

Remedy

By Linda D. Brewer

Ben was reading a paper on lichen community structure when he heard a cough outside his door, a thick, deep-down smoker's cough that provoked a sympathetic tickle in his own throat. He knew the cougher--Wendelle, the secretary he shared with two other biology faculty. Someone asked her a question, probably along the lines of, "Are you okay?" Wendelle laughed. Her laugh sounded like a more painful version of her cough. "Talk to you later," someone said, and he recognized his daughter Katy's sweet, unsullied voice.

A moment later Katy came into his office and laid an envelope on top of a pile of journals on his desk. She was wearing an old blue down jacket she had had since high school and her dark hair was ruffled like a bluejay's. She tended to pull the jacket's hood on and off without regard for her hairstyle. In dress and grooming she was his child, not her mother's.

Ben picked up the envelope. "What's this? Your letter of resignation?" She could, after all, pack up and go to California to live with her mother. Joking about it made it less likely, he hoped.

"My Christmas list. I don't want anything else--no clothes, no food, no shelter, nothing." She wasn't smiling. Either way, smiling or serious, hair mussed or combed, she was beautiful.

He opened the envelope and read the note. "Please quit smoking. I want you to live forever. Love, your daughter, Katy."

He'd expected something like this for a long time and then, when it didn't come, he'd hoped maybe it never would. He slipped the note back into the envelope. "I'll think about it."

"Please do think, because if you think you'll see it's your only logical option. You have all this work you want to do, and you need a good healthy lifetime to do it in. If you quit now you'll get eight extra years."

Her delivery wasn't stilted--she'd practiced her lines until she sounded natural. How long had that taken her, he wondered.

"But what if a cigarette now and then helps me do my work?" he said.

"That's only short term. Anyway, Wendelle says if you quit, she'll try to quit, too." As if that was the clincher.

Ben raised his eyebrows. "You didn't need to get her involved."

"She volunteered." Katy rushed on. "Dad, either quit smoking or make

your will. I want to go to medical school and I can't do that if I'm a poor orphan."

"If you were an orphan they'd give you a scholarship," Ben said.

"Very funny." There was a hint of helplessness in her expression. He hated to see it.

"I will think about it," he promised her. "It's not an easy thing or I would have done it a long time ago."

"Do it, Dad. You're too smart not to," Katy said. She was twenty years old and this was the first time she'd asked him to stop smoking. She'd worried about her mother most of her life, but Juliet was safe and sane and remarried, living in San Diego. Her new husband sold vitamins. It was his turn Ben thought. Now he was the worry-ee.

He didn't want his daughter to worry about anyone. He said, "I'll take care of it. It'll be okay."

Katy's expression said she'd heard that one before. She checked her watch, a bulky black thing with multiple functions that looked like a shackle on her narrow wrist. "I've got to go. I've got to handle the rats." She worked in the building's basement as a student helper for biochemistry experiments, her first step on the road to medical school.

"Be nice to them," he said.

"I'm very nice to them. I have a rat affinity, Dr. Shapiro says." She pointed to the note. "Please." Ben picked it up and put it in his jacket pocket. After she'd gone he went to his window and looked out over the Montlake Cut toward downtown Seattle. The traffic lights glowed deep red and green beneath the gray sky, appropriate colors for this time of year. On a clear day he could see Mt. Rainier, but there hadn't been any clear days since before Thanksgiving. He thought of all the cigarette butts he'd buried in the mountain's snow over the years and felt that he should feel ashamed, but he didn't. He'd once met an honest-to-God Himalayan Sherpa on Mt. Rainier, and he, too, had been enjoying a cigarette.

"I'd be happy to go in on the stop smoking thing with you," Wendelle told him later that afternoon. She was getting ready to leave—her purse and bulging tote bag sat beside the desk. She zipped up her blue nylon raincoat and pulled her hair out from under the collar. Wendelle dyed her own hair. This month it was a dark gold as opposed to summer's platinum blonde. Ben thought she would have looked better as a brunette, her natural color, but it wasn't his call, of course. Her husband probably liked blondes. "My boys have been begging me to quit since they were tiny little guys," Wendelle said.

