

TORCHING THE DUSTIES

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The little people are climbing up the nightstand. Today they're wearing green: the women in pannier overskirts, broad-brimmed velvet hats, and square-cut bodices shimmering with beads, the men in satin knickerbockers and buckled shoes, with bunches of ribbons fluttering from their shoulders and outsized bird plumes decorating their tri-corns. They have no respect for historical accuracy, these people. It's as if some bored theatrical costume designer got drunk behind the scenes and raided the storage boxes: an early Tudor neckline here, a gondolier's jacket there, a Harlequin outfit over there. Wilma has to admire the splapdash abandon.

Up they come, hand over hand. Once level with her eyes, they link arms and dance, gracefully enough considering the obstacles in their way: the night light, the jeweller's loupe sent by her daughter Alyson – a kind gesture but not very helpful – the e-reader that magnifies type. *Gone with the Wind* is the book she's struggling with at the moment. She's lucky if she can grope her way through a single page in fifteen minutes, though happily

she can remember the main parts from the first time she read it. Maybe that's where the green fabrics on the tiny folk have come from: those famous velvet curtains that headstrong Scarlett sewed into a gown to disguise herself as respectable.

The little people twirl about, the skirts of the women billowing. They're in a good mood today: they nod at one another, they smile, they open and close their mouths as if they're speaking.

Wilma's fully aware that these apparitions aren't real. They're only symptoms: Charles Bonnet's syndrome, common enough at her age, especially in those with eye problems. She's fortunate, because her manifestations — her Chuckies, as Dr. Prasad calls them — are mostly benign. Only rarely do these people scowl, or swell out of proportion, or dissolve into fragments. Even when they're angry or sullen, their fits of ill temper surely can't have anything to do with her, since the little folk never acknowledge her; which is also — says the doctor — par for the course.

She likes the miniature Chuckies, much of the time; she wishes they would talk to her. Be careful what you wish for, said Tobias when she shared this thought with him. Number one, once they start talking they might never shut up, and number two, who knows what they'd say? He then launched into an account of one of his past affairs; long past, needless to say. The woman was ravishing, with the breasts of an Indian goddess and the marble thighs of a Greek statue — Tobias is given to archaic, overblown comparisons — but every time she opened her mouth such banalities would emerge that he would almost burst with repressed irritation. It was a protracted and stressful campaign to get her into bed: chocolates were involved, in a heart-shaped golden box, the very best quality, no expense spared. Also champagne; but this had not made her more willing, only more fatuous.

According to Tobias, it was more difficult to seduce a stupid

woman than an intelligent one because stupid women could not understand innuendo or even connect cause with effect. The fact that a pricey dinner ought to be followed, as the night the day, by the compliant opening of their peerless legs was lost on them. Wilma has not considered it tactful to suggest to him that the blank stares and cluelessness might well have been acting on the part of these beauties, who would not be averse to a free meal if all it cost them was a widening of their huge, dumb, heavily fringed eyes. She remembers confidences exchanged in ladies' powder rooms, back when they were called "powder rooms"; she remembers conspiratorial tittering, she remembers helpful how-to hints exchanged concerning the gullibility of men, in between the lipsticking of mouths and the pencilling of eyebrows. But why upset suave Tobias by revealing all this? It's too late for such inside information to be of practical use to him, and it would only tarnish his rose-tinted memories.

"I should have known you back then," Tobias says to Wilma during his chocolates-and-champagne recitals. "What sparks we would have struck!" Wilma parses this in silence: is he saying that she's intelligent, and therefore a quick lay? Or would have been then. Does he realize that a more easily offended woman might take this as an insult?

No, he does not realize. It's meant to be a gallantry. He can't help it, poor man, being partly Hungarian in origin, he claims; so Wilma lets him prattle on, divine breasts here, marble thighs there, and doesn't comment crisply on his redundancies — as she might once have done — when he relates the same seduction over and over. We have to be kind to one another in here, she tells herself. We're all we have left.

The bottom line is that Tobias can still see. She can't afford to be annoyed by the irritating physical attractions of stale-dated stunners as long as Tobias can look out the window and tell her

what's going on down there in the grounds outside the imposing front door of Ambrosia Manor. She likes to be kept in the loop, insofar as there is one.

She squints at her big-numbers clock, then moves it to the side of her head where she can get a better view. It's later than she thought, as always. She fumbles around on the night table until she locates her bridge and slips it into her mouth.

The little people, waltzing now, don't even break stride: her fake teeth are of no interest to them. Or to anyone, come to think of it, except Wilma herself and possibly Dr. Stitt, wherever he may be now. It was Dr. Stitt who'd convinced her to have several of her about-to-splinter molars Roto-Rootered out and then to get the implants installed – fourteen or fifteen years ago, that must have been – so she'd have something to attach a bridge to, supposing she needed it in the future. Which he predicted she would, because her teeth, being pre-fluoridation, would shortly be crumbling away like wet plaster.

"You'll thank me later," he'd said.

"If I live that long," she'd replied with a laugh. She'd still been at the age when she'd liked to make death into a conversational flippancy, thus showing what a lively, game old bird she was.

