Elizabeth Strout, Olive, Again (2019)

The End of the Civil War Days

The MacPhersons lived in a large old house on the outskirts of Crosby, Maine. They had been married for forty-two years, and for the last thirty-five they had barely spoken to each other. But they still shared the house. In his youth, Mr. MacPherson—his name was Fergus—had had an affair with a neighbor; back then there was no forgiveness and no divorce. So they were stuck together in their house. For a while their younger daughter, Laurie, had come back home briefly, her marriage had broken up and she and her six-year-old son came to live with them—both Fergus and his wife had been gladdened by their arrival, in spite of its cause—but very soon Laurie said that "their continued arrangement," as she put it, was too unhealthy for her child, and so she left, moving to a small apartment near Portland.

Their arrangement was this: They lived with strips of yellow duct tape separating the living room in half; it ran over the wooden floor and right up against the rug that Ethel MacPherson had put on her side of the room; and in the dining room the tape was there as well, running over the dining room table, dividing it in half exactly, running down into the air and then onto the floor. Each night Ethel made dinner and placed her plate on one side of the taped table, and placed her husband's plate on the other side. They ate in

silence, and when Ethel was done eating she put her plate on her husband's side of the table and then she left the room; he did the dishes. The kitchen had been taped too, years earlier, but because of the sink and the cupboards, which both MacPhersons needed access to, especially in the morning, they had let the tape become peeled in places and they mostly ignored it. As they ignored each other. Their bedrooms were on separate floors, so that was not an issue.

The main issue, naturally, was the televisions in their living room. On either side of the duct tape sat a television; Fergus's was the bigger of the two, and Ethel's was older. For years they sat there in the evenings—Fergus drawing his fingers through his beard; Ethel, who in the early years might have had her curlers in, but eventually she cut her hair short and dyed it an orangey-yellow; she still was often knitting—watching separate shows on their televisions, each turning up the volume to drown out the other. But then a few years ago Fergus—right before he retired from the ironworks, where he had been a draftsman—went and got a fancy set of earphones that were attached to something like an old-fashioned telephone cord that he stuck into his television, and so he sat in his lounge chair with his earphones on, and Ethel could keep her television down to almost a regular sound.

In any event, their older daughter, Lisa, was coming home in a week for her annual visit from New York City, where she had moved eighteen years earlier. There was something about her that Fergus could never quite put his finger on: She was a pretty thing, but she never mentioned a boyfriend except for once in a very great while. Now she was close to forty, and the fact that she would probably not have children saddened him. Fergus had a special place for Lisa in his heart that he did not have for her younger sister, Laurie, though he loved Laurie as well. Lisa had a job as the administrative

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assistant to a program at the New School. "So you're a secretary," Fergus had said, and she had said, Yeah, well, basically she was.

Now—it was a Friday evening in early August—Fergus said out loud to his television, "Goddammit," and this caused his wife to begin to sing. "La-la-lahhh-la, deedly-dee-dum," she sang out loudly because she hated when he swore, but he had his earphones on and probably couldn't hear, so she gave it up. Fergus had sworn because his daughter's visit was going to coincide with the Civil War Days in the park next week, which Fergus always took part in, dressing up like a Union soldier and marching back and forth on Saturday and shooting a rifle—they were blanks, of course—and then he slept in his little canvas pup tent in the park with the other soldiers, and they cooked their meals on tiny makeshift stoves like the kind that were used in the Civil War days. It was Fergus's job to beat the drum, along with one other man, a nasty old codger named Ed Moody from down the coast who—when he joined a few years ago—seemed to think that he was the drummer; there had been trouble about that, but the regiment had finally said that both men could beat a drum. In truth, Fergus's enthusiasm for this entire thing had been waning, but he knew his wife laughed at him for partaking in it, and so he continued to do so. He had, when he thought about it, always preferred the St. Andrews group—the Highland Games when men of Scottish ancestry all wore their kilts and marched about the fairgrounds, bagpipes whining; Fergus played the drum for them as well, as he marched in his kilt of the MacPherson plaid.

