

# Things Left Behind

by Tamar Love Grande

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Even after the last box had been unpacked, the apartment was still awful. Iris tossed the empty cardboard box onto the kitchen floor and sighed, slumping against the stark, white living room wall, feeling empty herself.

She was exhausted, mostly from the cleaning and unpacking, but also from the long drive across country, which she could still feel in her bones, even though she'd arrived several days ago. Her muscles ached with fatigue from the long days of sitting still, waiting, and her eyes were puffy and swollen from cardboard dust and tears. She longed for something cozy and familiar—a cup of tea, a warm room filled with clutter. But that wouldn't happen in this place, these foreign rooms that were barely large enough to live in, and yet still seemed so cavernous, so barren.

She pushed her hair back from her face and looked around the apartment, searching for something she could change, a rearrangement or a repositioning that might make a difference, no matter how small. But there was nothing. Besides the bathroom, there were only three rooms: the tiny bedroom, an eat-in kitchen and a medium-sized living room with a broken fireplace. All empty, ugly and bare, save for the bed in the other room, the overstuffed "parlor" chair Grandma Sue had left her and the tired-looking couch she'd salvaged from the thrift store earlier that day.

She missed her things—her vintage furniture, the pictures and appliance cozies and throw pillows and crocheted lace doilies, even the threadbare brocade drapes—and especially all the many, many books and records and literary magazines she'd hoarded for so long, through her childhood and college. She even would have welcomed her mother's hideous silk-flower and wicker-basket collection.

But everything was gone now. After she'd graduated, before she'd left for San Francisco, she'd sold it all to finance the trip.

She would have liked to keep more, especially those things that reminded her of her parents, but she never would have made it out of Boston if she had. She'd been too burdened by the weight of all those things and the memories they carried. But now, confronted with a San Francisco summer, she was cold and lonely. She looked out the small front window and sighed. Already the fog was setting in, a wet, dismal blanket that seemed to rival even a Boston winter for stark bleakness.

Iris frowned at the naked walls and wished again that she had something to cover them with. The room needed color. She thought for a moment. She didn't have any wall hangings, and she'd sold all her framed prints, but she did have the large silk shawl that had been her mother's. She hated to put it out where it could be damaged, but it would only be temporary, until she could afford some things of her own.

Besides, her mother had always said that beautiful things were meant to be enjoyed, not locked away and forgotten. She went to the bedroom and took the scarf from her memory box, where it lay between layers of thin tissue. Her father had bought this scarf when Iris was just a girl, had brought it back from one of his many business trips. She remembered how he'd laid it over her mother's shoulders, the light in her mother's eyes as she'd smoothed the fabric with her long fingers. Iris clenched her teeth and pushed aside the paper, running her rough fingers over the smooth, cool cloth. After a few minutes, she carried it back to the living room, where she draped it across the back of her chair, next to the dysfunctional fireplace. It helped.

Next she pulled out her small collection of framed photos—the rest were loose in a box, waiting to be sorted into albums—and arranged them in an orderly group on the mantle. Her childhood cats, Twinkle and Betty-Sue, were framed in a silver heart; Janey, her best friend, married and living in Phoenix, was framed in light wood, and Ramona, her cousin who was studying physics at UCLA, was framed in teak. She touched each face as she set out the photos. In the center of the grouping, she placed her most prized picture, a glass-framed snapshot she'd taken of her parents, standing on the front porch of their house, her father's arm around her mother's shoulders, the Christmas wreath on the door behind them. The picture had been taken the week before Christmas three years ago, two weeks before the car accident.

The ache in her stomach became a dull, grinding nausea. All day it had been like this; everything she touched was another memory—her mother’s dishes, washed and neatly stacked in the kitchen, her father’s footstool next to Grandma Sue’s chair. Everything seemed to carry a picture, and every picture made her cry. Even though it had been three years, the smallest things could still set her off, plunge her back into the dark days just after the accident. She knew it was important to remember, but surely there was a point at which it was better to forget? She shivered, resisted the impulse to turn on the heat, and instead went to the tiny bedroom for her cardigan. Her therapist had told her to stay warm.