Ben had never met Wendelle's two sons. They ate a lot, he knew that

much about them. Wendelle shopped for groceries on her way to work, after work, and sometimes squeezed in a run for bread and milk on her lunch hour. Her sons were teenagers. She didn't talk about them often, but she had let slip that they were champing at the bit to join the Army. Wendelle herself had perilous dentition--she was always marching off to the clinic on the third floor to let some dental student try his luck with her molars. Maybe a family tendency toward cavities would keep them out of harm's way, Ben thought. Wendelle herself had never expressed this hope.

"I think I'd better tackle this project on my own. No need to make you suffer along with me," Ben said.

"I'd rather suffer with you than by myself. We can be each other's support group. How about this? Every afternoon on the J-wing stairwell balcony, five minutes to complain, five minutes to encourage each other, and off we go. We'll start right after New Year's. Be there or be square." She gave him a thumbs-up and stumped off in her low-heeled, entirely practical winter boots.

So that, Ben thought, was that. Be there or disappoint his secretary, not to mention his daughter.

Wendelle had worked for him for five years, since just before his divorce. Not long after she started she'd caught him smoking on the fourth floor stairwell balcony, his aerie, his zen zone, as he thought of it. When she opened the stairwell door and burst onto the balcony, he ignored her. He stared over the waist-high concrete wall at what lay before him in the world—a persistent mist, Canada geese feasting on the grass, students hurrying past the geese to get out of the mist--and what lay before him in his mind—his wife's tears as she went off to detox again, his upcoming appointment with a divorce attorney. Wendelle didn't speak to him. She finished her cigarette with quiet efficiency, in much the same way she typed his papers, and went back inside. Neither of them mentioned their meeting when he returned to the office. He never saw her on the stairwell after that. Where and when she smoked he didn't want to know.

On the last work day before New Year's she left a sticky note on his computer monitor. "Looking forward to a New Year and a Better Life! Live it or live with it!" He crumpled the note and put it in his pocket. He'd tried to quit a couple of times before, when no one was watching, and he'd failed. The thought crossed his mind that if his daughter really loved him, she would leave him to smoke in peace and go on with her life. They'd been through a lot together, more than most fathers and daughters. Anything that gave him a chance to pause in his busy day, he deserved.

He had to try, at least. On impulse he removed one cigarette from the pack in his pocket and hid it in an empty candy tin at the back of his top desk drawer, behind a box of paper clips and assorted pens. It would be his lifeline in an emergency. He told himself he could not open the tin unless something catastrophic happened.

He'd planned to spend New Year's Day watching football with Katy and her boyfriend, Richard. Ben had written his name on a scrap of paper and stuck it under a magnet on the refrigerator after calling him Matthew for the third time. Matthew—Richard—was a Middle Eastern studies major, with a self-diagnosed calling to bring about peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. For some reason Katy thought he had it in him to do it. Ben bought beer and diet soda and braved the crowds at QFC to stock up on frozen pretend chicken nuggets, hummus and three kinds of salad. Katy had met Richard at a vegetarian restaurant.

It drizzled on New Year's morning, beading the junipers with silver drops. At noon Katy knocked once and came in. "Richard's waiting in the car. We got invited to his professor's house at the last minute. It would be really good for him to be there." She saw the food he'd arranged on the dining table and tears came to her eyes. "Dad. I didn't think you'd go to all this trouble. I'll stay with you if you want me to." She smelled of the outdoors, fresh and cool. Lake Washington, a mile down the hill, was the same color as her eyes.

He shook his head. "Go on. I can forage off this the rest of the week."

She hugged him, a nice hug, but at the same time she sniffed his shirt. "You already smoked," she said, her voice hard. "It's only New Year's Day."

"My last one," he said.

"Better be," she said. She turned and ran down the wet front steps to Richard's car parked at the curb.

His impulse, after he closed the door, was to find his cigarettes and smoke one while he watched a football game. He headed toward the kitchen, but the display of food, the paper plates, the drinks suddenly reminded him of a post-funeral lunch he'd attended the previous year. A biology grad student had died on a backpacking trip, suffocated when a heavy snowfall buried his tent. In his mind's eye he saw a coffin with himself, the smoker, inside it and Katy huddled on a folding chair in a funeral home, her Arabic-Hebrew-speaking boyfriend unable to give her the consolation only a father could provide. No wonder she wanted to go off with that fool instead of staying with him. She couldn't bear to watch him kill himself. He grabbed

his cigarettes from the kitchen counter and threw them in the garbage can under the sink, then reconsidered and carried the garbage bag out to the big garbage can at the end of the driveway.