The dog, who had been lying in the corner of the room, a small—now old—cocker spaniel named Teddy, rose and walked over to Fergus and wagged his tail. Fergus took his earphones off. Ethel said, "I hope your father plans on taking you out, I don't feel like it tonight," and Fergus said, "Tell your mother to hush up." Fergus rose, and as he was leaving with the dog he said, "Teddy, I guess we'll go to the grocery store," and his wife said, "I hope to heck Fergus doesn't forget the milk." In this way, they communicated.

For years Ethel had worked in the town clerk's office, giving out fishing licenses and dog licenses and things of that sort to people who came in. So she was friendly with Anita Coombs, who still worked there, and tonight at the grocery store Anita was in line when Fergus walked up with the milk and his cans of baked beans and his hot dogs. "Hello, Fergus," said Anita, her face widening in pleasure. She was a short woman with glasses, who had sorrows of her own; Fergus knew this from listening to his wife on the telephone. Fergus gave her a nod. "How's everyone?" Anita asked. And Fergus said everyone was just fine. In his pocket his hand went around the roll of bills he always carried. Years ago, his wife had said to the girls that their father was so cheap he'd hang up the used toilet paper to dry if he could, and he had been stung by that; ever since, he carried around a roll of cash as if that made it not true.

"Getting ready for those Civil War Days?" Anita asked as she took out her credit card and stuck it in the slot for credit cards. Fergus said he was. Anita squinted at the card in the machine, then turned to Fergus and said, touching the edge of her eyeglasses, "I heard that you folks may not be spending the night in the park this year. Too many druggies out at night now."

Fergus felt a splinter of alarm go through him. "Don't know," he said. "Guess we're considering all angles."

Anita took back her card, then took her recycling bag of groceries and hoisted it over her shoulder. "You say hi to Ethel," she said, and he said he'd do that, and she said, "Awful nice to see you, Fergie," and she left the store.

In his car in the parking lot of the grocery store, Fergus took out his phone and saw a text from Bob Sturdges, who was the cap-

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tain of their little Civil War army. It said: Got some problems, give me a call when you can. So Fergus called him from the car and found out that what Anita had said was partly true: They were not going to be spending the night in the park. But Anita had been wrong about the druggies. It was because there was too much political stuff happening around the country these days, too many people upset about things; they had already stopped having Confederate soldiers in their unit, but you never knew. And also, the men were getting old. These were the reasons Bob Sturdges gave to Fergus about why they would not be spending the night in the park; Fergus felt disappointment and then, when he hung up, some relief. So they would go pitch their tents on Saturday and that would be that.

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Lisa had telephoned to say she'd be late; she'd flown to Portland and rented a car, and she'd told her parents—who each held a telephone receiver in their hand—that she was going to visit her sister on her way up. Traditionally, the girls had never been especially close; both Fergus and Ethel noted to themselves that it was curious that Lisa would stop and pay Laurie a visit rather than wait for Laurie to come to the house with her son, which is what Laurie had always done in the past.

But now Lisa's car could be heard turning in to the driveway, and her mother went to the door and waved and called out, "Hello, Lisa! Hello!" And Lisa got out of the car and said, "Hi, Mom," and they sort of hugged each other, which is what they always did, a sort of half a hug. "Let me help you," said her mother, and Lisa said, "No worries, Mom, I've got it." Lisa's dark hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, longer than it was last year, and her dark eyes—always large—shone with light. Ethel watched her daughter bring in her little suitcase, and then Ethel said, "You're in love." It's

because of how Lisa looked that her mother said this; there was an extra layer of beauty to her face.

"Oh, Mom," said Lisa, closing the door behind her.

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A few years back, Fergus had had a fling with a woman at the Civil War Days. Her name was Charlene Bibber, and she was one of the women who dressed up in a hoop skirt and a shawl and a small cap over her head with the handful of other women there who were dressed like that—most of them wives of the so-called soldiers—and that night Fergus had some whiskey and he found himself at the edge of the park—it was a glorious night—and there was Charlene, whose husband had been a soldier until he'd died the year before, and Fergus said, "You're a pretty thing tonight," and she had giggled. In fact, Charlene had graying hair and was plump, but that night she seemed to exude something that Fergus wanted. He took her around the waist and then messed around with her a bit while she kept saying, "Fergie, you naughty boy, you!" Laughing as she said it, and then up by the bandstand they had done it; the surprise of this, and the hustling of getting that damned hoop skirt up, had made it seem exciting at the time. But when he woke in his pup tent the next morning he thought, Oh holy Christ, and he found her and whispered an apology to her, and she acted as though nothing had happened, which he thought extremely rude.