Wrapping the sweater around her thin arms, she settled into the couch, glad to finally be off her feet. She thought about tea again, but decided she was too tired to get up and make it. She plucked a long blonde hair off her sleeve and closed her eyes, trying to relax, but she couldn’t keep from brooding. What would she do about this miserable apartment? She simply didn’t have the money to furnish it properly. The rent was terrible, over a thousand dollars a month, cheap for San Francisco, but her entry-level accountant’s salary would barely cover it. There’d been insurance money, of course, but that had all gone to her education. The sale of the house and its contents had brought her some money, but the house had been small, in an unfashionable neighborhood, and her parents had left behind a great deal of debt—as people often do when they don’t know they’re going to die the next day. She’d had enough money for a long trip to Janey’s, with a leg in LA visiting her cousin, then a two-week stay here, while she looked for a job and an apartment. Then there was the drive out here, with the car and trailer rental, gas and hotels, the security deposit and two months rent. She had very little left. Furnishing this place would break her, unless she were very careful.

Feeling a wave of panic wash over her, she began to breathe more quickly, and felt her throat begin to close up. She tried to imagine her stone cottage, her safe place, but the image was fuzzy, unreachable. Her forehead broke out in a light sweat, and her stomach gurgled and clenched, like she was boiling something in there. What was she going to do? She’d die if she had to spend even a week like this. It was bad enough

that she didn't know a soul in this city. If she didn't have a home to go to at the end of the day, some place where she could feel warm and tended to and safe...

*Stop feeling sorry for yourself*, she told herself sternly, fighting back the swell of panic, pushing it down until it was a thick, solid lump in the middle of her chest. "Stop panicking and think," she said aloud, her voice echoing off the empty walls. "You'll be fine. Just think for a minute. There's always a solution." There were probably all kinds of places she could buy things inexpensively, nice things, interesting things, things that would make her apartment seem special, make it a home. She'd just have to figure out where and how.

She remembered what the landlady had told her about Mr. Howard, the hermit on the second floor; he'd lived in the building for 15 years, longer than she'd owned the building. "Go say hello to him," Mrs. Flip had said, "He's such a nice man, and he never seems to go anywhere any more." She leaned in close to whisper, "He's too...*big*."

Maybe she'd go say hello to Mr. Howard. As foreign as that thought was to her, she found the idea calming. It would be nice to know someone in this strange city. Mrs. Flip had said he'd welcome Iris's company. She'd think about it.

A few days later, she found herself standing in front of Mr. Howard's door.

After three days at her new job, she still felt very alone. They'd stuck her at a desk in the far corner of the room where foot traffic was uncomfortably light. Feeling like a glorified temp, she'd watch people's eyes slide away from her as she passed them, feeling their indifference to someone who could quit or be fired so fast that it wasn't worth the bother to make eye contact. They reminded Iris of the waiters at The Blue Pig back home, bored students who'd made an art out of ignoring the customers.

Since she was so close to the Panhandle, she'd been walking around it every day. Although she'd smiled at almost everyone she'd passed, few people had smiled back. Yesterday she'd gone to the café near her apartment, but she didn't know what to say to any of the other people, most of whom were intently focused on their laptops. And on the bus, everyone was as friendly as strangers on an elevator.

Iris didn't understand. When she'd visited her cousin, Franka, last year, she'd had a great time. Everyone had seemed so friendly, making it easy for Iris to fall in love with a city she already had a crush on. But Franka was teaching ESL classes in Southern California for the next two months, and Iris didn't know anyone Franka had introduced her to well enough to call them. Instead of moving here a couple of months from now, when Franka returned, Iris had taken a leap of faith, not realizing how difficult it would be to connect with people. She was beginning to think no one would ever talk to her.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked twice on the door. Nothing happened. She knocked again, three times. Nothing happened again. She wondered how long she should wait for Mr. Howard to come to the door. Surely he was home?