As soon as he threw the bag inside he reconsidered. He looked up and down the street to see if anyone was around to see him fish it out again. There was only one car in sight. Everyone else was inside watching football. He lifted the lid off the garbage can and the lone car pulled up at the curb in front of his house. The front seat passenger rolled down his window and said, "We're lost." Ben put the lid back on the garbage can and wiped his hands on his pants as if he'd just completed an ordinary, non-regrettable act.

An elderly man sat in the passenger seat. The driver was younger, hippie-looking, perhaps his son, perhaps a caretaker. "We're supposed to be in Greenwood," the elderly man said. "We're late." Ben took the piece of paper the man proffered and saw the Greenwood address. He drew a map on the back and handed it across the old man to the driver. "Go due west, past Green Lake and the zoo." The driver nodded as if he'd known it all along. "Happy New Year," the elderly man said, and Ben returned the greeting. By the time they drove away he had pulled himself back from the brink.

He owed it to Katy to try. He told himself that if he got desperate he could drive to a gas station and buy a fresh pack, unstained by coffee grounds and orange peels. Back in the house he put the party food away without eating any of it. He watched a few minutes of football on one channel, a few minutes on another. He opened his computer and closed it again. He drank a glass of water. At two o'clock he called Wendelle and asked her how she was doing.

"I had my very last cigarette at midnight standing on the back porch in the freezing cold. The boys had a sleepover. I needed the peace and quiet."

"And today?"

"And today nothing. I'm never having another one. Not unless Mt. Rainier erupts. Then I'm driving to Circle K and smoking everything they have."

"Hmm," Ben said. "Sounds like a plan."

"You can do it. I have faith in you," she said.

"You have more faith in me than I do."

"Put on your coat and go for a walk and look for lichens. Call me back later and tell me how many kinds you find. The boys are out skateboarding. I'm sitting here trying to teach myself how to knit out of a book. You won't be interrupting anything important."

The idea of sitting inside all day like Wendelle got him out the door. He

grabbed his rain jacket and headed down the hill to Magnusson Park, a mile from his house. He hadn't been there in a long time, and the sound of the wavelets lapping against the rocks made him realize how much he'd missed it. He walked along the lake shore and then turned into the park and walked up the hill to the sound garden. The wind was blowing just enough to make the slender vertical tubes moan among themselves. He tried not to think about how much they looked like giant cigarettes.

"Old-mans-beard," he told Wendelle two hours later. "Green dog lichen. Imperfect. Lungwort."

"*Lobaria pulmonaria*," Wendelle said knowledgeably. "It's everywhere once you start looking."

He still saw the water, heard the keening of the sound garden, felt the chill weight of the rocks he'd picked up and plunked into the lake. He couldn't tell Wendelle—it sounded as if she still had a houseful of boys and anyway they didn't talk about things like that. He said goodbye, put on some music, sat down to read, and fell asleep in his easy chair. When he woke he ate some salad and pretend nuggets. He went to bed earlier than usual and smiled, lying in bed, at his tiny victory.

"They say the first week's the hardest," Wendelle declared the following afternoon. She popped a stick of sugar-free gum in her mouth and squinted into the dusk like a sea captain steering through icebergs. "Things come up and that's the first thing you think of, oh, I need a cigarette to relax. My soon-to-be-ex-husband called me last night at midnight to wish me a happy new year. He was too busy partying the night before. He told me I look like Marilyn Monroe."

"What did you say?" Ben asked.

"I laughed. I used to believe him when he told me that. Then as I got older it annoyed me. My new strategy is, I laugh." She raised her head high as if inviting the world—or him, at least—to compare and contrast her face with Marilyn Monroe's. Not even close, Ben thought, though she wasn't actively homely. Katy had once referred to her as "Wendelle of the longing glances." She'd told Ben it was obvious Wendelle was in love with him. "She wants to rip off your bodice," she'd said. Katy was fifteen then, and trying on a worldly attitude. When she and Wendelle got together in the outer office they laughed together like kids.

He researched the patch. He researched medications. He researched on-line programs, and after an hour went back to his work feeling none the wiser.