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"Listen, you guys," Lisa said. She had kissed her father, who had stood up to greet her and who was now sitting back down in his lounge chair, and Lisa sat down in a chair across from her mother, next to her mother's television, but then she got up and moved the chair so that it was directly on the strip of yellow duct tape; she

looked back and forth between her parents. She touched the long bangs that fell onto her face, moving them slightly aside. "I stopped and saw Laurie on the way up—"

Fergus said, "We know, Lisa. That was good of you."

Lisa glanced at him and said, "And I told her something, and she said I had to tell you guys, that if I didn't she would—so I have to tell you." The dog sat at Lisa's feet, and he suddenly whined and wagged his tail, poking at Lisa's jeaned legs with his nose.

"So tell us," said Ethel. Ethel took a glimpse at her husband; he was looking at Lisa impassively.

Lisa smoothed her long brown ponytail over her shoulder, and her eyes were very bright. "There's a documentary that's been made." She said this and raised her eyebrows. "And it stars me." Then she turned to the dog, patting him, and making kissing sounds toward him.

Fergus said, "What do you mean, a documentary?"

"What I said," Lisa answered.

Fergus sat up straight in his chair. "Now, hold on," he said. "You're starring in a documentary? I didn't know documentaries had stars."

"Tell your father to hush up," Ethel said. "And then tell me about this documentary. What do you mean, you're starring in it? Honey, this is so exciting."

Lisa nodded. "Well, it is, frankly. Very exciting."

A few times during the summer months, after the Highland Games in June, Fergus would put on his kilt—not the one with the MacPherson plaid, but a different one of plain color; he had gained weight and bought the last one at a store for only twenty-one dollars and ninety-nine cents, the price had pleased him—and he walked the streets of Crosby. He enjoyed this; people were pleasant, and he liked the feel of the kilt; he wore it with a gray T-shirt that matched his gray beard, and he wore his brown walking shoes with it as well. People, often summer people, would stop and talk to him, and they spoke of their own Scottish pasts, if they had one, and he was always surprised—and pleased—at how many people were proud of their ancestry this way. Years earlier there had been a pack of boys up near High Street that would call out, "What does a Scottish man wear under his kilt? A wang, a wang," and they would convulse with laughter. He had felt like throwing stones at them, but of course he did not, and he noticed as the years went by that this sort of thing happened much less frequently and so he had his own private theory that people were becoming more tolerant—about a man wearing a kilt, anyway, if not more tolerant about the mess in the country—and this pleased him.

"About your work?" Ethel was asking Lisa. "Or is this a documentary about someone who comes from a small town and lives in New York City?"

Lisa closed her eyes, and opened them. "About my work," she said. She stood up. "Oh, you guys, we'll talk about this later. Let me get unpacked."

Fergus said, "No, tell us now, Lisa. Spit it out, kid. Not everyone stars in a documentary."

Lisa looked at him. "Well. Okay. Now, listen, you guys. I'm a dominatrix," she said.

Fergus couldn't sleep. He stared at the dark above his head. Then he closed his eyes and immediately felt afraid and so he kept his eyes open, but he couldn't sleep that way. After almost two hours he got out of bed and went down the hall and listened, and he heard Lisa moving about her room, so he knocked lightly on the door.

"Dad?" She stepped back and let him in. She was dressed in her pajamas; they were pink silky-looking things, the bottoms long.

"You know, Lisa," he said. He put his hand to the back of his head. "You know, if it's money you need, honest to God, just say the word. I never should have assumed you could have made it on your own down there—"

"Dad, it's not the money. Well, it kind of is, I guess, but that's not the point." Lisa put her hand to her hair, which was out of its ponytail now, and she smoothed it over her shoulder; it looked glossy to Fergus, like a television ad.

