

## Today Is Eddie's Birthday

*Eddie and his brother are sitting in the maintenance shop.*

*"This," Joe says proudly, holding up a drill, "is the newest model."*

*Joe is wearing a checkered sport coat and black-and-white saddle shoes. Eddie thinks his brother looks too fancy—and fancy means phony—but Joe is a salesman for a hardware company now and Eddie has been wearing the same outfit for years, so what does he know?*

*"Yes, sir," Joe says, "and get this. It runs on that battery."*

*Eddie holds the battery between his fingers, a small thing called nickel cadmium. Hard to believe.*

*"Start it up," Joe says, handing the drill over.*

*Eddie squeezes the trigger. It explodes in noise.*

*"Nice, huh?" Joe yells.*

*That morning, Joe had told Eddie his new salary. It was three times what Eddie made. Then Joe had congratulated Eddie on his promotion: head of maintenance for Ruby Pier, his father's old position. Eddie had wanted to answer, "If it's so great, why don't you take it, and I'll take your job?" But he didn't. Eddie never said anything he felt that deeply.*

*"Helloo? Anybody in here?"*

*Marguerite is at the door, holding a reel of orange tickets. Eddie's eyes go, as always, to her face, her olive skin, her dark coffee*

eyes. She has taken a job in the ticket booths this summer and she wears the official Ruby Pier uniform: a white shirt, a red vest, black stirrup pants, a red beret, and her name on a pin below her collarbone. The sight of it makes Eddie angry—especially in front of his hotshot brother.

“Show her the drill,” Joe says. He turns to Marguerite. “It’s battery operated.”

Eddie squeezes. Marguerite grabs her ears.

“It’s louder than your snoring,” she says.

“Whoa-ho!” Joe yells, laughing. “Whoa-ho! She got you!”

Eddie looks down sheepishly, then sees his wife smiling.

“Can you come outside?” she says.

Eddie waves the drill. “I’m working here.”

“Just for a minute, OK?”

Eddie stands up slowly, then follows her out the door. The sun hits his face.

“HAP-PY BIRTH-DAY, MR. ED-DIE!” a group of children scream in unison.

“Well, I’ll be,” Eddie says.

Marguerite yells, “OK, kids, put the candles on the cake!”

The children race to a vanilla sheet cake sitting on a nearby folding table. Marguerite leans toward Eddie and whispers, “I promised them you’d blow out all thirty-eight at once.”

Eddie snorts. He watches his wife organize the group. As always with Marguerite and children, his mood is lifted by her easy connection to them and dampened by her inability to bear them. One doctor said she was too nervous. Another said she had waited too long,

*she should have had them by age 25. In time, they ran out of money for doctors. It was what it was.*

*For nearly a year now, she has been talking about adoption. She went to the library. She brought home papers. Eddie said they were too old. She said, "What's too old to a child?"*

*Eddie said he'd think about it.*

*"All right," she yells now from the sheet cake. "Come on, Mr. Eddie! Blow them out. Oh, wait, wait . . ." She fishes in a bag and pulls out a camera, a complicated contraption with rods and tabs and a round flashbulb.*

*"Charlene let me use it. It's a Polaroid."*

*Marguerite lines up the picture, Eddie over the cake, the children squeezing in around him, admiring the 38 little flames. One kid pokes Eddie and says, "Blow them all out, OK?"*

*Eddie looks down. The frosting is a mess, full of countless little handprints.*

*"I will," Eddie says, but he is looking at his wife.*



☺ EDDIE STARED AT the young Marguerite.

“It’s not you,” he said.

She lowered her almond basket. She smiled sadly. The tarantella was dancing behind them and the sun was fading behind a ribbon of white clouds.

“It’s not you,” Eddie said again.

The dancers yelled, “*Hooheyy!*” They banged tambourines.

She offered her hand. Eddie reached for it quickly, instinctively, as if grabbing for a falling object. Their fingers met and he had never felt such a sensation, as if flesh were forming over his own flesh, soft and warm and almost ticklish. She knelt down beside him.