"How's it going?" Wendelle asked at their next session on the stairwell

balcony. Ben said it was going fine and asked how it was going for her.

“Tougher today than it was yesterday,” Wendelle said. “I feel like there’s something burning inside me.” She patted her mid section.

“You don’t have to do this,” Ben said.

“Of course I do. If I gave up it would be like giving you permission to give up.” They stood without speaking for a couple of minutes. It was cold on the stairwell. A damp breeze blew in every afternoon around this time of day. When he’d smoked, the breeze had made it hard to light a cigarette. Wendelle said, “Well, that’s all I can muster up today. I’m going to stop at the store and then go home and knit.”

The following week Wendelle made reference to her divorce. She didn’t go into detail, just mentioned that she would need to take a morning off soon to go downtown and get it finalized. Ben said, “Congratulations, I hope,” and she said, “It’s not like I’m jumping for joy.” He nodded. “I know what you mean.” The day the divorce was final he brought her a pack of her favorite sugar-free gum. She thanked him and chewed with tears running down her face.

On a rainy morning at the end of January Wendelle showed up at work in a lumpy cream-colored sweater. “It was supposed to be an Irish fisherman-type thing, but I can’t do cables yet so I just made it plain. It’s organic wool, though,” she said. She launched into a long, involved story about knitting patterns, types of wool, and her desire someday to own an actual sheep. “It’s organic as heck,” she said again, smiling down at her sweater. Ben didn’t doubt it. He could smell damp wool all the way from the outer office. He hoped she wouldn’t take it into her head to knit him something out of it.

In her role as secretary Wendelle asked questions about the papers she typed for him, which his previous secretary had never done. “Lichens fascinate me,” she said. “I always noticed them when I was a kid growing up in Snohomish. I love the whole mycobiont/photobiont thing. It’s like real life,” she said with a laugh. Wendelle also worked for Dr. Mihara and Dr. Tuller, but she never mentioned their work in any way that indicated real interest.

As his non-smoking buddy she talked about more personal matters. Most of her stories went on too long and ended in nervous laughter. Her son Anson had split his head open on Christmas Eve and ended up with twenty-two stitches. She went into detail about the boy’s bloody shirt and how he had whimpered when the doctor was sewing him up. “Long story short, no over the river and through the woods for us,” she said. One day,

when he sensed her working up to another tale of woe or triumph he forestalled her by talking about his troubles with Juliet. “She got doctors to write prescriptions and she took every pill they gave her. I used to love her. I don’t hate her. I’m glad she’s doing fine.” He shook his head. “I just had to get away from her.” Wendelle offered him a stick of gum and he accepted it.

“You did the best you could. You had Katy to think of,” she said. It was a cliché, but he accepted it as well.

One Thursday afternoon as they they pushed back through the heavy door into the fourth floor hallway Dr. Tuller stepped out of the elevator. He nodded at them and smiled. “Hi, Wendelle. Hello, Ben. How go the lichens?”

“They’re going,” Ben said. He had no desire to stand around and chat with Tuller at the end of a long day.

“It’s the air pollution,” Wendelle said. “Species are declining all over the world. They suffer because of our addiction to polluting industries. As human beings we should be ashamed.”

Tuller said, “Interesting.” He shot Ben a surprised glance before he moved on down the hall. Ben understood what Tuller thought he had seen, a professor, a noted lichenologist, and his secretary sharing private time at the end of the day. What Tuller didn’t know was that these balcony moments were nothing compared to times Ben and his wife had shared. Once at a lichenology conference in London they had gone out onto the hotel balcony and waved at the people on the streets below. They’d felt like a royal couple with a long, eventful life ahead of them. What he and Wendelle had was a makeshift parody of the real thing.

The next morning the clouds that had hung on for weeks were gone. The air had turned cold and still as it sometimes did in February. On the drive into work Ben saw Mt. Rainier and the sight made him itch to get back up there. He’d spent months of his life on the mountain photographing specimens and generally having the time of his life. Back then he’d cared for nobody or nothing but himself and his work. It still seemed like the simplest, best way to live.

He passed three smokers huddled on a patch of gravel outside the J-wing door. They didn’t give him a glance as he hustled up the steps past them. They were on their turf, in their private zone, and he had no right to give them a critical eye.