He sat down on her bed; his legs felt weak. "What is the point?" he said.

"Oh, Dad." She looked at him with such great sadness on her face that he had to look away.

Earlier—that afternoon, after a great deal of confusion, especially from Ethel, who did not understand what a dominatrix was and who kept saying, "I just don't understand what you mean, Lisa"—Lisa, after explaining to her mother what she did as a dominatrix, that she dressed up and had men play out their sexual fantasies, had said to her parents, "People need to be educated."

"Why?" Ethel and Fergus had said this at the same time.

"So *they* can *understand*," Lisa said. "Just like how Mom doesn't even know what we do."

Fergus had unwittingly walked across the tape to his wife's side of the living room. "People don't need to understand that kind of behavior. Good God, Lisa." He tugged on his beard, walking about. Then he said, "You're only excited because some damn person, some goddamn nimrod, decided to make a movie about this."

"A documentary," Lisa said. She said, almost with exasperation, "It isn't about sex, Dad. I'm not a *prostitute*, Dad." She added, looking up at him, "I don't have sex with any of these men, you know."

"I don't understand," Ethel said, moving her hand through her hair; she stood up and looked around and then sat right back down. "I really don't understand any of this."

Fergus felt puzzled but—only slightly—relieved to hear that she didn't have sex with anyone, but he said, "What do you mean it's not about sex? Of course it's about sex, Lisa. Come on."

"It's about playacting. Dressing up." Lisa's voice sounded like she was trying to be patient. "If you watched it, you might learn something. Laurie watched it."

"You have it?" Fergus asked.

"Yeah, I have a DVD. I'm not suggesting you watch it, I'm just saying if you *did*—"

Now, late at night, Lisa only said, still with the sadness in her face, "Go to sleep, Dad. I never should have told you. It was a mistake. But you know, you might have found out, because it will go public, and I thought you should know."

"You don't have sex with these men?" Fergus asked.

"I don't, Dad. No."

Fergus backed out of the room. "Good night," he said.

"Sweet dreams," Lisa called to him.

And Fergus could not believe she said that.

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In the morning, Fergus overslept—he had not fallen asleep for ages—and when he woke he could hear Lisa and her mother in the kitchen. He knelt and got out his Civil War uniform from the trunk beneath his bed; the hat seemed squashed, and he punched it a few times. The whole uniform looked wrinkled; he had not taken it to the cleaners to have it pressed as he had in the past. "Oh, for Christ's sake," he murmured to himself. He put it on, got out the small brush for his mustache, which he tried curling at the ends, then went into the bathroom and sprayed hairspray on it, which got into his eyes and stung like hell.

In the kitchen, while sunlight was streaming through the window, he said to Lisa, "Good morning," and she smiled at him—"Hi, Dad"—and he poured himself a bowl of cereal and took it into the dining room, and then he did something he never did, which was to sit on Ethel's side of the yellow duct tape, and he did that so he could hear better what they were saying. But they were talking about dish towels. Dish towels! Lisa was saying that she'd like to go to that store out by Cook's Corner where they have nice dish towels, and Ethel was murmuring something that sounded like Okay, they could do that. Fergus finished his cereal and went back to the kitchen, rinsed the bowl, and told Lisa that he was going off and would see her tonight. "Have a good time," Lisa said. And then his wife said, "Tell your father to enjoy his day," which kind of surprised him, and he said to Lisa to tell her mother thank you.

But he did not have a good day. Taking it from the garage, he put his pup tent into the back of his truck, and when he got to the park everyone was already there; in fact, he heard the gunshots before he even pulled up. It seemed a motley crew this time, not as many men were there as usual, and he got out his tent and walked over to Bob Sturdges, who greeted him and said, "Over there," pointing to a place near the pup tents that Fergus was to use for his own, and Fergus was already too hot in his uniform as he put the damned thing up. He could not stop thinking about Lisa. He thought of her as a young girl, home from school at the end of the day: She'd always been a cheerful sort, not like Laurie, who was prone to sulking.