“It’s not you,” he said.

“It is me,” she whispered.

*Hooheyy!*

“It’s not you, it’s not you, it’s not you,” Eddie mumbled, as he dropped his head onto her shoulder and, for the first time since his death, began to cry.

☺ THEIR OWN WEDDING took place Christmas Eve on the second floor of a dimly lit Chinese restaurant called Sammy

Hong's. The owner, Sammy, agreed to rent it for that night, figuring he'd have little other business. Eddie took what cash he had left from the army and spent it on the reception—roast chicken and Chinese vegetables and port wine and a man with an accordion. The chairs for the ceremony were needed for the dinner, so once the vows were taken, the waiters asked the guests to rise, then carried the chairs downstairs to the tables. The accordion man sat on a stool. Years later, Marguerite would joke that the only thing missing from their wedding “were the bingo cards.”

When the meal was finished and some small gifts were given, a final toast was offered and the accordion man packed his case. Eddie and Marguerite left through the front door. It was raining lightly, a chilly rain, but the bride and groom walked home together, seeing as it was only a few blocks. Marguerite wore her wedding dress beneath a thick pink sweater. Eddie wore his white suit coat, the shirt pinching his neck. They held hands. They moved through pools of lamplight. Everything around them seemed buttoned up tight.

☽PEOPLE SAY THEY “find” love, as if it were an object hidden by a rock. But love takes many forms, and it is never the same for any man and woman. What people find then is a *certain* love. And Eddie found a certain love with Marguerite,

a grateful love, a deep but quiet love, one that he knew, above all else, was irreplaceable. Once she'd gone, he'd let the days go stale. He put his heart to sleep.

Now, here she was again, as young as the day they were wed.

"Walk with me," she said.

Eddie tried to stand, but his bad knee buckled. She lifted him effortlessly.

"Your leg," she said, regarding the faded scar with a tender familiarity. Then she looked up and touched the tufts of hair above his ears.

"It's white," she said, smiling.

Eddie couldn't get his tongue to move. He couldn't do much but stare. She was exactly as he remembered—more beautiful, really, for his final memories of her had been as an older, suffering woman. He stood beside her, silent, until her dark eyes narrowed and her lips crept up mischievously.

"Eddie." She almost giggled. "Have you forgotten so fast how I used to look?"

Eddie swallowed. "I never forgot that."

She touched his face lightly and the warmth spread through his body. She motioned to the village and the dancing guests.

"All weddings," she said, happily. "That was my choice. A world of weddings, behind every door. Oh, Eddie, it never changes, when the groom lifts the veil, when the bride accepts the ring, the possibilities you see in their

eyes, it's the same around the world. They truly believe their love and their marriage is going to break all the records."

She smiled. "Do you think we had that?"

Eddie didn't know how to answer.

"We had an accordion player," he said.

☉THEY WALKED FROM the reception and up a gravel path. The music faded to a background noise. Eddie wanted to tell her everything he had seen, everything that had happened. He wanted to ask her about every little thing and every big thing, too. He felt a churning inside him, a stop-start anxiety. He had no idea where to begin.

"You did this, too?" he finally said. "You met five people?"

She nodded.

"A different five people," he said.

She nodded again.

"And they explained everything? And it made a difference?"

She smiled. "All the difference." She touched his chin. "And then I waited for you."

He studied her eyes. Her smile. He wondered if her waiting had felt like his.

"How much do you know . . . about me? I mean, how much do you know since . . ."

He still had trouble saying it.

"Since you died."

She removed the straw hat and pushed the thick, young locks away from her forehead. "Well, I know everything that happened when we were together . . ."

She pursed her lips.

"And now I know *why* it happened. . . ."

She put her hands on her chest.

"And I also know . . . that you loved me dearly."

She took his other hand then. He felt the melting warmth.

"I don't know how *you* died," she said.

Eddie thought for a moment.