His phone rang from the depths of his briefcase. He checked the number and saw that it was his ex-wife, Juliet, calling from San Diego. He decided to have a cup of coffee before he got into it with her—whatever “it” was. If she’d broken up with her husband, she might well want him to take

her back—she'd hinted at it before. Meanwhile he had a mountain of work to get through, and Katy had said she would drop by after her shift in the basement. He went into the department's kitchen area and nearly bumped into Wendelle. She was holding out a cup of coffee as if she had expected him at that very moment. Her hand jerked up and coffee splashed her face, her sweater, the front of her skirt. Usually in mishaps of this kind she managed to grin and make a joke of it. This time, her expression was one of shock, even hurt.

"I'm sorry, Wendelle. Are you all right?" He edged past her and grabbed a handful of paper napkins from the kitchen counter. He handed her some and crouched and began to blot up coffee. It smelled of vanilla almond, the kind she liked best. Above him, Wendelle set the cup down on the counter and took up a sponge.

"I've got it." She knelt beside him and began to sponge up the coffee. He saw that there were a few drops in her hair, but didn't have the heart to tell her.

He said, "Breathe deep. Every day is a new beginning," and she rewarded him with a weak smile. He put the sodden napkins in the garbage can and grabbed another handful.

"I'm fine here," Wendelle said. "You should get to work, Dr. Bryor."

He washed his hands and said, "I'm very sorry, Wendelle. I owe you one." She nodded without looking at him. All the way down the hall to his office he wondered if she was angry with him.

Half an hour later Wendelle brought him a flash drive containing a report she'd been working on for him. She was wearing a white lab coat over her coffee-stained clothes. It came down nearly to her ankles and she'd rolled the sleeves up into thick cuffs. She looked like a comedienne pretending to be a scientist.

"It's Dr. Mihara's but he never uses it," she said. Ben felt irritated with himself. He could have loaned her his own lab coat, although Mihara's was probably cleaner. Mihara studied absorption of radioactivity from contaminated landfills by cottonwoods. The secretaries were all fond of him—Wendelle had told him so—because he gave them gardening tips. Apparently he grew tomatoes like nobody's business.

His office phone rang and he answered it.

"I've been calling you all morning," Juliet said. "Have you been out collecting weeds?"

"I've been working. How are you?" he asked in the cautious way he always did with her. She was the mother of his child, though not a good

mother.

“I’m wanted to let you know I’m going back into rehab,” Juliet said. “I’m going to make it work this time. I want you to let Katy know. This time I mean business. It’s my New Year’s resolution.”

He was vaguely aware that Wendelle had left the office and closed the door. “This is what you said the last time,” he said. “I thought it worked then.”

“That was three years ago. I’ve had some ups and downs.” Juliet laughed, her husky smoker’s laugh, and he saw her as a young woman, glamorous in a long dark-blue dress, sitting cross-legged on the floor at a party, smoking and laughing, the most sophisticated young woman he’d ever seen. One look and she had his heart almost before he knew he had one to give.

“Did you stop going to your group?” he said. He saw no reason to disguise his anger.

“I was busy being happy. I felt good. I wanted to live my life, not waste time listening to a bunch of whiny narcissists every week. I’m done with that. I was done with it. I’ll go back to it now if I have to.”

“You’d better,” he said.

“I just want to say this is all on me. Don’t blame Lawrence. He thought his vitamins were working. It’s just that I met an old friend one day and we got to talking and next thing I knew we were sitting on the beach stoned out of our minds.” She’d had fun, he could hear it in her voice.

“That was stupid,” Ben said. He wanted to reach through the phone and shake her.

“I know,” she said in a quieter voice. “I’m remorseful. I’ll do better this time. Not just better. I’ll really get there. I’m going back on the good meds and staying off the bad ones. Tell Katy I’m thinking of her.”

“What does Lawrence say?”

“He says he’ll be there for me every step of the way.” She chuckled. “So that’s a good thing, right?”

“Right.”

There was a pause. Juliet said, “How are you? Is it raining?”

“It’s sunny. The Mountain’s out.”

“Oh. That’s one thing I do miss. I used to think of you as Mt. Rainier. Or maybe it was a hallucination I had once. You were Mt. Rainier and I was Mt. St. Helens, obviously. Kaboom.”

“Yes,” he said.

“Just try to keep Katy from hating me.”

