

Lee Smith

## HOUSE TOUR

“Have a happy holiday!” The pretty girl in the wine shop is dressed in a red velvet elf suit, with green tights and high black boots. She carries the carton of wine to Lynn’s car like it is nothing. When she bends over to put it in the trunk, her tiny skirt hikes up to show her red panties. This is the kind of outfit Lawrence would love, damn his soul. A little kitsch, a little sex, a little irony. Everybody always thought Lawrence was such a genius, but actually he is so predictable as to be boring, really. Lynn recalls that black thong she found in his glove compartment years ago, back when they were first married; she didn’t even know what it was.

“I am putty in their hands,” he’d said, spreading his. Lawrence has soft, elegant hands with long thin white fingers; he has never done one honest day’s work in his life.

“Thanks, Erin, and Merry Christmas to you also,” Lynn says, which comes out sounding weird, sort of like English as a second language, but never mind, this Erin girl will get it. She’s a smart girl; she has never raised an eyebrow or said one word to Lynn about her solo wine purchases or asked where Lawrence is keeping himself these days. (Guggenheim in Italy? semester at NYU? Lynn has answers ready.) And when she first broke her ankle, Erin brought a nice bottle of viognier over to the house herself, a gift. Erin is so nice, really, just like everybody else in town who came by with casseroles or picked up Lynn’s mail at the Post Office for her. This is the benefit of living in a village, though there’s a down side, too, Lynn thinks darkly. Yes indeed.

For instance, there’s no bypass, and right now the traffic is stopped dead, bumper to bumper — where on earth are all these people coming from? Lynn lives right on Main Street; how’s she supposed to get home? Finally she pulls out, but is immediately confronted by a young policeman with a whistle which he will *not* stop blowing as he energetically motions her to the left, down Wisteria Way. Lynn is startled to see a giant Cat in the Hat prancing along just beyond him, then a dozen silver-clad majorettes followed by the entire Oakwood High School Marching Band. Oh, God, it’s the Christmas Parade! “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” fills the air.

## SHENANDOAH

Behind the band, about forty kids from Susie's Dance Studio prance down the hill past the courthouse, turning flips and cartwheels, followed by a giant concrete mixer covered with little children in reindeer hats with antlers, throwing candy to the crowds which, Lynn notes now, are everywhere, lining Main Street on both sides. A shimmering float sits poised at the top of the hill, covered with beautiful girls undoubtedly freezing to death in their skimpy evening gowns but waving, waving, waving, mouths set in those big sweet smiles. They can do this forever, these girls. Lynn herself was never much good at denial of any sort, not even as a girl; this is why she will never be truly Southern, although she has lived down here for twenty-five years now. The band stops still and switches into "Jingle Bells" while the majorettes go into a dance routine. Their batons flash high in the cold bright air.

Lynn drives down Wisteria and heads for home the back way, braking suddenly for a carriage pulled by two big black horses with slavering mouths and real jingle bells and a top-hatted driver like a sudden apparition from the nineteenth century, straight out of Dickens, which Lynn used to teach. Jesus! Where did *he* come from? The fringe on the carriage jiggles. Things have gotten a lot more elaborate since the last Christmas parade Lynn remembers — three years ago, was it? Year before last, they were in Mexico at that conference, and last year they were in San Francisco visiting Anne, who still doesn't know. Nor does Jeffrey, in Rome. Lynn just hasn't told them, that's all. Why should she? Why should *she* have to be the one to do it, when none of it was her fault? And why spoil their Christmases, anyway? Why give Lawrence so much power over all their lives?

Evergreen roping is strung from lantern to lantern along the front walkway of the historic Episcopal Church. Angels scurry across the lawn, followed by people in choir robes. The minister, Harry Fitzhugh, stands by the open red doors of the church in a long white robe, looking more like Friar Tuck than one of the heavenly host. "Tour site #11" reads a placard beside him, printed in somebody's idea of medieval lettering.

Oh, shit. It's the Christmas House Tour, too, of course it is! There's a "Tour Site #8" sign in the Woodward's huge yard; every single window of their antebellum mansion wears a Christmas wreath with a big red bow on it, second floor, too. Three costumed ladies stand down by the wrought iron gate, ready to welcome the onslaught of visitors. Those hoop skirts make them look

like bells themselves, belles as bells; Lawrence would have made something clever of it.

Oh, good. Lynn sees that the carriage horses have taken a big shit right in front of Mrs. Gardiner's house, which is on the tour, too. Back when Lynn and Lawrence had just moved to town, their first Christmas here, Mrs. Gardiner had stopped Lynn on the street to pluck peevishly at her sleeve and say, "My de-ah, you must know that you should nev-ah, *nev-ah* put colored lights on your home! Only white! *white!*" referring to the Christmas tree Lynn had put out on her front porch, with its old-fashioned round colored bulbs, carefully saved from Lynn's own childhood in Pennsylvania. This was back when Lynn used to decorate her house, back when the children were young.