"I'm not sure, either," he said. "There was a girl, a little girl, she wandered into this ride, and she was in trouble. . . ."

Marguerite's gaze widened. She looked so young. This was harder than Eddie figured, telling his wife about the day he was killed.

"They have these rides, see, these new rides, nothing like what we used to have—everyone has to go a thousand miles an hour now. Anyhow, this one ride, it drops these carts, and the hydraulics are supposed to stop it, bring it down slowly, but something sliced the cable, the cart snapped loose, I still can't figure it, but the cart dropped because I told them to release it—I mean, I told Dom, he's this kid who works with me now—it wasn't his fault—but I told him and then I tried to stop it, but he couldn't hear me, and this little girl was just



sitting there, and I tried to reach her. I tried to save her. I felt her little hands, but then I . . .”

He stopped. She tilted her head, urging him to go on. He exhaled deeply.

“I ain’t talked this much since I got here,” he said.

She nodded and smiled, a gentle smile, and at the sight of it, his eyes began to moisten and a wave of sadness washed over him and suddenly, just like that, none of this mattered, nothing about his death or the park or the crowd he had yelled at to “Get back!” Why was he talking about this? What was he doing? Was he really with *her*? Like a hidden grieving that rises to grab the heart, his soul was ambushed with old emotions, and his lips began to tremble and he was swept into the current of all that he had lost. He was looking at his wife, his dead wife, his young wife, his missing wife, his only wife, and he didn’t want to look anymore.

“Oh God, Marguerite,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. I can’t say. I can’t say. I can’t say.”

He dropped his head into his hands and he said it anyhow, he said what everyone says.

“I missed you so much.”

## Today Is Eddie's Birthday

*The racetrack is crowded with summer customers. The women wear straw sunhats and the men smoke cigars. Eddie and Noel leave work early to play Eddie's birthday number, 39, in the Daily Double. They sit on slatted fold-down seats. At their feet are paper cups of beer, amidst a carpet of discarded tickets.*

*Earlier, Eddie won the first race of the day. He'd put half of those winnings on the second race and won that as well, the first time such a thing had ever happened to him. That gave him \$209. After losing twice in smaller bets, he put it all on a horse to win in the sixth, because, as he and Noel agreed, in exuberant logic, he'd arrived with next to nothing, so what harm done if he went home the same way?*

*"Just think, if you win," Noel says now, "you'll have all that dough for the kid."*

*The bell rings. The horses are off. They bunch together on the far straightaway, their colorful silks blurring with their bumpy movement. Eddie has No. 8, a horse named Jersey Finch, which isn't a bad gamble, not at four to one, but what Noel has just said about "the kid"—the one Eddie and Marguerite are planning to adopt—flushes him with guilt. They could have used that money. Why did he do things like this?*

*The crowd rises. The horses come down the stretch. Jersey Finch moves outside and lengthens into full stride. The cheering*

*mixes with the thundering hooves. Noel hollers. Eddie squeezes his ticket. He is more nervous than he wants to be. His skin goes bumpy. One horse pulls ahead of the pack.*

*Jersey Finch!*

*Now Eddie has nearly \$800.*

*"I gotta call home," he says.*

*"You'll ruin it," Noel says.*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*"You tell somebody, you ruin your luck."*

*"You're nuts."*

*"Don't do it."*

*"I'm calling her. It'll make her happy."*

*"It won't make her happy."*

*He limps to a pay phone and drops in a nickel. Marguerite answers. Eddie tells her the news. Noel is right. She is not happy. She tells him to come home. He tells her to stop telling him what to do.*

*"We have a baby coming," she scolds. "You can't keep behaving like this."*

*Eddie hangs up the phone with a heat behind his ears. He goes back to Noel, who is eating peanuts at the railing.*

*"Let me guess," Noel says.*

*They go to the window and pick another horse. Eddie takes the money from his pocket. Half of him doesn't want it anymore and half of him wants twice as much, so he can throw it on the bed when he gets home and tell his wife, "Here, buy whatever you want, OK?"*