One of the men nearby—Fergus could not remember his name—was cooking something on a tiny grill placed over a little fire, and Fergus took his coffee—he had cheated and ground the beans earlier—and his tin cup and went and sat with this man, who said, "Hello, Fergus!" And Fergus made his coffee, feeling like a fool, and sat and drank it with this man, whose name finally came to him, Mark Wilton. "Not so many folks today," said Mark, and Fergus said no, there weren't.

From above them the sun came down sharply; they were in a tiny spot of shade from an oak tree, but much of the park was in full sunlight. The oaks and maples caused a dappling of the brightness, and Fergus suddenly remembered the park when he had been a kid here; there were elms in those days, and their leaves were so full, so thick, that the park had felt like it was garlanded. The grass in his memory had been greener as well, and in fact these days there was a whole section of the park that was just dirt, caused by the farmers market that showed up twice a week, the carts ruining the grass below.

Turning, Fergus saw a woman walking toward them in a long dress, skirt puffed out, bright blue, and she was carrying a little blue parasol against the sun. He could see her face, and what struck him was the look of almost-smugness on it. But it wasn't smugness, he realized, as much as a suppressed joy for being able to wear such a dress today. She was a big woman to begin with, and the dress made her appear even bigger. "Hello, Fergus," she said as she got closer to him, and God Almighty if it wasn't Charlene Bibber.

"Hello, Charlene, that's quite a dress you've got on today." Fergus gave her a nod.

"Yes, it is," said Mark Wilton. "Look at you."

"Well, thank you, boys. I made this dress myself by *hand*." Charlene stood there, a few beads of sweat lining her upper lip. "I thought to myself, no sewing machines back in those days, so off we go, Charlene, you can do this, and so I did."

Fergus stood up and said, If they would excuse him, he'd forgotten something back at his house.

"What'd you forget?" asked Charlene, and he just shook his head. As he got into his truck he saw that she was still watching him.

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In the driveway, he was surprised to see Laurie's car, and even more surprised when he saw his grandson, Teddy—named after the dog—sitting in the backseat of the car. "Teddy Bear," said Fergus, opening the car door. "What are you doing sitting here all alone?"

The boy looked at him with serious eyes. "Mom said I couldn't come in, that the conversation was something I couldn't hear."

"Uh-oh," said Fergus. He loved this kid like the devil. "Aren't you kind of hot?"

The boy nodded. "But I got the windows down. She said she wouldn't be long."

"How long has she been in there?"

The boy shrugged. "I don't know. Not very long, I guess. I just wish—" He looked around miserably. "I just wish I didn't have to sit here." Then he said, quizzically, "Grandpa, you've got your uniform on. It looks different."

"Come sit on the porch, at least," said Fergus. "Come on, I'll take the blame if you get in trouble for just sitting on the porch. Come on, Bear." And so Teddy got out of the car with a book, and he sat down on the first step of the porch.

"Why does your uniform look different?" Teddy asked.

"Oh, it's not pressed."

"Pressed?" Teddy asked, squinting up at his grandfather.

"It's not ironed. Probably why it looks different." Fergus glanced down at his pants, and was struck by how rumpled they were.

Through the open window came sudden hollering.

Teddy looked up at Fergus with alarm in his eyes, and Fergus said, "Okay, back in the car, kid. I'll come get you soon. I promise." And so the boy returned to the car, and said, "It's going to be okay, right?" And Fergus said, "You bet it is," and he thought the boy's face relaxed some, and this pleased Fergus unduly.

"Did she tell you?" Laurie flung these words at her father when he walked into the house. "Did she?"

"She did," Fergus said. "Just calm down."

"That she sticks pins in men's penises? Did she tell you that?"

Fergus had to sit down. "For Christ's sake, Laurie. Stop it." His scrotum seemed to shrivel as he said this.

"You're telling me to stop it? I can't believe you're telling me to stop it. I'm the normal one in the family! Oh my God, your daughter is a *prostitute* and you're telling *me* to calm down." Laurie's neck stuck forward a bit as she said this.

"Yes, I am," Fergus said. "I am asking you to calm down right now, Laurie MacPherson. This is not helping matters one bit."

Laurie turned to her mother. "Mom. Help me out here. Please."