A shining Moravian star hangs over the Camerons' front door, she sees, while a whole herd of electrical reindeer graze in the McClures' side yard, their bright heads moving up and down. And here comes Lynn's friend Virginia, walking briskly away from her own house while tour guides cluster on the garlanded verandah behind her. Virginia waves cheerily as she turns toward town where she's probably going to watch the parade. Of course Virginia has put her house on the tour; she's unfailingly civic. Virginia has never mentioned Lawrence's absence, either, out of tact or ignorance, Lynn is not sure which. In any case, Virginia *must* leave now, this is the way it works, while volunteers lead the paying public inside to view decorations fashioned by members of the local garden club. Lynn remembers one time when these ladies put a huge wreath made of bagels up over the stove in Marilyn and Don Goodman's gourmet kitchen; the Goodmans invited the entire neighborhood over to eat it the next day for breakfast.

Lynn herself would hate to have the garden club ladies in her own house even more than she would hate to have the public. In this, at least, she and Lawrence were in accord, though they own the kind of house which looks like it *should* be on the house tour, a big old rambling Victorian set way back from Main Street, with gingerbread woodwork all along the deep porches enclosing it on three sides. The previous owners had restored it — Lynn and Lawrence could never have undertaken such a mammoth task, neither one of them being at all handy. They had both been married to other people who were the practical ones. In fact, Lynn has sometimes thought of her sweet earnest first husband, and his ratchet set, with a certain longing.

But Lawrence made it perfectly plain when he married her: “My dear, I am *not* domestic,” he had said straight out, “but whatever it is, I will hire it done.”

Not entirely true, but close enough, Lynn supposes, remembering suddenly what he said when that nice tremulous committee lady paid them a surprise call to ask if they would “show their lovely home.” Lynn had ushered her straight into Lawrence’s office, where he sat in his accustomed gloom, drapes drawn behind him, papers and books strewn across the floor and every available surface. There was nowhere for anyone else to sit.

The lady made her request.

“We shall not be participating in this house tour during my current lifetime,” Lawrence had intoned quite formally, giving her the famous stare over his half-glasses.

“Excuse me?” She fluttered her hand to her throat.

“I said, *not bloody likely!*” Then he stood up from his chair, all six and a half skinny, wavering feet of him, towering over this nice lady, who — predictably — fled.

Now Lynn is ashamed to remember how she and Lawrence had high-fived each other, having vanquished, once again, the Philistines. She has come to hate that easy scorn, that superciliousness, that constant depression which was supposed to excuse everything. Of course she knew Lawrence was depressed from the very moment she met him — how could she not know? It was his stock in trade. After all, he was a playwright, the writer-in-residence. Initially she found it romantic, even somewhat appealing. After all, she was a graduate student. Nobody had told her yet that depression can be catching . . . or permanent. A world view. That was a term they used back then, in graduate school. But Lynn always thought she could fix him, anyway, when she wanted to. When she got ready. This turned out to be not true, which came, over time, to enrage her. “I’m *not enough?*” she’d screamed at him more than once.

“Lynn, that’s very egotistical,” he’d say severely.

She turns into her driveway and pulls up close to the back steps, so she won’t have to carry things so far. Her ankle is still bothering her, even though Doug, the physical therapist, has supposedly fixed it.

“You’re fine,” he said, patting her tibia. “Good to go.”

Lynn knows this is not true. She is not good to go. She struggles up the back steps with her groceries, balancing the bag on her hip as she unlocks the door.

They bought this house with the proceeds from *Audubon Park*, Lawrence's big hit, which was just as dark as everything else he'd written, actually; who knows why it was such a success? Six years on Broadway, then the film with Meryl Streep.

Lawrence had disconcerted the perky real estate girl immediately. "Now what are you looking for, in a house?" she had asked, back at the real estate office. "Colonial, modern, near the university, out in the country, what?" She wore a hot pink nubby wool suit, then the height of fashion, her hair caught up in a neat French twist.

Lynn wore jeans.

Lawrence took off his glasses and rubbed his huge watery pale eyes, and then put them back on. "What I really want," he said, "is a house I could die in."

Lynn started laughing. The real estate girl rustled her papers and stood up on her tiny heels. "Then let's get going!" she said. She drove them around in her Lincoln town car for five hours, until they were punchy and exhausted, finally ending up here just as the sun was setting. It was, Lynn knew immediately, *perfect*. Not quite the House of Usher — new plumbing, thank God, new kitchen, new HVAC — but it was close enough. And a big back yard where their children could play.

"We can make a swing here for our grandchildren," she said dreamily, putting one hand on a huge limb which would be perfect.

"Or I could just use it to hang myself," Lawrence said.

"*Excuse me!*" the real estate girl took off her shoes and ran across the grass in her stocking feet to her car, where she sat chain-smoking Salems until they came over and told her it was a deal.

"You're kidding," she said.

LYNN PUTS THE groceries down on the kitchen counter, then goes back out for the wine. She can hear the parade moving down Main Street in front of her house. The big bass drum sounds like it's beating inside her head. Long shadows slant across the lawn now, it's almost dusk, and suddenly Lynn wonders

about that old string of colored lights, someplace down in the basement. She thinks she knows where it is. Maybe she'll just go down there tomorrow and get it, and string it around a boxwood. The carton of wine is not as heavy as she'd imagined, but she takes the steps one at a time, carefully. She's still limping, damn it, she is *not* "good to go," no matter what Doug says.