*Noel watches him push the bills through the opening. He raises his eyebrows.*

*"I know, I know," Eddie says.*

*What he does not know is that Marguerite, unable to call him back, has chosen to drive to the track and find him. She feels badly about yelling, this being his birthday, and she wants to apologize; she also wants him to stop. She knows from evenings past that Noel will insist they stay until closing—Noel is like that. And since the track is only ten minutes away, she grabs her handbag and drives their secondhand Nash Rambler down Ocean Parkway. She turns right on Lester Street. The sun is gone and the sky is in flux. Most of the cars are coming from the other direction. She approaches the Lester Street overpass, which used to be how customers reached the track, up the stairs, over the street and back down the stairs again, until the track owners paid the city for a traffic light, which left the overpass, for the most part, deserted.*

*But on this night, it is not deserted. It holds two teenagers who do not want to be found, two 17-year-olds who, hours earlier, had been chased from a liquor store after stealing five cartons of cigarettes and three pints of Old Harper's whiskey. Now, having finished the alcohol and smoked many of the cigarettes, they are bored with the evening, and they dangle their empty bottles over the lip of the rusted railing.*

*"Dare me?" one says.*

*"Dare ya," says the other.*

*The first one lets the bottle drop and they duck behind the metal grate to watch. It just misses a car and shatters onto the pavement.*

*"Whoooo," the second one yells. "Did you see that!"*

*"Drop yours now, chicken."*

*The second one stands, holds out his bottle, and chooses the sparse traffic of the right-hand lane. He wiggles the bottle back and forth, trying to time the drop to land between vehicles, as if this was some sort of art and he was some sort of artist.*

*His fingers release. He almost smiles.*

*Forty feet below, Marguerite never thinks to look up, never thinks that anything might be happening on that overpass, never thinks about anything besides getting Eddie out of that racetrack while he still has some money left. She is wondering what section of the grandstand to look in, even as the Old Harper's whiskey bottle smashes her windshield into a spray of flying glass. Her car veers into the concrete divider. Her body is tossed like a doll, slamming against the door and the dashboard and the steering wheel, lacerating her liver and breaking her arm and thumping her head so hard she loses touch with the sounds of the evening. She does not hear the screeching of cars. She does not hear the honking of horns. She does not hear the retreat of rubber-soled sneakers, running down the Lester Street overpass and off into the night.*



∞LOVE, LIKE RAIN, can nourish from above, drenching couples with a soaking joy. But sometimes, under the angry heat of life, love dries on the surface and must nourish from below, tending to its roots, keeping itself alive.

The accident on Lester Street sent Marguerite to the hospital. She was confined to bed rest for nearly six months. Her injured liver recovered eventually, but the expense and the delay cost them the adoption. The child they were expecting went to someone else. The unspoken blame for this never found a resting place—it simply moved like a shadow from husband to wife. Marguerite went quiet for a long time. Eddie lost himself in work. The shadow took a place at their table and they ate in its presence, amid the lonely clanking of forks and plates. When they spoke, they spoke of small things. The water of their love was hidden beneath the roots. Eddie never bet the horses again. His visits with Noel came to a gradual end, each of them unable to discuss much over breakfast that didn't feel like an effort.

An amusement park in California introduced the first tubular steel tracks—they twisted at severe angles unachievable with wood—and suddenly, roller coasters, which had faded to near oblivion, were back in fashion. Mr. Bullock, the park owner, had ordered a steel-track model for Ruby

Pier, and Eddie oversaw the construction. He barked at the installers, checking their every move. He didn't trust anything this fast. Sixty-degree angles? He was sure someone would get hurt. Anyhow, it gave him a distraction.

The Stardust Band Shell was torn down. So was the Zipper ride. And the Tunnel of Love, which kids found too corny now. A few years later, a new boat ride called a log flume was constructed, and, to Eddie's surprise, it was hugely popular. The riders floated through troughs of water and dropped, at the end, into a large splash pool. Eddie couldn't figure why people so loved getting wet, when the ocean was 300 yards away. But he maintained it just the same, working shoeless in the water, ensuring that the boats never loosened from the tracks.