As if he could, Ben thought. Ten years earlier, the first time he'd put Juliet into rehab he'd told Katy very little. "Mommy's sick. She has to go to a nursing home," he'd said. Both he and Juliet had tried to protect her from what they both thought of as a one-time fluky situation. "Been there, done that," Juliet had said when he brought her home. Too much had happened since that time. Katy wasn't foolable anymore.

"Take good care of yourself," he said. "I have to go. I have a lot of work to get through."

Juliet laughed. "Don't you always?"

He picked up the flash drive Wendelle had left but didn't plug it in. The final episode before his divorce had occurred when Katy was a sophomore in high school. Juliet had had trouble sleeping the night before, as she often did, and had skipped work to stay home and nap. She had pills, all kinds, stashed around the house. He knew she did, even after two stints in rehab, but at some point he grew tired of looking for them. He had work of his own to do, a career to make as best he could. When Katy came home from school that afternoon Juliet had screamed in terror and hidden in the front hall closet. Katy had tried at first to get her to come out, but eventually she'd given up. He would never forget the sound of her voice when she called him. "Mom thinks I'm an evil entity. She thinks I came from hell to take her back. She won't believe I am who I am." He'd called Becky, their old babysitter and waited on the front porch with Katy until Becky arrived. Juliet spent two days in the hospital coming down from her overdose. He called a lawyer before he brought her home.

It was too late to plug in the flash drive and go over his paper. He had a lecture at two o'clock and a departmental meeting afterward. He had hours of tension and tedium to get through before he could go home and unwind. He pulled open his top desk drawer and rummaged until he found the candy tin. He slipped it into his pocket and headed out the door. "See you on the landing at five?" Wendelle called.

"See you," he said. He just wanted to stand on the balcony by himself and think about what he should do, if anything. He hated Juliet and didn't believe a thing she said about rehab. He loved her and wanted her to succeed this time. He didn't want Katy to be hurt.

He shut the stairwell door and pulled the tin from his pocket. He had the feeling it contained a beating heart instead of mere paper and tobacco.

His lighter he had always with him. He opened the tin. It was empty, except for a fine mint-flavored dust. Like a fool he turned it upside-down and shook it, as if a cigarette might magically fall into his hand.

Wendelle. He wondered when she'd smoked it. He threw the tin into a clump of bushes down below and let himself back into the building. He would meet her at five o'clock and have it out with her. So much for the so-called support group.

He got through the lecture—lichen growth along the Toutle River. He answered questions afterward appropriately. He sat through the meeting in a haze of frustration. Someone asked his opinion of the new departmental library. He raised his hands and said, "I'm likin' it," which got a laugh.

As soon as the meeting was over he ducked down the stairwell and went out onto the landing to cool off. The sky was still light. There was a point every year in the middle of February when the lingering daylight astonished him after months of early darkness. A lone seagull flapped westward back to the Sound. He could hear the clang of lines from a boat moored in the ship canal outside the Fisheries building.

Juliet had liked sailboats, the bigger the better, but she had never been a hiker. She had gone to Mt. Rainier with him just once, on one of their first dates, to please him. He had taken her to Mowich Lake and on past it up the trail, to a place where the mountain loomed right over them, bigger than anything else in the world. Juliet had found its vastness unnerving. Ben had sat her down and explained that "mowich" meant "deer" in the Chinook jargon. He pointed out some bright orange jewel lichen on a rock and told her that it liked animal urine, and she'd said that wasn't enough incentive to get her to pull down her pants. He had brought two canteens and two candy bars. When they unwrapped them, the melted chocolate smeared their fingers. "I'm going to lie back and rest a minute," he had said, and put his smeary hand around her shoulder and pulled her down beside him. She came home with a terrible sunburn and Katy a tiny bud of life inside her.

The door opened behind him.

"Hello again," Wendelle said. She wore a long, bulky scarf over the lab coat. The scarf was moss green and appeared to be twice as big at one end as it was at the other.

"I knit this last weekend in a flurry. I knew if I didn't knit I would smoke. I wouldn't wear it to the opera, but it's nice and warm." As if she ever went to the opera, Ben thought.

She took a deep breath and let it out. "What a day. It's been a real doozy. The phone calls alone, wow."

He nodded. "Mine, too."

"At least the mountain was out."