The truth is that Lynn had loved physical therapy: she had loved the sunny, cheerful little gym at Tar Heel Orthopedics with all its primary colors and shiny machines. She loved Doug and Louise and Mike, all of them impossibly young and impossibly fit; she loved the routine of the gym and the easy camaraderie and the way they all encouraged each other, she and the other patients, many of them in far worse shape than she was. They still had pins, stitches, braces, casts. Complications. By contrast, her doctor had said, Lynn's was a clean break. She'd known it the minute she stumbled off the curb and heard the bone pop like a rifle shot.

"The three most important rules of aging," Dr. Lamb had told her as he set it, "are these: *Pay Attention, Pay Attention, Pay Attention.*"

And now they have released her back into the real and dangerous world, Doug and the doctor. Doug said that she would recover full mobility, and soon she'd be back up to her regular ADL level.

"What does that mean?" she asked. "What is my ADL level?"

"Activities of daily life. Your ADL level ought to be completely normal in no time," Doug told her, not knowing of course that her ADL level has *never* been completely normal.

Lynn manages to open the door and switch on the hall light, but that's depressing because the house is a wreck, it hasn't been cleaned in weeks, nothing is working, nothing seems even capable of getting fixed, of ever working again. Her ADL level is shit, actually. The broken dishwasher sits out in the middle of the broad central hallway where it has been sitting for ten days now, waiting for Mr. Terrell to come and haul it away, while the new one lurks in its huge cardboard box in the kitchen, waiting for a plumber to come and install it. It seems likely that neither one of these people will ever come, that neither one of these things will ever happen.

Lynn sets the carton of wine down on top of the old dishwasher in the hall. Well, okay, she's been drinking too much. Or, possibly, she's not drinking

enough. Who can say? Whose goddamn business is it, anyway? She takes off her coat and drops it on the bench, then goes into the kitchen with the mail and throws it down on the kitchen table on top of yesterday's mail. Okay, she'll read it all at once. Then she'll pour herself a little glass of wine as a reward. The pinot, perhaps.

The doorbell rings. Lynn ignores it. She puts the real mail, Christmas cards and letters, into one stack; the bills in another; the year-end pleas for contributions into another. The bell rings again. Lynn starts slitting envelopes open with a paring knife. She reads a Christmas letter which begins, "It's been a big year for the Hobgoods, what with two new grandchildren and an autumn trip to Tuscany for Bill's 60<sup>th</sup> . . ." Sixtieth *what?* Lynn is thinking furiously; she hates it when people leave off the noun.

SUDDENLY LYNN THINKS she hears voices in the hall. By the time she has stood up from the kitchen table and walked through the shadowy dining room, she's certain of it. Sure enough, the front door stands wide open, and a whole crowd of women wearing hats (*hats?*) has clustered around in the hallway.

"Hallo? Hallo?" one of them keeps calling.

Another (determined, even bossy) voice says, "Well, let's get some light on *this* subject!" and the hall light is switched on abruptly.

The hats are *red*. The women stand blinking in the light. One, smaller and more frail than the others, leans on her walker. "Robin, I just don't know about this." She sounds fretful.

"Hallo? Hallo?" the tall brunette keeps screaming up the staircase.

Lynn comes to stand in the dining room arch. "Can I help you?" she asks.

"We're here to see the house," announces the very tan blonde closest to Lynn.

"This house is not on the tour," Lynn says. "I'm sorry."

"Well, it most certainly *is!* Toursite #14!" The brunette abandons the staircase and elbows her way through the group. "Look at this!" Her dark eyes, set too close together, are snapping. She thrusts a brochure at Lynn.

"Let me see that." Luckily Lynn still has her reading glasses on. She examines the map, which has been badly drawn and badly printed. "You're looking

for the Barkley School,” she explains. “It’s on the *next* corner, see? One more block up Main Street. It was a boarding school before the Civil War,” she adds, trying to seem friendly.

“But we already walked all the way up that *hill*,” moans a pale, plump woman whose red hat is as round as her face.

“Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t help that,” Lynn says firmly. “As you can see, this house is not on the tour. Just look at it.”

“But look at poor little Melissa, why she’s just about to die! She pushed her walker all the way up here!” The plump woman points at the older one, who has now turned her walker into a seat and sits upon it, breathing hard. “If we could just stay for a *minute*,” Melissa begs softly.

“When was this house built?” the tan one asks. Her cap of blonde hair sits on her head like a mushroom. “You ought to be on the tour, anyway. This a lot better than the last house we went in.”

“We’re not, though,” Lynn says hopelessly. “We’re not on the tour.”

But now they are all milling about, widening their area, peeping into other doors which open off the central hall. “That’s a beautiful sideboard.” Several peer past Lynn into the dining room.

“Rita, come look at this, you won’t believe such a mess!” The mushroom blonde peers into Lawrence’s study, where no one is allowed. “Why, it’s just a pigpen in there.”