But Ethel, who had been standing behind her chair, now sat down in it and she said only, "Oh, Laurie." She added, "But she's not a prostitute, Laurie. I think."

"Oh my God," said Laurie. She dropped her pocketbook onto the floor and put both hands on her hips.

"It's just that I don't know what to say," Ethel said. "Can't you understand that? I just don't know what to *say*. The whole thing has been—it's just been awful."

"You *think*?" Laurie gave a little dramatic head toss as she said this.

Fergus said, "Laurie, for Christ's sake, calm the hell down. Now."

Laurie pressed her lips together, then reached down and picked up her pocketbook. She said quietly, "This is the sickest family that ever lived on God's earth." She turned and walked through the door, slamming it so hard that a pan on the other side of the kitchen fell from a shelf it was on.

Fergus rose and went after her. "Teddy Bear," he said to his grandson, bending down to speak to him through the car window, "let's you and I see each other soon. Your mother's mad at the moment, but she'll get over it, and then you and I can go fishing."

"Fishing," said Laurie, as she strapped her seatbelt on. "You can go effing fishing all right." And she drove out of the driveway with

her tires squealing while her poor son looked down at his lap as Fergus waved to him.

In the living room, Lisa seemed serene. She was wearing a white T-shirt and jeans, and she looked young. She was speaking to her mother, and she turned her body slightly to include her father as he came in and sat in his chair. A glance at Ethel made Fergus actually feel sorry for his wife; she seemed frightened, and smaller physically. Lisa was saying, "You know, I just want to say, Mrs. Kitteridge told us, years ago in that math class—I will never forget it—one day she just stopped a math problem she was doing on the board and she turned around and she said to the class, 'You all know who you are. If you just look at yourself and listen to yourself, you know exactly who you are. And don't forget it.' And I never did forget it. It kind of gave me courage over the years because she was right; I did know who I was."

"You knew you were a—a dominatrix?" Fergus asked. "Is that what you're saying?"

"Kind of, yes, that is what I'm saying. I knew, I always knew I loved to dress up, and I like to tell people what to do, I *like* people, Dad, and these people have certain needs and I get to fulfill them, and that's a pretty great thing."

Ethel said, "I'm just not understanding this. I am not understanding this at all." Her eyes seemed like they were turning in different directions; this is the image Fergus got when he glanced at her again. He also noticed that the roots of her hair were dark and the yellow parts were sticking out; she must have been running her hand through it—yes, there, she did it, ran her hand through her hair. "Honey, I'm trying," Ethel said. "Lisa, I am trying, but I just don't *get* it."

Lisa nodded patiently. Her dark eyes shone and her face had that glow that it had when she had first walked into the house. "And this is exactly why we're doing the documentary. Because people don't have to feel so—so, so, you know, marginalized anymore if they are into this stuff. It's all just human behavior, and that's what we're trying to say." She smoothed her hair over her shoulder; she had a confidence that was notable.

Fergus cleared his throat, and sat forward with his elbows on his knees. "If putting needles into some man's penis is acceptable human behavior, then something's very, very wrong." He tugged on his beard. "*God*, Lisa." He stood and turned to leave the room, then turned back and said, "Human behavior? For Christ's sake, the concentration camps run by the Nazis were human behavior. What's this defending-human-behavior crap? Honestly, Lisa!"

And then the tears came. Buckets of them. Lisa wept and wept, her eyes becoming smudged and causing black stuff to roll down her cheeks. How could he say she was a *Nazi*? How could he *say* that? And then, after minutes of sobbing noisily, she said it was because of ignorance. She stood up; there was a smudge of black eye makeup on her white T-shirt. "I love you, Dad," she said. "But you are ignorant."

By the side of the road stood Anita Coombs, next to a low blue car with a bent fender. Fergus pulled his truck over and got out. There were no other cars around, it was on the road out toward the Point, and all one could see were fields. The sun beat down and made Anita's fender glint. "Oh, Fergie," she said as he approached. "Boy, am I glad to see you. This damn car broke down."

