "You might go square dancing at the Grange Hall. Olive and I used to go. It's a nice group of people."

She stepped past him, her face moist, the top of her hair passing by his eyes. "Or maybe you think that's square," he said in the parking lot, lamely.

"I am square," she said, quietly.

"Yes," he said, just as quietly. "I am too." As he drove home in the dark, he pictured being the one to take Denise to a Grange Hall dance. "Spin your partner, and promenade...", her face breaking into a smile, her foot tapping, her small hands on her hips. No—it was not bearable, and he was really frightened now by the sudden emergence of anger he had inspired in her. He could do nothing for her. He could not take her in his arms, kiss her damp forehead, sleep

beside her while she wore those little-girl flannel pajamas she'd worn the night Slippers died. To leave Olive was as unthinkable as sawing off his leg. In any event, Denise would not want a divorced Protestant; nor would he be able to abide her Catholicism.

They spoke to each other little as the days went by. He felt coming from her now an unrelenting coldness that was accusatory. What had he led her to expect? And yet when she mentioned a visit from Tony Kuzio, or made an elliptical reference to seeing a movie in Portland, an answering coldness arose in him. He had to grit his teeth not to say, "Too square to go square dancing, then?" How he hated that the words *lovers' quarrel* went through his head.

And then just as suddenly she'd say—ostensibly to Jerry McCarthy, who listened those days with a new comportment to his bulky self, but really she was speaking to Henry (he could see this in the way she glanced at him, holding her small hands together nervously)—"My mother, when I was very little, and before she got sick, would make special cookies for Christmas. We'd paint them with frosting and sprinkles. Oh, I think it was the most fun I ever had sometimes"—her voice wavering while her eyes blinked behind her glasses. And he would understand then that the death of her husband had caused her to feel the death of her girlhood as well; she was mourning the loss of the only *herself* she had ever known—gone now, to this new, bewildered young widow. His eyes, catching hers, softened.

Back and forth this cycle went. For the first time in his life as a pharmacist, he allowed himself a sleeping tablet, slipping one each day into the pocket of his trousers. "All set, Denise?" he'd say when it was time to close. Either she'd silently go get her coat, or she'd say, looking at him with gentleness, "All set, Henry. One more day."

Daisy Foster, standing now to sing a hymn, turns her head and smiles at him. He nods back and opens the hymnal. "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing." The words, the sound of the few people singing, make him both hopeful and deeply sad. "You can learn to love someone," he had told Denise, when she'd come to him in the back of the store that spring day. Now, as he places the hymnal back in the holder in front of him, sits once more on the small pew, he thinks of the last time he saw her. They had come north to visit Jerry's parents, and they stopped by the house with the baby, Paul. What Henry remembers is this: Jerry saying something sarcastic about Denise falling asleep each night on the couch, sometimes staying there the whole night through. Denise turning away, looking out over the bay, her shoulders slumped, her small breasts just slightly pushing out against her thin turtleneck sweater, but she had a belly, as though a basketball had been cut in half and she'd swallowed it. No longer the girl she had been—no girl stayed a girl—but a mother, tired, and her round cheeks had deflated as her belly had expanded, so that already there was a look of the gravity of life weighing her down. It was at that point Jerry said sharply, "Denise, stand up straight. Put your shoulders back." He looked at Henry, shaking his head. "How many times do I keep telling her that?"

"Have some chowder," Henry said. "Olive made it last night." But they had to get going, and when they left, he said nothing about their visit, and neither did Olive, surprisingly. He would not have thought Jerry would grow into that sort of man, large, clean-looking—thanks to the ministrations of Denise—not even so much fat anymore, just a big man earning a big

salary, speaking to his wife in a way Olive had sometimes spoken to Henry. He did not see her again, although she must have been in the region. In her birthday notes, she reported the death of her mother, then, a few years later, her father. Of course she would have driven north to go to the funerals. Did she think of him? Did she and Jerry stop and visit the grave of Henry Thibodeau?

“You’re looking fresh as a daisy,” he tells Daisy Foster in the parking lot outside the church. It is their joke; he has said it to her for years.

“How’s Olive?” Daisy’s blue eyes are still large and lovely, her smile ever present.

“Olive’s fine. Home keeping the fires burning. And what’s new with you?”

“I have a beau.” She says this quietly, putting a hand to her mouth.

“Do you? Daisy, that’s wonderful.”

“Sells insurance in Heathwick during the day, and takes me dancing on Friday nights.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Henry says again. “You’ll have to bring him around for supper.”

“Why do you need everyone married?” Christopher has said to him angrily, when Henry has asked about his son’s life. “Why can’t you just leave people alone?”

He doesn’t want people alone.

At home, Olive nods to the table, where a card from Denise lies next to an African violet. “Came yesterday,” Olive says. “I forgot.”

Henry sits down heavily and opens it with his pen, finds his glasses, peers at it. Her note is longer than usual. She had a scare late in the summer. Pericardial effusion, which turned out to be nothing. “It changed me,” she wrote, “as experiences do. It put all my priorities straight, and I have lived every day since then with the deepest gratitude for my family. Nothing matters except family and friends,” she wrote, in her neat, small hand. “And I have been blessed with both.”

The card, for the first time ever, was signed, “Love.”

“How is she?” asks Olive, running water into the sink. Henry stares out at the bay, at the skinny spruce trees along the edge of the cove, and it seems beautiful to him, God’s magnificence there in the quiet stateliness of the coastline and the slightly rocking water.

“She’s fine,” he answers. Not at the moment, but soon, he will walk over to Olive and put his hand on her arm. Olive, who has lived through her own sorrows. For he understood long ago—after Jim O’Casey’s car went off the road, and Olive spent weeks going straight to bed after supper, sobbing harshly into a pillow—Henry understood then that Olive had loved Jim

O'Casey, had possibly been loved by him, though Henry never asked her and she never told, just as he did not tell her of the gripping, sickening need he felt for Denise until the day she came to him to report Jerry's proposal, and he said: "Go."

He puts the card on the windowsill. He has wondered what it has felt like for her to write the words *Dear Henry*. Has she known other Henrys since then? He has no way of knowing. Nor does he know what happened to Tony Kuzio, or whether candles are still being lit for Henry Thibodeau in church.

Henry stands up, Daisy Foster fleeting through his mind, her smile as she spoke of going dancing. The relief that he just felt over Denise's note, that she is glad for the life that unfolded before her, gives way suddenly, queerly, into an odd sense of loss, as if something significant has been taken from him. "Olive," he says.

She must not hear him because of the water running into the sink. She is not as tall as she used to be, and is broader across her back. The water stops. "Olive," he says, and she turns. "You're not going to leave me, are you?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Henry. You could make a woman sick." She wipes her hands quickly on a towel.

He nods. How could he ever tell her—he could not—that all these years of feeling guilty about Denise have carried with them the kernel of still having her? He cannot even bear this thought, and in a moment it will be gone, dismissed as not true. For who could bear to think of himself this way, as a man deflated by the good fortune of others? No, such a thing is ludicrous.

"Daisy has a fellow," he says. "We need to have them over soon."