In time, husband and wife began talking again, and one night, Eddie even spoke about adopting. Marguerite rubbed her forehead and said, "We're too old now."

Eddie said, "What's too old to a child?"

The years passed. And while a child never came, their wound slowly healed, and their companionship rose to fill the space they were saving for another. In the mornings, she made him toast and coffee, and he dropped her at her cleaning job then drove back to the pier. Sometimes, in the afternoons, she got off early and walked the boardwalk with him, following his rounds, riding carousel horses or yellow-painted clamshells as Eddie explained the rotors and cables and listened for the engines' hum.

One July evening, they found themselves walking by the ocean, eating grape popsicles, their bare feet sinking in the wet sand. They looked around and realized they were the oldest people on the beach.

Marguerite said something about the bikini bathing suits the young girls were wearing and how she would never have the nerve to wear such a thing. Eddie said the girls were lucky, because if she did the men would not look at anyone else. And even though by this point Marguerite was in her mid-40s and her hips had thickened and a web of small lines had formed around her eyes, she thanked Eddie gratefully and looked at his crooked nose and wide jaw. The waters of their love fell again from above and soaked them as surely as the sea that gathered at their feet.

☺THREE YEARS LATER, she was breading chicken cutlets in the kitchen of their apartment, the one they had kept all this time, long after Eddie's mother had died, because Marguerite said it reminded her of when they were kids, and she liked to see the old carousel out the window. Suddenly, without warning, the fingers of her right hand stretched open uncontrollably. They moved backward. They would not close. The cutlet slid from her palm. It fell into the sink. Her arm throbbed. Her breathing quickened. She stared for a moment at this hand with the locked fingers that appeared to belong to someone else, someone gripping a large, invisible jar.

Then everything went dizzy.



“Eddie?” she called, but by the time he arrived, she had passed out on the floor.

☉IT WAS, THEY would determine, a tumor on the brain, and her decline would be like many others, treatments that made the disease seem mild, hair falling out in patches, mornings spent with noisy radiation machines and evenings spent vomiting in a hospital toilet.

In the final days, when cancer was ruled the victor, the doctors said only, “Rest. Take it easy.” When she asked questions, they nodded sympathetically, as if their nods were medicine doled out with a dropper. She realized this was protocol, their way of being nice while being helpless, and when one of them suggested “getting your affairs in order,” she asked to be released from the hospital. She told more than asked.

Eddie helped her up the stairs and hung her coat as she looked around the apartment. She wanted to cook but he made her sit, and he heated some water for tea. He had purchased lamb chops the day before, and that night he bumbled through a dinner with several invited friends and coworkers, most of whom greeted Marguerite and her sallow complexion with sentences like, “Well, look who’s back!” as if this were a homecoming and not a farewell party.

They ate mashed potatoes from a CorningWare dish and had butterscotch brownies for dessert, and when Marguerite finished a second glass of wine, Eddie took the bottle and poured her a third.

Two days later, she awoke with a scream. He drove her to the hospital in the predawn silence. They spoke in short sentences, what doctor might be on, who Eddie should call. And even though she was sitting in the seat next to him, Eddie felt her in everything, in the steering wheel, in the gas pedal, in the blinking of his eye, in the clearing of his throat. Every move he made was about hanging on to her.

She was 47.

"You have the card?" she asked him.

"The card . . ." he said blankly.

She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes, and her voice was thinner when she resumed speaking, as if that breath had cost her dearly.

"Insurance," she croaked.

"Yeah, yeah," he said quickly. "I got the card."

They parked in the lot and Eddie shut the engine. It was suddenly too still and too quiet. He heard every tiny sound, the squeak of his body on the leather seat, the *ca-cunk* of the door handle, the rush of outside air, his feet on the pavement, the jangle of his keys.