Fergus put his hand out, and she handed him the key. Squashed into the driver's seat, he tried to start the car and nothing happened. He tried a few more times, then got out and said, "It's dead. Did you call anyone?"

"Yeah." Anita gave a great sigh and looked at her watch. "They said they'd be here in fifteen minutes, and that was half an hour ago."

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"Let me call them," said Fergus, and he took Anita's phone and called the tow people and spoke to them brusquely. He gave her back the phone. "Okay," he said. "They're on their way." He leaned against her car and folded his arms. "I'll wait with you," he added.

"Thanks, Fergie." Anita seemed tired. She put her hands into the front pockets of her jeans and shook her head slowly. Then she said, "Where're you headed?"

"Nowhere," said Fergus, and Anita nodded.

It was Sunday afternoon. Fergus had gone back to the park in the dark last night and found his pup tent, standing by itself—he had been vaguely surprised to see that it was still there—and he had packed it up and put it into the back of his truck. Also in the back of his truck now, in a garbage bag, was his Civil War uniform, with the boots and the cap. This morning after breakfast—she had seemed calm again, never mentioning her foolish documentary—Lisa said, "I'm going to call Laurie. I don't like that she's so mad at me." Fergus almost said, "I'm mad at you too," but he didn't; he just took the dishes and washed them while Ethel remained at the dining-room table, drumming her fingers on it. They could both hear, from Lisa's room, her voice, but could not make out the words. But Lisa talked and talked and talked, and after a while Ethel said, "Come on, Teddy," and took the dog out for a walk. When she came back she asked, "Still talking?" And after a moment Fergus said, "Yes." Then he said, "Teddy, tell your mother I'm going for a drive," and he had gone out in his truck with the intention of taking his Civil War uniform to the garbage can out near the Point and dumping it in there. In the truck he had said out loud a few times, "Creag Dhubh!" which was the war cry of the MacPherson clan, and then he stopped it; he thought of the Highland Games and wondered if that was foolishness too: standing there every summer in his kilt yelling that with the rest of the clan.

Now he said to Anita, "What do you think of Olive Kitteridge?"

"Olive?" said Anita. "Oh, I've always liked her myself. She's not everyone's cup of tea, but I like her." After a moment she said "Why do you ask?" and Fergus just shook his head. Anita gave a small laugh. "She was the one—did Ethel tell you this?—who suggested to us when we were filling out those fishing licenses and they asked for the weight of the person, Olive said, 'Why don't you ask them what they think a game warden would say about how much they weighed?' It was kind of brilliant. You know, you get these fatties in there and you don't want to just say, Hey, how much do you weigh? So we started doing that."

"Anita," Fergus said, turning to her. "This is a hell of a world we live in."

"Oh, I know," Anita said casually. She nodded. "Yuh, I know." She added, "Always has been, I suspect."

"Do you think so?" Fergus asked. He looked at her through his sunglasses. "Do you think it has always been this bad, really? It seems to me like things are getting crazier."

Anita shrugged. "I think they've always been crazy. That's my view."

And so Fergus thought about this.

After another few moments he said, "Things all right with you, Anita?"

She gave a sigh that made her cheeks expand for a moment. "Nah." She looked both ways on the road and said, "Gary's been a mess since he got laid off, and that was a few years ago, and my kids are crazy." She looked at Fergus and made a circle around her ear with her forefinger. She said, "I mean, they are really crazy." She shook her head. "You know what my oldest son is into? He watches some Japanese reality show on his computer where the contestants sniff each other's butts."

Fergus looked over at her. "*God*," he said. Then he said, "Come on, Anita, the world has certainly gotten crazier."

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"Oh, maybe a little, who knows." Anita shrugged slightly.

Fergus finally said, looking at the ground, "Well, kids. What can you do."

"Nothing," said Anita. "How are your girls?"

"Oh, they're crazy too. Batty as can be." He saw the tow truck across the field and motioned toward it and Anita said, "Oh, good."

"You're going to need cash for the tow," Fergus said. "You got it?"

"No, just my credit card."