Just as she was about to give up, she heard a rustling noise, a faint *swish swish swish*. The door opened suddenly, and Iris jumped a little. An obese middle-aged man poked his head out from behind the chain-bolted door. "Yes?" he inquired. The brown eyes, tiny behind loose wrinkles of skin, looked kind.

"Yes?" he repeated.

Feeling shy, she said, "I'm Iris, your new neighbor." A blank look. "From downstairs."

His face broke into a wide smile. "Ah, yes," he said, "the girl from Chicago."

"Boston." Something about his smile was infectious, and she smiled back, even though it was the last thing she felt like doing just then.

"Boston," he said, "that's right. Mrs. Flip told me about you." He seemed pleased. "You're in the Chesney woman's apartment, right?" He unbolted the chain and opened the door a little wider.

She did not know the Chesney woman. "I'm in apartment one—" she started.

"Yes, that's it. Apartment one. Glad she's gone," he said. "She was a nuisance, and those ridiculous birds!" He laughed, and all of his chins shook. He was fatter than Iris thought possible for a person to be, but he seemed so friendly, you almost didn't notice. He was a nice-looking man, she thought, maybe around sixty, with peppered-gray hair and a safe, familiar look about him, like an old family dog, or a much-loved stuffed animal. "Come in," he said. "Tell me what I can do for you."

She stepped through the door and stopped, staring. His apartment was a museum.

The short hallway opened onto a large room dominated by an enormous green velvet couch littered with small, oddly shaped pillows and chenille throw blankets. Thick Oriental rugs covered most of the wooden floors, and whatever space was free of the rows of low bookshelves was filled with tiny, impractical-looking tables—“occasionals” her mother would have called them—covered with porcelain bric-a-brac and frames. More stacks of books and magazines were crowded under the tables and against the walls, and long velvet drapes framed the bay windows.

After the barren walls and emptiness of her apartment, the riot of shapes and colors and textures was almost more than Iris could bear. Her head spun, and she felt slightly faint. But it was wonderful at the same time, a warm paradise that immediately reminded her of her mother’s house; her mother’s taste had been very different, but the feeling of hominess and comfort was the same. Iris breathed deeply, filling her lungs with the warm air, and was surprised to feel the lump in her chest really loosen. She touched her throat and smiled. It was amazing how much something as simple as a comfortable room could affect you.

And then she noticed the walls.

Draped with dark sage velvet, painted a rich, deep red, the walls were crowded with row after row of portraits-photographs, drawings, paintings-hundreds of them, more than she could count, filling the walls so completely, there was almost no space between them. “My collection of strangers,” said Mr. Howard, laboring down the hall behind her, wheezing, grunting, struggling for each step. “Aren’t they a nice bunch?”

Iris stood, amazed, and stared at all the faces.

“I used to be an antiques dealer,” he said, “always going to flea markets, estate sales, neighborhood garage sales, you name it. And among all the detritus of a person’s life, the books and jewelry and furniture, I’d always find a portrait or two and bring them home.” He looked at the walls. “It seems sad doesn’t it? To have such a special memento, maybe of yourself, maybe your dead wife, then have some stranger buy it from you and hang it on their own wall, a picture that means nothing to them,

except that they liked it. I always wondered, what would make a person do such a thing?"

Iris, thinking of her own sold portraits, knowing exactly what made a person do such a thing and how much it hurt, said nothing. But the lump came back, started moving around again, and she felt like she might throw up.

"Me, who has no family left," Mr. Howard continued, "I could never part with a memory like that. After all," he said, "what are we when we're gone if there's nothing left of us behind?"

Iris did not know what to say.

"But an old man like me gets lonely sometimes, so maybe it's okay if I pretend a little, right?" he winked. "I buy the pictures and bring them home and hang them on a wall where I can look at them, talk to them a little-I'm a crazy old man, right? Talking to pictures? But I got no one else to talk to now, except the TV, and I don't like what it says. These people, they're almost like family to me now. And I know how to take care of family, right?" He gestured at the wall. "Even if they're gone, you got to make sure they're not forgotten. A nice girl like you, I'm sure you take real good care of your family."