Suddenly Lynn can’t help it, she starts laughing uncontrollably.

“Now come on.” The tall brunette nudges Lynn. “Can’t you just let us look around for a minute? After all,” she adds reasonably, “we’re already *here*.”

“Well, you certainly are,” Lynn hears herself say, then, “Okay. What the hell? Why the hell not?” Some of the ladies glance at each other, suddenly wary, when she says “hell.” But Lynn continues, “Come on. Sure. I’ll give you your own personal house tour. Why not? I haven’t got one other single god-damn thing to do.”

“I think we’d better go.” A thin redhead wearing a lot of gold jewelry speaks up for the first time.

“Georgia, are you *crazy*?” somebody else says. “Think about that hill. We’d have to walk all the way down it, then go a whole block up again, to that school, then climb up *that* hill . . .”

“Who cares about a school anyway?” the pale fat one says. “I vote we stay here.”

“Then we’d better introduce ourselves.” The brunette with the too-close-together eyes is obviously the leader; she reminds Lynn of a high school principal. No! of an *assistant* high school principal. “I am Robin Atwater,” she says, “and this is Mary Lane Faucette —” gesturing toward the pale plump woman who looks like a snow lady, Lynn realizes now, exactly like the snow lady and snowman her kids used to build out there on the front lawn every winter. “Angela Flack —” Robin indicates the blonde. “Melissa Cheatham,” who nods from her walker, hand to chest. What if she *dies* in my front hall? Lynn is thinking. What then? “Georgia Mayo” is the thin redhead with the gold jewelry. “Rita Goins” is the big-haired one wearing the mink coat and all the make-up; she used to be very pretty, Lynn can tell. You can always tell. But that Angela Flack looks like she has spent half her life in a tanning booth. What is it with all this tanning, anyway? Lynn has always wondered. Doesn’t Angela know how bad this is for her? Doesn’t she even read *Parade Magazine*?

Robin introduces them all, then pauses expectantly.

But instead of introducing herself in return, Lynn asks, “So what’s with the red hats?”

“Oh, don’t you *know*?” several of them cry out, obviously surprised. “Don’t you know who we are?”

Lynn shakes her head. “Sorry,” she says.

“It’s all based on a poem,” the snow lady offers.

“What poem?” Lynn is really surprised.

“It’s this poem that goes, ‘When I am old, I shall wear purple, and a red hat’, and I forget the rest . . . .”

“Who’s it by?”

“Oh, who cares?” Robin snaps. “The point is how we interpret it, what we *do*.”

“But what *do* you do?” Lynn asks. *Besides breaking into innocent people’s houses*, she does not say.

The women look at each other. Then Georgia stands to attention. She looks like a soldier in her bright red blazer and all that gold jewelry. “Nothing!” she cries.

“What?” Lynn must have misunderstood.

“Nothing! I said, *nothing!*” Georgia shrieks, giggling.

The others chime in like a high Greek chorus: “We’ve been doing things for other people our whole lives, and now it’s time for *us* to enjoy ourselves . . . . so we take trips, we go out to lunch. Our entire purpose is having fun! We are releasing our inner child!”

“Well, I suppose the least I can do is show you around the house, then,” Lynn says. “Let’s start with the pigpen. But just stick your heads in the door, please, there’s really no place to stand, as you will see.”

Obediently, they bunch up at the study door.

“My goodness, I have never seen that many books in one place in my life except in a library,” Angela remarks. “Who reads?”

It’s like an accusation. They all turn to stare at Lynn.

“Well, we both do,” she says finally.

“You do? All these books?”

“Yes, we both read quite a lot. In fact, we’ve both been teachers all our lives, and actually, my husband is a writer, as well. Quite a famous writer. And I used to be a writer, too.” Lynn can’t imagine why she’s adding this part. But now they are all staring at her.

“Oh, that must be so *boring*,” Georgia — the redhead — finally says.

“Why, what do you mean?”

“I mean, well . . . you have to write all those ‘he said’s’ and ‘she said’s’ all the time, don’t you get really tired of it? *I* would,” Georgia announces decisively.

“I guess I’ve never thought of it quite that way,” Lynn says politely, thinking *damn good point* as she ushers them into the living room.

“Well, you certainly haven’t decorated for Christmas, have you?” Robin asks pointedly.

“I’m not on the tour,” Lynn reminds them, overwhelmed suddenly by the clutter of their lives which now strikes her as appalling rather than eclectic — hodgepodge furniture bought here and there; her grandmother’s antique crewel-work armchair; that huge, square glass coffee table they got in New York, covered with art books, most of them Lawrence’s beloved German expressionism; the Chinese porcelain vases they brought back from China when Lawrence was invited to participate in that PEN tour (and they went down the Yangtze in that yellow boat just at dawn, oh God); and that half-woman, half-horse sculpture

from New Mexico bolted to the chimney (Lynn has never been sure whether Lawrence was fucking the sculptor or not). The rugs from Turkey, the brass elephant from Morocco, the Tibetan temple door on the landing, the tapestry they bought from the old man in Turkey. Lynn loved Africa best of all, the Serengeti, looking out across those endless plains.