He opened her door and helped her get out. Her shoulders were scrunched up near her jaws, like a freezing child. Her hair blew across her face. She sniffed and lifted her eyes to the horizon. She motioned to Eddie and nodded toward the distant top of a big, white amusement ride, with red carts dangling like tree ornaments.

"You can see it from here," she said.

"The Ferris wheel?" he said.

She looked away. "Home."

☉BECAUSE HE HAD not slept in heaven, it was Eddie's perception that he had not spent more than a few hours with any of the people he'd met. Then again, without night or day, without sleeping or waking, without sunsets or high tides or meals or schedules, how did he know?

With Marguerite, he wanted only time—more and more time—and he was granted it, nighttimes and daytimes and nighttimes again. They walked through the doors of the assorted weddings and spoke of everything he wished to speak about. At a Swedish ceremony, Eddie told her about his brother, Joe, who had died 10 years earlier from a heart attack, just a month after purchasing a new condominium in Florida. At a Russian ceremony, she asked if he had kept the old apartment, and he said that he had, and she said she was glad. At an outdoor ceremony in a Lebanese village, he spoke about what had happened to him here in heaven, and she seemed to listen and know at the same time. He spoke of the Blue Man and his story, why some die when others live, and he spoke about the Captain and his tale of sacrifice. When he spoke about his father, Marguerite recalled the many nights he had spent enraged at the man, confounded by his silence. Eddie told her he had made things

square, and her eyebrows lifted and her lips spread and Eddie felt an old, warm feeling he had missed for years, the simple act of making his wife happy.

☺ ONE NIGHT, EDDIE spoke about the changes at Ruby Pier, how the old rides had been torn down, how the pennywhistle music at the arcade was now blaring rock 'n' roll, how the roller coasters now had corkscrew twists and carts that hung *down* from the tracks, how the "dark" rides, which once meant cowboy cutouts in glow paint, were full of video screens now, like watching television all the time.

He told her the new names. No more Dippers or Tumble Bugs. Everything was the Blizzard, the Mindbender, Top Gun, the Vortex.

"Sounds strange, don't it?" Eddie said.

"It sounds," she said, wistfully, "like someone else's summer."

Eddie realized that was precisely what he'd been feeling for years.

"I should have worked somewhere else," he told her. "I'm sorry I never got us out of there. My dad. My leg. I always felt like such a bum after the war."

He saw a sadness pass over her face.

"What happened?" she asked. "During that war?"

He had never quite told her. It was all understood. Soldiers, in his day, did what they had to do and didn't speak of it once they came home. He thought about the men he'd

killed. He thought about the guards. He thought about the blood on his hands. He wondered if he'd ever be forgiven.

"I lost myself," he said.

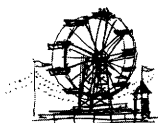
"No," his wife said.

"Yes," he whispered, and she said nothing else.

☺ AT TIMES, THERE in heaven, the two of them would lie down together. But they did not sleep. On earth, Marguerite said, when you fell asleep, you sometimes dreamed your heaven and those dreams helped to form it. But there was no reason for such dreams now.

Instead, Eddie held her shoulders and nuzzled in her hair and took long, deep breaths. At one point, he asked his wife if God knew he was here. She smiled and said, "Of course," even when Eddie admitted that some of his life he'd spent hiding from God, and the rest of the time he thought he went unnoticed.

## The Fourth Lesson



*F*INALLY, AFTER MANY TALKS, Marguerite walked Eddie through another door. They were back inside the small, round room. She sat on the stool and placed her fingers together. She turned to the mirror, and Eddie noticed her reflection. Hers, but not his.

“The bride waits here,” she said, running her hands along her hair, taking in her image but seeming to drift away. “This is the moment you think about what you’re doing. Who you’re choosing. Who you will love. If it’s right, Eddie, this can be such a wonderful moment.”

She turned to him.

“You had to live without love for many years, didn’t you?”

Eddie said nothing.