Iris did not know if it was guilt or panic-or maybe a little of both-but whatever it was, it hit her hard, like a wave, or a wooden plank, knocking the breath out of her.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Howard said, looking at her closely. "I've hurt you, haven't I?"

"N-no," she whispered, staring at the ground. "I'm fine."

"Yes," he said, "You are upset." He led her back to the door, his pants making the swishing sound she'd heard earlier. "It was nice of you to come say hello, but you should go now, and get some rest. I can see that you are tired."

She smiled weakly and started to say something, but he forestalled her with an upraised hand and gently pushed her out the door with the other.

"No," he said. "There is no reason for you to apologize. We are strangers-we have just met. There is no reason for you to tell me anything." He smiled. "But we are also neighbors, and so tomorrow night you will have some dinner with me."

Iris felt so relieved she couldn't speak for a moment. What a nice, nice man he was. "That would be lovely," she said, her cheeks warm with gratitude and pleasure. "But what can I bring?" Her mother had taught her never to arrive empty-handed.

He thought for a moment. "A little wine goes nice with my chicken saltimbocca," he said, and grinned at her.

"I'll bring wine then," she said, and he closed the door.

The next day at work, she had a panic attack. One of the senior accountants had yelled at woman whose desk was closest to Iris's, and she felt her stomach drop to the floor. She didn't even know what the yelling was about; the sound of it was enough to send her reeling inside. She'd slipped away as soon as she could, finding refuge in the nearby restroom.

Leaning against the cool metal stall door, Iris tried to control her breathing. *Think of something nice, something pleasant.* She closed her eyes. But instead of her normal stone-cottage safe place, she found herself thinking of Mr. Howard's apartment. She imagined the wall of faces, stretching up to the ceiling, off into the distance, the different eyes and cheeks and noses, the old-fashioned hairstyles and the gilt frames. And then she imaged herself sitting on that green sofa, sipping a cup of tea, and she felt better. Not great, but definitely better.

"Thank you," she whispered.

On her way home, she stopped at the corner store and bought two bottles of red Italian table wine. They weren't expensive, but they were the best she could afford. She hoped Mr. Howard would like them.

He opened the door right away, greeting her with even more warmth than he had shown her last night. "My Boston girl!" he cried, "Come it!" He moved back against the wall and ushered her in, closing the door behind her.

"I brought these," she said, holding out the bottles. "I hope they're okay."

He took them from her and inspected the labels closely. "These are wonderful," he said, "I serve the very same at my table."

Knowing how little they'd cost, Iris doubted that, but she decided it didn't matter.

"Go in," he said, shooing her down the hall, "please, be comfortable. I will attend to the chicken, and then I will open this wine and pour us each a glass." He disappeared into the kitchen.

Iris sat on the edge of the couch, feeling at once safe and warm. The delicious food smells wafting from the kitchen were making her stomach rumble, with hunger for once, and not anxiety. She wondered what chicken saltimbocca was. Chicken Whatever it was, she was sure it would be delicious. She had a feeling Mr. Howard was a good cook.

She looked around the room a little, feeling less overwhelmed than she had the day before. She had wondered how Mr. Howard could move around in here without knocking things over, but she saw now that there were wide paths between the furniture and stacks of books. Craning her head around, she got a full view of the room and estimated that it must be twice the size of her whole apartment. He must have the whole top floor to himself.

The kitchen door opened and Mr. Howard came out, carrying two wine glasses, a bottle of wine and a corkscrew. Iris got another whiff of dinner before the door swung shut again, and she caught a brief view of a bright, happy kitchen, with yellow walls and red cabinets. He made his way toward her, pausing to rest his hand against the wall. She didn't like the way he was breathing, and wondered if he took blood pressure medicine. In a moment, he seemed to recover, for he stood upright and walked the rest of the way to the couch faster than she thought possible.

"And now for the wine," he said grandly, settling on the sofa next to her. She rose at least six inches when he sat down, and she quickly rearranged herself so he wouldn't notice. She didn't want to hurt his feelings. He deftly opened the wine and poured a generous measure into one of the glasses.