The women stop before one of Lawrence's treasured Max Bechmann prints hanging in the hallway, a formally dressed man holding a cigarette in one hand, staring insolently out of the frame. Rita says, "I think that's what you call undressing somebody with your eyes," while the rest of them giggle. "I wouldn't have that man in my house!" somebody else declares.

Lynn points to a sketch of San Galgano, in Tuscany. "I did that," she says, and they turn to stare at her.

"You *did*?" says Georgia, as if she doesn't quite believe it.

"And this watercolor, too." Lynn indicates a placid canal in Belgium, a trip they took with their best friends from Berkeley, the Hoffbergers, long since divorced.

"Now that's a nice one." Robin pauses at an old photograph of Lynn's family out on the rocky shore of their house at Cape Breton, Lawrence in his most disreputable fishing hat, the children in shorts, herself in rolled-up jeans throwing a stick for their beloved dogs Plato and Emily Dickinson, long since dead. Maybe Lynn should get herself a dog, now there's a thought.

"Those must be your children?" Robin prompts, and Lynn says yes, that Anne lives in California with her husband and two daughters, both adopted — little Chinese girls — and Jeffrey is in Rome for the year on a fellowship.

"*Really?*" this idea seems to strike Robin as radical. "They're not coming home for Christmas? Your son will be over there all by himself?"

"Well." Lynn tries to hide a smile. "He's 35, and he has a partner." An Italian hairdresser, she does not say, whom they have never met.

"I see." Robin squinches her eyes even closer together.

Lynn is beginning to hate her.

But the women will not move on. "And when was this picture taken?" Angela asks.

"Oh, years ago," Lynn says, "but we still have this house in Nova Scotia; we go up there every summer. We've been going for thirty years. The children love it, they always come for a while, no matter where they're living, especially

for the Fourth of July. That's sort of what we do instead of Christmas. We boil lobsters out on the beach, and corn and clams in this big iron pot . . ." Lynn goes on and on describing their Fourth of July ritual, unable to stop, furious at herself for telling these women these details. Because this will be the sore point, the sticking point, won't it? Who will get this house? which you can't quite see in this photograph, hidden back there behind the birches. This house where the children spent every summer of their childhoods, which the children love. Which Lawrence loves, and she loves, too, thinking of those long red sunsets and the spray in her face as they head out into the bay in the ancient Boston Whaler which used to belong to Lawrence's first wife's first husband. Could these women even follow that? Could they ever understand anything at all about our lives?

"Dave and I went to Canada once," Mary Lane says, "but the water was too cold to swim."

Lynn hears Georgia say to Robin in an undertone, "You know, you could really do something with this house if you got all the junk out of it. Look at this crown molding," as the group goes through the dining room.

"Wait, oh wait!" Melissa cries piteously, falling behind on her walker.

The kitchen is such a disaster (dishes in the sink, groceries still in their paper bags on the counter) that Lynn tries to rush the red hat ladies on through, but by now they're totally into the tour, pausing to exclaim over the ferns which Lynn has brought inside for the winter — "Why, it's practically a greenhouse in here!" — and the hand-painted tiles all around the sink and stove, tiles which Lynn carried back so carefully from Italy where they had had that lovely high pink house in Lucca with a view of the sea from the bedroom window and those long lace curtains sweeping the floor, that passionate year of fights (that cleaning girl) and then making up; why once she'd let the baby — this was Anne — cry for half the morning while she made love to Lawrence, swept up in overwhelming guilt and desire. She and Lawrence used to dance out on the balcony, too, as she recalls, to the music of the village band coming up from the piazza, and once they had danced in the kitchen, to no music at all. What would the red hat ladies think of that? But surely they had had *some* fun with their own husbands? Surely it hadn't been all duty, all carpools and PTA?

But she, too, has spent a large part of her life taking care of others, Lynn realizes. She is as old as these red hat ladies, even older than Georgia and

Robin. So why isn't she out there fulfilling herself, too, having fun? Releasing her own inner child? Or does she still have one? Maybe that child has been killed off now by too much drinking and too many very long dinner parties with other over-educated supercilious people such as herself and Lawrence. Maybe she ought to join the red hat ladies. Or maybe she ought to become a Republican. She'd been amazed when Gore lost. She'd been amazed every time Jesse Helms won, all these years of living in North Carolina and they'd never known one single person, not one, who ever admitted to voting for Jesse Helms. But somebody did, because then the vote rolled in. Lynn bets that most of the people in that Christmas parade voted for him, possibly some of these ladies in the red hats as well. Some of them must be Republicans. Robin is one for sure. Momentarily Lynn envies them, at least if she were a Republican, she could be so goddamn *positive* about things, about *something* at least, about anything. Anything at all. She'd like to become a truly positive person like Doug and Mike and Louise at physical therapy, and improve her ADL. Improvement is possible, Doug has said so. Doug has promised. A great deal of improvement is still possible! Things can be fixed! Maybe Lynn should just break her other ankle, so she can go back to the cheerful little gym — no, that's ridiculous!

She leads the women into the back hallway.