"You felt that it was snatched away, that I left you too soon."

He lowered himself slowly. Her lavender dress was spread before him.

"You *did* leave too soon," he said.

"You were angry with me."

"No."

Her eyes flashed.

"OK. Yes."

"There was a reason to it all," she said.

"What reason?" he said. "How could there be a reason? You died. You were forty-seven. You were the best person any of us knew, and you died and you lost everything. And I lost everything. I lost the only woman I ever loved."

She took his hands. "No, you didn't. I was right here. And you loved me anyway.

"Lost love is still love, Eddie. It takes a different form, that's all. You can't see their smile or bring them food or tousle their hair or move them around a dance floor. But when those senses weaken, another heightens. Memory. Memory becomes your partner. You nurture it. You hold it. You dance with it.

"Life has to end," she said. "Love doesn't."

Eddie thought about the years after he buried his wife. It was like looking over a fence. He was aware of another kind of life out there, even as he knew he would never be a part of it.

"I never wanted anyone else," he said quietly.

"I know," she said.

"I was still in love with you."

"I know." She nodded. "I felt it."

"Here?" he asked.

"Even here," she said, smiling. "That's how strong lost love can be."

She stood and opened a door, and Eddie blinked as he entered behind her. It was a dimly lit room, with foldable chairs, and an accordion player sitting in the corner.

"I was saving this one," she said.

She held out her arms. And for the first time in heaven, he initiated his contact, he came to her, ignoring the leg, ignoring all the ugly associations he had made about dance and music and weddings, realizing now that they were really about loneliness.

"All that's missing," Marguerite whispered, taking his shoulder, "is the bingo cards."

He grinned and put a hand behind her waist.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Yes."

"How come you look the way you looked the day I married you?"

"I thought you'd like it that way."

He thought for a moment. "Can you change it?"

"Change it?" She looked amused. "To what?"

"To the end."



She lowered her arms. "I wasn't so pretty at the end."

Eddie shook his head, as if to say not true.

"Could you?"

She took a moment, then came again into his arms. The accordion man played the familiar notes. She hummed in his ear and they began to move together, slowly, in a remembered rhythm that a husband shares only with his wife.

*You made me love you*

*I didn't want to do it*

*I didn't want to do it. . . .*

*You made me love you*

*and all the time you knew it*

*and all the time you knew it. . . .*

When he moved his head back, she was 47 again, the web of lines beside her eyes, the thinner hair, the looser skin beneath her chin. She smiled and he smiled, and she was, to him, as beautiful as ever, and he closed his eyes and said for the first time what he'd been feeling from the moment he saw her again: "I don't want to go on. I want to stay here."

When he opened his eyes, his arms still held her shape, but she was gone, and so was everything else.

FRIDAY, 3:15 P.M.

Dominguez pressed the elevator button and the door rumbled closed. An inner porthole lined up with an exterior porthole. The car jerked upward, and through the meshed glass he watched the lobby disappear.

“I can’t believe this elevator still works,” Dominguez said. “It must be, like, from the last century.”

The man beside him, an estate attorney, nodded slightly, feigning interest. He took off his hat—it was stuffy, and he was sweating—and watched the numbers light up on the brass panel. This was his third appointment of the day. One more, and he could go home to dinner.

“Eddie didn’t have much,” Dominguez said.

“Um-hmm,” the man said, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. “Then it shouldn’t take long.”

The elevator bounced to a stop and the door rumbled open and they turned toward 6B. The hallway still had the black-and-white checkered tile of the 1960s, and it smelled of someone’s cooking—garlic and fried potatoes. The superintendent had given them the key—along with a deadline. Next Wednesday. Have the place cleared out for a new tenant.

“Wow . . .” Dominguez said, upon opening the door and entering the kitchen. “Pretty tidy for an old guy.” The sink was clean. The counters were wiped. Lord knows, he thought, *his* place was never this neat.

“Financial papers?” the man asked. “Bank statements? Jewelry?”