"Here you are—" he looked at her, frowning. "It seems that I do not know your name."

Iris blushed, realizing he'd forgotten but not wanting to embarrass him. "It's Iris," she murmured, taking the wine.

"Iris. What a lovely name for such a young girl who resembles a flower." He poured himself a glass and held it in the air. "A toast," he said, "to Iris, who will be my most lovely new neighbor."

Iris giggled and took a sip of the wine. It wasn't altogether wretched, but it wasn't great. Mr. Howard took a hearty gulp and set the glass down on the coffee table.

"So," he said, "now you will tell me why you moved to San Francisco." He looked at her expectantly.

She cleared her throat. "Well," she said, staring into her wine glass, "I don't really know." She looked up at Mr. Howard, but he was watching her attentively, his brow slightly furrowed. "I mean," she continued, "I had to move somewhere, didn't I? I was done with school." her voice trailed off.

Mr. Howard still didn't say anything, but waited patiently, almost like her therapist, for her to continue.

She thought for a moment, and her eyes lost their focus. "I came out to visit cousin last year, and something about this city seemed to call me. I thought that if I came here, took the chance, that I wouldn't be sorry. That I'd be glad I came. That I'd find a home here—or something else just as important." Lost in thought, she stared again into her wine, not noticing the silence that filled the room.

When he spoke, Mr. Howard's voice was gentle, "San Francisco can be very kind or very cruel."

Iris started. "What do you mean?" she said. How could a city be cruel? Yet it sounded right somehow—she'd had the feeling when crossing the Bay Bridge that a city so beautiful must have some very sharp edges.

Mr. Howard took another long drink of wine, and then refilled his glass. "Thousands of people, every year, move here in search of something—a career, a life, friends, lovers, family. Sometimes just in search of themselves." He touched his chest. "Not everyone finds what they are looking for. And what they sometimes find instead

can kill them inside." he looked sad, but then his eyes brightened. "And sometimes what they find can give them life. Sometimes, they just hear a call to move on, take what they've learned and settle down elsewhere." He laughed. "I suppose one never really knows."

"I suppose not."

"But one can hope for the best," he said.

"Of course," she said. "Once can hope."

He looked at her for a long moment. She didn't say anything, just stared at the floor, feeling the familiar panic start to rise. Was there hope?

"And now," he said softly, "if you do not mind, you will please tell me why you are looking so sad."

Iris finished the last of her wine and held it to be refilled. "My parents died three years ago," she said, watching the dark liquid swirl into the bowl of the glass. "It was Christmas, and they were on their way home from a dinner party, and some drunk plowed his car into them and killed them."

"I'm so sorry," Mr. Howard murmured. "That is a terrible loss."

"That's not it though."

"No?"

"I mean, there isn't a day that goes by when I don't think of them and miss them, but it's more than that."

"Yes?"

"It's all of this," she gestured into the air, "the move, the new job, being in a new city, with no friends. No family." She couldn't help it; tears began to trickle down her cheeks and she heard her voice waver. "It would be bearable if I had a home to come home to every day, but that place," she waved her hand in disgust and made a face.

He produced a clean handkerchief from somewhere and handed it to her.

"I think it would be easier for me if I'd been able to keep more of my things," she said, wiping her cheeks. "I mean, not just the dishes and the footstool, but the things that really meant something. It was all the things my parents left me, the things

I grew up with. I feel so guilty for not trying harder to hang on to it all. But it just seemed like the right thing to do, you know? Every time I walked into a room, there was something of theirs to remind me of them. It hurt so much, all of the time, and it wasn't getting any better. Finally, my therapist suggested I sell it all, but free of it altogether.

"The day of the sale, I felt liberated. Free." She took a long drink of wine, which had grown slightly warm. "But then I felt like a traitor. Like I'd taken their whole lives, everything they'd worked for, and just thrown it all away. And I think that a part of me just can't forgive myself for that."