"Well!" Robin stops dead in her tracks, eyeing the broken dishwasher with the box of wine on top of it.

"Oh. Who drinks?" Angela asks, and Lynn says, "I do."

This cracks them up, these red hat ladies, but Lynn has had about enough of them by now. She shows them the music room. "Is that really a Steinway?" Georgia wants to know, and Lynn says yes, it is, adding that Jeffrey is really a concert pianist. She leads them down the hall toward the front door but clearly they don't want to leave yet, they dawdle, they don't want to set off down that long hill.

"So!" Robin stops by the newel post. "Aren't there any ghost stories associated with this old house?"

SOMETHING SNAPS INSIDE Lynn's head. "Why, yes," she says. "As a matter of fact, we *do* have a ghost, because actually there was a terrible death right here."

## SHENANDOAH

“Right *where?*” The ladies peer nervously about themselves. It’s getting dark outside, and it’s a little spooky in this hallway, even with the chandelier on. It’s always been dark in here. Lynn decides she’s going to paint the entire downstairs a sort of creamy eggshell color, brighten it up some.

“Right *there!*” She points to the dark at the top of the stairs. “Now here’s the story.”

They draw in closer.

“It was back in the 1920’s,” Lynn says, “when this house was owned by a very attractive couple awaiting the birth of their first child. The husband had been sent here to open a new bank, the Carolina Southern, right down the street there in that old stone building next to the pharmacy.” Everybody nods. Lynn continues, amazed at herself, “Nobody knew much about this young husband — he seemed to have risen up out of nowhere, though he was perfectly charming and clearly very smart — but *she* came from one of the oldest and wealthiest families in Wilmington. He was a gambler and a spendthrift, though nobody knew it yet, and the new bank was in serious trouble when her mother — now, this is the wife’s mother, Mrs. Mildred Osgood, a widow, one of the Cape Fear Osgoods, came up from Wilmington to spend the Easter holiday and stay on for the birth of her first grandchild, as this daughter was her only child. So it was Easter Sunday, 1923, when the tragedy occurred.”

“What tragedy?” Mary Lane breathes.

“Well, the daughter was downstairs all ready for church—they belonged to the Episcopal Church—but her husband and her mother were still upstairs dressing, and she was afraid they were going to be late, so she called up the staircase and begged them to hurry. Later, she could have bit off her tongue, because her mother appeared briefly at the top of these stairs and then tripped somehow, breaking her ankle, and fell all the way down this entire staircase, head over heels, landing in a crumpled heap right there.” Lynn points dramatically to the hooked rug at the bottom of the stairs. “She died instantly. And of course the young couple was just distraught, overcome with sorrow, and in fact they never got over it.”

“Never?” It’s Mary Lane again.

“No. Never. Because after the mother’s death, there was a presence in the house, a certain presence: you would feel someone beside you when no one was there, you would sense a presence in the room, and when she got old

enough, the baby would smile at it, at the person who wasn't there. So the young couple left, after a few years, but things did not go well for them. He died in an automobile accident, drove his car off the bridge into the Neuse River, and she became an alcoholic back in Wilmington. She drank white wine all day long."

"What happened to the child, then, their baby?"

"I don't know," Lynn says.

"Do you think he did it? The husband, I mean? Do you think he pushed her down the stairs, for the money?" Robin Atwater's mind is just clicking away.

"It's possible. I just don't know. There are some things we can never know," Lynn says.

A silence falls around them then, like snow. Down at the end of the front yard, the streetlights come on along Main Street.

"Have you ever felt that . . . that presence?" Angela asks softly.

"Oh, yes," Lynn says. "Many times."

There's an audible intake of breath, an involuntary drawing together.

"And I'll tell you something else." Now Lynn is getting reckless, she knows she's going to blow it but she can't resist, she just *can't*.

"What?"

"When Mrs. Osgood fell down the staircase, she was wearing a *red hat!*"

Nobody says a word.

"Oh, you're kidding, right? You just made that up," Georgia Mayo says finally.

"Did you make it *all* up?" Mary Lane sounds very disappointed.

"I think that's just *mean!*" Melissa Cheatham, in her walker, sounds like she's going to cry.

"Well, girls, it's getting late, I think we'd better be going on now." Robin takes control again. "Thanks so much," she says briskly, extending her hand but pulling it back when Lynn has barely touched her long, sharp, manicured nails. "Quite entertaining, I must say! And now, goodbye, and Merry Christmas." Robin shepherds them out the door. It's drizzling now, getting dark. Lynn turns on the porch light and stands to watch as they straggle over to the side street, helping Melissa along, then moving in their group down the long hill, farther and farther away. Carolers are singing someplace nearby; their voices float out on the chilly air.

“Merry Christmas!” Lynn calls after the ladies. “Merry Christmas!” She watches them until they turn the corner and disappear, heading back down Main Street. Obviously they have decided to skip the Barkley School after all.

Now, finally, she’ll get that drink. Lynn laughs as she closes the door behind her and walks back down the long haunted hallway to grab the pinot. She’s still smiling when she goes into the kitchen to open it and finds Lawrence sitting at the kitchen table, wearing his overcoat, going through the mail.