"Yes."

Wendelle looked at her watch. “The boys will order a pizza if I’m not there by six. They’ve had pizza twice this week already.” She flipped her scarf around her neck in a getting-ready-to-go gesture. “You’re doing great. I’m doing great. If we can do this we can do anything.”

He kept his eyes on the blaze of pink sky. “But what if we can’t do this? What if it’s so hard we end up cheating?”

Wendelle stared at him. She said, “I don’t cheat. Do you?”

The door opened behind them. “Hi Dad, hi Wendelle,” Katy said. Her voice was muffled. Ben knew right away she had been crying. Juliet must have called her. His chest tightened. “Stop crying, please, you’re breaking my heart,” he wanted to say, but not with Wendelle there watching.

Wendelle pulled a packet of tissues from her purse and handed it to Katy. “What’s wrong?”

“I had to weigh the rats today,” Katie said. She stopped and swallowed.

“Breathe deep,” Wendelle said. “What about the rats?”

“I weighed the normal ones and the obese ones and recorded their data and then I had to, I had to put them in the killing chamber. Six at a time.”

“How many were there all together?” Wendelle asked, as if the exact number made a difference.

“Sixty. Thirty normal ones and thirty obese. I’ve been feeding them and changing their litter all this time, and handling them. That was part of my duties, stroking them so they wouldn’t resist being weighed and, and everything.”

Katie had long slim fingers. The rats had probably enjoyed having her stroke them, tickle them behind the ears, whatever, Ben thought. She had an affinity.

“They each have a different voice when they scream,” Katie said. “I had to stand there and listen. They hear each other and they know something horrible is happening and they try to get away.” Tears spilled down her cheeks. “If they tell me to do something like that again I’ll quit. I can’t deal with it.”

Ben felt weak in the knees, undone as always by his daughter’s tears. He knew enough about doctors to know that none of them would cry over a rat. There would be worse to come, far worse—cadavers in medical school, and then the patients. What would Katy do then? Patients died sometimes. Her mother would die one of these days and be found slumped on a bathroom floor by some future boyfriend. He needed to give Katy a shield, a magic bracelet, something.

“I’ve never been a rat person myself,” Wendelle said.

He said, “All right, Wendelle,” meaning it wasn’t all right and he wanted her to shut up and go home.

She ignored him. “I’m more of a monkey person. I saw a TV show a while ago about these monkeys in Japan. It’s a northern island where it snows, and the monkeys like to go sit in these hot springs.”

“Japan is seismically active,” Ben said. He looked at his watch. “Your boys are probably getting hungry.”

“The monkeys sit in the pools like people, with their heads sticking up and the steam wafting up around them. It looks wonderful.”

Katy had on her old down jacket with the hood up. It wouldn’t be shield enough for her. He said, “Okay, kiddo.”

“So anyway, with these monkeys, they’re trudging through the snow. It’s really, really cold. The snow’s really deep.” Wendelle hunched slightly. “And there was this grandma monkey at the back of the pack? She was practically bald. I think her mate had left her.” Wendelle’s eyes sparkled. “She was old and weak,” she said in a mournful voice. “And she had a crippled leg.” Her voice broke.

Katy snickered. Wendelle continued, quelling her own laughter, “Her grownup child monkey came back to help her but every time she grabbed onto him he fell down, too.” Katy erupted in laughter and Wendelle joined her. They laughed until tears ran down their cheeks.

Ben guessed it was the kind of story about which people said later, “You had to be there.” He was there right now, and he didn’t see the humor. He said, “That’s a terrible story. The poor monkey.”

Katy and Wendelle looked at him and laughed harder, gasping for breath.

They wound down after a couple of minutes. “Don’t look at me,” Katy said, “or I’ll start laughing again.” She wiped her eyes on her coatsleeve. “That was awful. Wow, Wendelle, you rock.” She said to Ben, “I’m going to Sonita’s to study. I’ll be home later.”

When she had gone, Wendelle said, “I have to go. Anson’s figured out where I hide the chips. He’ll eat a whole bag and expect dinner, to boot.” She drew in a deep breath. “Whew. That poor monkey.” Laughter still lurked in her voice. Her breath rose and dissipated in the cold evening air.

“Whew,” Ben echoed and his own breath rose in gratitude, free of his hot, craving heart.