Mr. Howard smiled at her, a sweet, fatherly smile that made her cry harder. God how she missed her Dad. If she could just see him again, smell him.

"Ah, yes," he said. "You cannot forgive yourself. This I understand. But, sweet Iris, you must." He stood up. "Now I must check on the chicken. You will wait."

By the time Mr. Howard came back, Iris's eyes were dry and her face clear. She felt a little better, not great, but she was most definitely hungry. Hearing her stomach growl, Mr. Howard laughed and disappeared into the kitchen for a moment more, returning with a forkful of dark meat—"spoon meat," he called it. Handing it to her, he invited her to taste it, saying, "Dinner is almost ready."

The chicken was delicious, which wasn't surprising at all, considering how fat he was. Iris blushed, ashamed of her cruel thought. "It's wonderful," she said, licking her fingers.

Mr. Howard seemed to read her mind. "Fat people are always the best cooks," he said, "because they perceive food as their lover."

Iris was mortified. "But—" she began, and then realized she didn't know what to say.

"But I wasn't always this fat? No, of course not. Once upon a time, I was just a chubby little antiques dealer with a passion for Russian and Italian food. But then, after Danya left."

"Danya?"

"Yes, Danya." His voice was flat. "My wife. She left."

"Oh." How sad for him, she thought. He was such a kind man.

"It was cancer."

"Oh."

"Yes. It was...difficult. I tried, but I could not find sufficient reason to continue my life after she left. I loved her too much to destroy myself, so I did this instead." He patted his ample belly. "Much more preferable an alternative," he said, "Wouldn't you agree?"

"I'm so sorry for you." In that moment, carrying the weight of that sadness, he reminded her again of her father, who had lost his own mother before Iris had been born.

"For a long time, I was indeed very sorry. Like you, I was surrounded with many things that reminded me of Danya. Her clothes, her shoes, blankets she had slept under, her ridiculous little hats-and the smell of her." he inhaled deeply. "I could smell her everywhere."

"What did you do?" Iris asked.

He looked at her, levelly. "Like you, I got rid of everything."

"But—" Iris started, looking at the clutter with amazement. How much more had there been?

He saw her startled look and laughed. "Ah, but I told you I was an antiques dealer, did I not? There was much, much more at one time." He poured them both more wine, emptying the bottle into Iris's glass.

"Do you ever feel guilty?" Iris asked in a small voice.

"No," he said, setting the empty bottle on the table. "No, I do not." He picked a small, framed photograph off the table next to the couch and held it out to her.

"Danya?" she asked, taking the photograph. Two large, lovely brown eyes stared out beneath a mass of curly brown hair.

"This was taken when she was forty-five," he said. "Less than one year later, she had lost all of that hair to chemotherapy. We cried together the night the last lock fell out. Danya was always vain about her hair." He took the picture from her and turned it over, opening the easel back. "Here," he said, showing her, "this is the lock we saved."

A thick brown curl lay against the back of the photograph. He touched the tip of his finger to it, gently, as if he were afraid it might blow away. He smiled, did not shed the tear Iris was certain she saw hovering in his eye, and closed the back of the picture, returning it to the table.

"So you see," he continued, "that she is here," he touched the photograph, "and here," he touched his chest, "and so I have not betrayed her." He looked at her with great seriousness, and spoke slowly. "Whenever I think of her, she is alive. And because I will think of her forever, she will be alive forever. I do not need physical reminders that she once existed." He was silent a moment, looking at her. "Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

"Yes, she said, "I understand."

"That is good," he said.

"Mr. Howard?" she asked, wiping again at the tears that had resurfaced.

He laughed. "I'm just Howard," he said. "Mrs. Flip is the only one who calls me mister."

She smiled. "Yes, sweet Iris?"

"What is chicken saltimbocca?"

He smiled at her, looking quite serious.. "Come and find out." He rose slowly, awkwardly, and shuffled toward the kitchen.