HE LOOKS UP at her over the half-glasses, white hair floating out all around his head like a dandelion gone to seed. God, he’s aged, he looks really old now, like some character out of *Alice in Wonderland*. “Bravo, bravo!” He starts that slow deliberate sort of clapping he does which always drove Lynn mad. “Well done, well done, my dear! Very creative! I commend you.”

“You were here? You heard all that?”

“Ah, yes, my dear, I had just come slinking home through the back door, appropriately enough, dragging my tail behind me.”

Lynn glances out into the back hall. She didn’t notice any luggage when she passed the broken dishwasher. No, his bag is not there, it’s definitely not there. So what does this mean? Does he imagine that he has come home for good? Or is he just visiting? Lawrence stands up to take off the huge overcoat which strikes Lynn now as an affectation, especially that cape-y thing, and the belt — why, it’s downright theatrical, really. Lawrence seems theatrical, too, an old ham, a joke.

He says, “I especially liked the mother-in-law’s name, Mrs. Mildred Osgood, and that line, ‘one of the Cape Fear Osgoods.’ That was quite good, you know.”

Lynn had somehow forgotten about his deep, stupid voice-of-God voice, which they all love so much on NPR. And that accent — almost English, isn’t it? Lawrence claims he got it at Harvard, but plenty of people who went to Harvard don’t sound like that, do they? She opens the bottle.

“And that detail about the baby smiling at the presence in the room, very nice. You should go back to writing fiction, you know. You really should. You’ve a gift for it.”

“I won’t, though. I have other plans,” Lynn hears herself saying.

“Well, what are they?” he asks. “Good works? Ha ha.” He does his har-rumphing laugh; he’s being ironic, of course.

“Perhaps.” Lynn gets herself a jelly jar from the sink and pours some wine into it. “If I ever do go back to writing, the first thing I’m going to write is a long epic poem named ‘Irony Sucks.’”

He raises those scraggly white eyebrows. “Aha! A manifesto? You *are* interesting, you know. You are still interesting.”

“Thank you.” Her ankle hurts. She walks over to sit down at the littered table.

Lawrence gets up, opens the china cabinet. “Bravo!” he says again. “In any case, bravo! You have vanquished the opposition.” He takes down one of those little green glasses they got in Venice, actually at Murano, out in the lagoon, where there’d been some sort of a workingman’s organization holding a celebration, singing and dancing, arms linked, all of them singing and dancing as one. Lawrence and Lynn had stood up and joined them. Come to think of it, that might be as close as they ever got to feeling like part of something else, like part of a group. Usually, it had been the two of them against the world.

He fills the delicate green glass and lifts it. “To you, my dear.”

“To Deborah Woodley,” Lynn says instead, raising hers. “So, where is she?”

“Gone.” He lowers his glass. “Gone with the wind. Or so it would seem.”

Lynn lifts an eyebrow, sipping her wine.

“Yes,” he says. “I ‘brought her down,’ apparently. ‘You bring me down,’ is what she told me, to be precise. She is considerably younger than I, as you know. We had gone to a holiday party where she had a wonderful time, as usual, and I did *not*, again as usual. And on the way home in the car, she said she was tired of me bringing her down.”

“Just like that? What else did you say?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what else had you said — before that, I mean — to bring her down?”

“Oh, well, I suppose I had said something to the effect . . . oh, yes, I remember now. I had remarked that I hate it whenever she has a good time.”

“And then *she* said . . . .”

“And then she said she was tired of me bringing her down.”

“So here you are.”

“So here I am.”

Lynn starts laughing and can't stop.

“What? What is it?” He leans forward frowning.

“Do you remember when we first moved to North Carolina?” she asked. “And I was working for the newspaper? And I had to write all those headlines and cutlines?”

“Yes . . . .” He's nodding his wispy white head.

“Well, I can just see the headline now,” she says. “‘*Debbie Dumps Depressive*.’”

Lawrence starts laughing, too. “Oh, that's good,” he says. “That's rich, that's really good. ‘*Debbie Dumps Depressive*,’ very nice.”

They are still laughing when Mary Lane Faucette, the snow lady, pokes her red hat around the back door. “Hello — oh!” she carols. And here comes Georgia Mayo smiling her bright red smile, advancing into the kitchen, with Rita Goins tap-tapping along right behind her on those ridiculous spike heels.

*Oh God.* Will Lynn *never* be rid of these women?

“You must be the husband,” Georgia says to Lawrence.

“In a manner of speaking.” Lawrence drains his glass and pours another.

“Well, pardon me,” Georgia says. Actually she looks like the Little Drummer Boy in that red blazer with all the gold jewelry. “Pardon me, but we just had to come back and make sure . . . that wasn't really true, was it? That part about the mother-in-law falling down the staircase?”

“No,” Lynn says.

“I *told* you,” Rita says.

“Well, why did you say it then?” Mary Lane's feelings have obviously been hurt.

“I don't know,” Lynn says.

“Ladies . . .” Lawrence begins, then pauses. “Ladies, pardon me. But could you explain your attire to me, please? Are you members of a club? An organization?”