Fergus reached into his pocket and gave Anita his roll of cash. He waited until the tow truck was driving away, Anita sitting in the front seat of it, waving to him, and then he got back into his truck and drove to the Point and threw his uniform into the garbage, pushing the bag all the way down into the bin. He wondered about Anita's children, how crazy they were, or were not. Watching people sniff each other's butts? Jesus *God*. That was pretty goddamn crazy stuff.

Back home, he was surprised once again to see Laurie's car in the driveway, but no Teddy sat in it, and when he walked into the house he heard his television on. He knew it was his, and not Ethel's, because of the kind of sound it made. He went straight into the living room and found Ethel and his daughters all sitting on his lounge chair, Ethel on the front edge of it, and one girl on each arm, and he was about to open his mouth and say What the hell when he saw that on the television screen was—it was Lisa—and she was dressed in leather and holding a whip, and she cracked the whip and a man moaned; his face was on the floor, turned to its side, and the image pixelated his face, but his buttocks were bare, and again this woman—Lisa—whipped him and again he moaned.

"Turn that off," Fergus said. "Turn that off right now." His wife pressed a button on a remote control, and the screen went a blank

blue except for the DVD sign. "And who said you could use my TV?" Fergus added.

Lisa said, "We had to, Dad, because Mom's is too old to take a DVD and she said she was ready to try and watch this, and so did Laurie—"

"Dad," Laurie said. "You won't believe this. She had one guy that she made roll around in like a hundred squished-up bananas and then—oh God, Dad, she took a *dump* on him!"

Fergus looked at Laurie hard. "And what changed your mind about this filth?"

Laurie said, "Well, Lisa and I had a really long talk and I began to think about it, and I think maybe she's right, people should be educated, so I came here to watch it with Mom. And Mom said she would give it a try, because, you know, it's Lisa, it's her daughter—"

"Where's Teddy?" Fergus looked around.

"He's at his father's. It's Sunday."

Fergus had an odd sensation of not fully knowing where he himself was. He said to Lisa, "You took a shit on a man?"

Lisa looked down. "That's his thing, Dad."

Fergus walked to the television set, and then he was aware of a different strange feeling, his eyes became blurry very quickly, and without any sense of warning that his body would do this he went crashing to the floor, hitting his head on the corner of his television; briefly he saw stars. When he came to, he heard the loud talking of women, this would be his family, and they were trying to sit him up, and they did, and then he was standing and they were pushing him into the car.

All Fergus wanted to do was curl up, this kept going through his head, just curl up, curl up, curl up, and when they got him to the hospital he did that, he curled up on the floor of the emergency room, and very quickly a nurse came and got him standing again, and then he was on a thin bed and he curled up on the bed. When someone tried to straighten out his legs, he curled them right back

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up, almost to his chest, and his head was down there too. All he wanted was to stay curled up with his eyes closed.

Eventually he heard someone say "sedative," and he thought Yes, give me that, and they must have, because he slept deeply, and when he woke he felt frightened and did not know where he was.

"Dad?" It was Lisa, lowering her head, speaking to him quietly. "Oh, Daddy, guess what? You're okay! Oh God, Daddy, you scared us so much, but you're okay. They're going to keep you here tonight, but you're okay, Daddy."

She held his hand, and he squeezed it.

Then Laurie was there, and she said, "Oh, Dad, we were so scared," and he nodded.

Then he was alone, and he fell asleep again. When he woke, he knew right away that he was in the hospital and it was nighttime, a small light was on above his hospital bed. He closed his eyes again.

As he lay there he became aware of someone stroking his arm, very slowly, rhythmically, back and forth went the hand on his arm. He kept his eyes closed so it would continue, and it did. After many minutes went by—who knew how many minutes?—he turned his head and opened his eyes and saw that it was his wife. She stopped when she saw him watching her and put her hand into her lap.

"Ethel," he said. "What have we done?"

"Done about what?" she asked quietly. "You mean our life, or our children?"

He said, "I don't know what I mean." After a moment he said, "You have to tell me about Anita's kids. Not right now, but someday soon."

"Oh," Ethel said. "They're looney tunes."

"Not like ours," he said.

Ethel said, "Not like ours."

And then he nodded toward his arm, a small nod, but old marrieds that they were she understood. She began to stroke his arm again.