Two weeks later, with her first paycheck in the bank, Iris stopped at the antique store she'd passed every day on her way to work. Cluttered and dusty, the store looked like a good place to begin her shopping. It didn't seem like it would be expensive. She'd wanted to come in before, but she'd been unwilling to even look until she had some money to spend. Now, after two weeks, she had allocated \$25 this project-not much, but enough to buy at least one thing, something nice to welcome her to San Francisco.

Browsing through a rack of glass candy dishes and vases, Iris thought about the last two weeks. They'd been tough, but she thought she was maybe going to be okay. The job was a good one, not too difficult, but still challenging enough to be

interesting. After the first week, her co-workers had started to include her in their break-room conversation. Now that she knew them a little, they seemed nice and unexpectedly friendly. She had a lunch date on Monday with one of the other accountants, a woman named Mary who'd been recently divorced. She still felt a little unsteady, but the panic attacks had stopped, for the time being at least.

Mr. Howard had really helped her. Since the night of their first dinner, she hadn't had a single attack. She'd been scared at times, and nervous pretty much all of the time, but the feeling of raw panic hadn't come back at all. With it, the unbearable guilt had gone as well, freeing her so much that she even seemed to walk easier. She was still sad-she would always be sad-but she didn't feel so desperate.

The apartment was still pretty inhospitable, but she'd spent most evenings and all of last weekend painting the walls with some leftover paint she'd found in the basement. She'd gone down there looking for some light bulbs and seen a whole stack of cans, some of them not even open. She'd asked Mr. Howard about it and had been told that Mrs. Flip's nephew was a contractor, and that he stored supplies from previous jobs here, in the basement. Apparently, they were free to use the stuff.

She'd been a little afraid of what Mrs. Flip would say, but when she asked if she could paint, the landlady hadn't seemed to care too much. "Long as we can paint over it when you leave," she'd said, "I don't care what you do to the place." Iris had painted the kitchen a warm melon color with sunny yellow trim. She was going to paint the tiny living room a vibrant purple, which ought to bring a little life into the room. She'd debated over what color to paint the bedroom, but finally settled on a deep red that was so similar to the walls in Mr. Howard's apartment, she figured it must have been left over from when he'd had them painted.

Even past alleviating her sense of guilt, the warmth Mr. Howard had shown her had sustained her through the cold morning walks to work and the lonely nights alone with her paintbrush. She'd had dinner with him twice more since then, wonderful veal and pasta dishes, spiced with wine and conversation just as rich as the first time. He really was a wonderful man. But she hadn't seen him in several days. On Tuesday, when she'd gone up to say hello, he hadn't invited her in, saying he wasn't feeling

well. She'd worried about him, but he'd told her not to be foolish. That he was an old man with aches and pains, and that if he paid attention to every one, he'd never have anything else to think about. She hoped to catch him tonight—or at least some time this weekend—and had thought several times about the meal she'd cook him if given the opportunity: her mother's Italian sausage with red sauce over penne, a family favorite.

She had just picked up a clear glass bowl that would look beautiful holding fruit, when she noticed the shelves on the other side of the glassware section, shelves that were filled with old pictures. Only one caught her eye, a small, ornately framed standing daguerreotype of a man from the turn of the century. Instead of the serious, somber expression Iris remembered seeing in such portraits, the man appeared to be laughing, a pose Iris knew would have been difficult to sustain for the length of time it took to produce a daguerreotype. It was as if it were so important to this man to be captured laughing, to be immortalized as his true and joyful self, that no mere inconvenience such as comfort would have deterred him. His kind brown eyes smiled out from under a thick swatch of brown, curly hair. He looked a little like Mr. Howard, like he might have looked before he got so fat. Maybe it was the joy, or the brown eyes. She decided to buy it for Mr. Howard, a thank-you gift for all he had done for her.

It will look nice next to the picture of Danya, she thought, and placed the glass bowl back on the shelf.

Turning the corner onto her street, Iris was surprised to see Mrs. Flip standing on the front stoop barking orders at two workmen who were carrying boxes out to a large, green dumpster. Hearing the crashing sound of breaking glass, Iris ran up the stairs and asked the landlady what was happening.