“Not really,” Rita says.

“We're a *dis*-organization,” Georgia explains. “The only rule is that you have to be over 50. And basically we're all tired of doing things for other people. We just want to have some fun. We're releasing our inner child,” she adds.

Lawrence laughs, a short, abrupt bark.

*Oh no*, Lynn is thinking. Now he will destroy them.

But instead, Lawrence says, “There are those who feel that my inner child has been released entirely too much already. In fact, it seems entirely possible that I am nothing but an old fool, an idiot.”

Lynn can feel him looking at her.

“Who are you, again?” Georgia asks him point-blank.

“I am no one. *No one*,” Lawrence intones in the voice-of-God voice.

“Are you really the husband?” she persists.

“In a manner of speaking.” Lawrence drains his glass, then pours another. He stands up.

Now, Lynn is thinking. Now he will destroy them.

But instead, he makes a stagy little bow. “Ladies, please,” he says. “Please. Sit down. Have a drink.”

They look at each other.

“I don’t mind if we do,” Mary Lane says. “It was *hard*, getting back up that hill.” She sinks gratefully into the chair which Lawrence pulls out for her. Rita takes off her mink coat and does the same, while Georgia sits gingerly on the very edge of her chair, looking all around the messy kitchen.

Lawrence refills Lynn’s jelly jar, then pours each of them a little green glass of wine. “*Salut!*” he says. “To you!”

“Thank you.” Mary Lane Faucette seems shy, suddenly. She drains her glass. Then she clears her throat and says, “My son is gay, too. He lives in Atlanta, and he’s just wonderful. He’s the sweetest thing. In fact, he has always been the light of my life . . . of all our lives, really. He was the only truly light-hearted one in our family. But my husband won’t accept it, he just can’t. At first I thought, Oh, he’ll come around, it’ll just take time, but he can’t. He just can’t. In fact, he won’t even talk about it. He won’t mention his name.”

“That’s rough,” Lawrence says. “Hard on you.”

Lynn stares at him. Who’s this? Sigmund Freud?

“It’s been hard for all of us,” Mary Lane says, “especially at Christmas. It’s especially sad for Libbie — that’s his twin sister, they used to be so close.”

“I would imagine that it’s harder on your husband than anybody else,” Lawrence says. “That’s how men are, we’ll hold onto an idea we can’t live with until it kills us.”

“Well, that’s just crazy!” Georgia Mayo says decisively, tipping her glass up to get the last bit.

“But people *are* crazy. Not just men.” Rita leans forward on the kitchen table, propping her pretty face up in her hands. “I mean, you never know what is going to happen in this world, do you? For instance, I used to be Miss South Carolina?” Her voice goes up at the end. “And now I have a double mastectomy? And my husband left right in the middle of all the chemo and radiation and everything, he just couldn’t take it? But guess what?”

“What?” Lynn can’t imagine.

“The radiologist and I fell in love? And my children just had a fit because, of course, he’s eleven years younger than I am, but that’s not much, is it? and we didn’t care, we went right ahead and got married anyway? before my hair even came back? Because you just never know how much time you’ve got, do you? and now we are so happy, I mean, so happy, I just had no idea! And then we bought this house down at Hilton Head? and I have actually become a *birdwatcher*? and the children all got over it eventually, why between us we’ve got five grandchildren, I’ve got my ‘brag book’ right here.” She produces a small pink photo album from her voluminous purse and puts it on the table, flipping the pages one by one.

“Oh, look at that darling little towhead boy,” Mary Lane says. “I could just eat him up with a spoon.”

Lawrence opens another bottle of pinot noir, and the viognier, for her.

Lynn rummages in a kitchen drawer and pulls out a picture of her granddaughters, taken this past summer at Cape Breton. She puts it on the table.

“Why, aren’t they cute?” Georgia exclaims. “And their eyes look just like anybody’s! Why, I’ll say!”

“You’ll say *what*?” Lynn is thinking furiously. “*What*?” but she holds her tongue, and they all have another drink, and then another, and some of that pound cake Virginia brought over yesterday, and it’s nearly seven o’clock when the three women struggle back into their coats and leave. Lynn and Lawrence stand together in the wide open front door, hands not touching, to watch them walk down the hill.

Lawrence makes his harrumphing sound. “Well?” he asks.

“Well, *what*?” Lynn says. In her mind, her doctor is saying, “Pay attention, pay attention, pay attention.” She has had a clean break, though there are

often complications. And her ADL level is still shit, though Doug has said she is “good to go.” But improvement is possible, Doug has also said this. A great deal of improvement is still possible. For instance, she is going to put colored lights on that boxwood. And she is going to buy some sexy high heels like Rita’s. She is going to buy a dog. She is going to paint the entire downstairs: eggshell. A cold breeze lifts her hair. The parade is long since over, the carolers and tourists have all gone home. The rain is past, too, though dark clouds race across the dark sky, chasing a sickle moon. Lynn and Lawrence stand together in the doorway, not quite touching. In the darkened room behind them, Lynn senses their inner children sitting on the edge of their chairs, just waiting to see what will happen.