"Oh, Mr. Howard died," she said, mopping her dripping forehead with her sleeve.

Iris felt a chill pierce her, a sharp knife far colder than anything she'd felt since her parent's had died. "What?" It didn't make any sense.

Mrs. Flip shot her an impatient look. "Mr. Howard," she said, "from the second floor—"

"I know who he is," Iris said, growing angry. "

"Well he died. Heart attack."

"When?"

Mrs. Flip looked around, and then lowered her voice as if imparting some piece of juicy gossip. "That's the sad part," she said. "He died two days ago. But he was all alone in there, so no one even knew he died until yesterday, when his food delivery man came to get the grocery list." She looked at Iris suspiciously. "Did you go and say hello to him like I told you to?"

"Yes," Iris whispered. "We had dinner."

"Then you know what a sweet man he was. I never had a better tenant than him," she said, "even if he was a little weird. I mean, he never left the house, being so fat and all, but he always paid his rent on time and never made a peep about nothing. I'm gonna miss that guy."

Iris was silent.

Mrs. Flip folded her arms under her breasts and clucked her tongue against her teeth, shaking her head. "Poor man, to die all alone like that. I guess that comes from having no family or nothing. No one to notice when you've gone. No one to care."

Iris felt a strange sense of familiar dislocation. She shook her head to clear it. "What will happen to his things?" she asked.

"Well, some things—the furniture and all that—I had taken away earlier today to the Goodwill. He didn't have no will or nothing too valuable, but he wanted whatever there was to go to charity. Mrs. Flip sounded matter-of-fact. "Most of this stuff," she waved her hand at the dumpster, "it's all crap anyway. I'm not even going to bother to sell it, all those junky knick-knacks and pictures and things. Never did I see so much trash in one place—"

"You're throwing all his things away?" The dislocation instantly melted into anger. She felt like slapping the woman. How dare she throw his beautiful pictures away?

“Well, I told you the furniture went to the charity—” Mrs. Flip looked genuinely startled, as though Iris had, indeed, punched her.

“How could you?” Iris shouted, pushing past her. “This was his life!” She gestured at the boxes of broken frames and felt the anxiety again, in the pit of her stomach, an angry fist punching her from inside. “You’re throwing away his life! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

She ran up the stairs. The workmen were in the bedroom, loading up another stack of boxes to throw in the dumpster. Iris looked wildly around the living room, empty except for a few carelessly packed boxes. The walls were bare and the furniture gone. She began to sort through the boxes, carefully at first, then faster, almost frenzied. She cut her hand on a shard of broken glass, but barely noticed, holding the bloody hand to her mouth as she moved to the next box.

She found what she was looking for in the fourth box. The glass was broken, but the picture itself was unharmed. She pulled out the daguerreotype she’d just purchased and held it next to the portrait of Danya. They seemed to belong together, and the resemblance was so strong. It wasn’t Mr. Howard, of course, that would have been impossible. But the look of him was there, the same deep eyes, the corners of the laughing mouths turned up in the same joyful curve. He really would have loved it.

She sat back on her heels and surveyed the ruined apartment. It looked almost like her own now, she thought without irony. How funny that was. She imagined the immense velvet couch, and the tiny little porcelain figurines, and tried not to cry. She could almost hear him laughing. She thought about running downstairs and seeing what she could salvage from the dumpster. Something small, something to remember him by. But then she remembered what he had said about memory, and things, and she knew there was no point. If she could leave her own things behind, she could leave Mr. Howard’s. After all, it wasn’t like she was going to forget him any time soon. That just wouldn’t be possible.

“Oh, Mr. Howard,” she said, into the empty apartment, “I’m so sorry.” Her voice echoed off the bare walls. “But don’t worry, okay? I have her now,” she touched the small portrait. She would put both pictures on the mantle in her living room, next to

the picture of her parents. That would be suitable. And then that would be enough of grieving-for a long time, she hoped. She stood up, and walked down stairs to her apartment.

The ache in her middle was already beginning to fade.