"You'll live forever," he'd said. Which had sounded more like a warning than a reassurance. Though maybe he was only anticipating future business from her.

But now it is later, and she does thank Dr. Stitt, silently, every morning. It would be dire to be toothless.

Smooth white smile inserted, she slides out of bed, feels with her toes for her terrycloth slippers, and shuffles her way to the

bathroom. The bathroom is still manageable: she knows where everything is in there, and it isn't as if she can't see at all. From the corners of her eyes she can still get a working impression, though the central void in her field of vision is expanding, as she's been told it would. Too much golf without sunglasses, and then there was the sailing – you get a double dose of the rays from the reflection off the water – but who knew anything then? The sun was supposed to be good for you. A healthy tan. They'd covered themselves in baby oil, fried themselves like pancakes. The dark, slick, fricasseed finish looked so good on the legs against white shorts.

Macular degeneration. *Macular* sounds so immoral, the opposite of *immaculate*. "I'm a degenerate," she used to quip right after she'd received the diagnosis. So many brave jokes, once.

Putting her clothes on is still possible as long as there aren't any buttons: two years ago, or is it longer, she weeded the buttons out of her wardrobe. There's now Velcro throughout, and zippers too, which are fine as long as they're end-stop zippers: slotting the little thingy into the other little thingy is no longer possible.

She smooths her hair, feels for stray wisps. Ambrosia Manor has its own salon complete with hairdresser, thank providence, and she relies on Sasha there to keep her trimmed. The most worrisome item during her morning preparation is her face. She can scarcely make it out in the mirror: it's like one of those face-shaped blanks that once appeared on Internet accounts when you hadn't added your picture. So no hope for the eyebrow pencil or the mascara, and hardly any for the lipstick, though on optimistic days she pretends to herself she can draw that on sightlessly. Should she chance it today? Maybe she'll look like a clown. But if so, who would care?

She would. And Tobias might. And the staff, though in a different way. If you look demented they're more likely to treat you as if you really are. So better to avoid the lipstick.

She finds the cologne bottle where it always resides – the cleaners have strict instructions not to move anything – and dabs herself behind the ears. Attar of Roses, with an undertone of something else, a citrus. She breathes in deeply: thank heavens she can still smell, unlike some of the others. It's when you can't smell any more that your appetite goes and you dwindle to nothing.

As she turns away she does manage to catch a glimpse of herself, or of someone: a woman disconcertingly like her own mother as she was in old age, white hair, crumpled tissue-paper skin and all; though, as the eyes are sideways, more mischievous. Possibly more malevolent as well, like an elf gone to the bad. That sideways glance lacks the candour of a full frontal gaze, a thing she will never see again.

Here comes Tobias, punctual as ever. They always have breakfast together.

He knocks first, like the courtly gentleman he purports to be. The time you should wait before entering a lady's chamber, according to Tobias, is the time it would take the other man to dive under the bed. Appearances should be preserved when it comes to wives, several of whom have been undergone by Tobias. They were cheaters every one, though he doesn't hold it against them any more because it would be hard to respect a woman who wasn't desired by other men. He never let the wives know he knew, and he always enticed them back and made sure they were worshipping him again before giving them a sudden boot out the door, with no explanation, because why lower himself by

accusing them? A firmly closed door was more dignified. That was the way to deal with wives.

In the case of mistresses, however, spontaneous emotion is likely to take over. A suspicious lover infuriated by jealousy and his own wounded honour is tempted to barge right in without knocking, and then there will be bloodshed, right there on the spot, with a knife or bare hands, or else in the form of duels, later.

"Did you ever kill anyone?" Wilma asked once, during this recitation.

"My lips are sealed," Tobias replied solemnly. "But a wine bottle – a *full* wine bottle – can crush in a skull, at the temple. And I was a crack shot."

Wilma kept her mouth still: she can't see Tobias, but he can see her, and a smirk would hurt him. She finds these kinds of details rococo, like the vanished gold chocolate boxes, and suspects Tobias of making them up, not out of whole cloth but from creaky, ornate operettas and once-fashionable continental novels and the reminiscences of dandyish uncles. He must think that naive, bland, North American Wilma finds him decadent and glamorous, quite the *roué*; he must think she swallows this stuff whole. But maybe he believes it himself.

"Come in," she says now. A blob appears in the doorway. She regards it sideways, sniffs the air. It's Tobias for sure, it's his aftershave: Brut, if she's not mistaken. Has her sense of smell become sharper as her eyesight has faded? Probably not, though it's comforting to think so. "How lovely to see you, Tobias," she says.

"Dear lady, you are radiant," says Tobias. He advances, plants a kiss of greeting upon her cheek with his thin, dry lips. A few bristles: he hasn't shaved yet, just splashed on the Brut. Like herself, he must be worried about how he smells: that acid, stale

odour of aging bodies so noticeable when all the Ambrosiads are assembled in the dining room, their base note of slow decay and involuntary leakage papered over with applied layers of scent – delicate florals on the women, bracing spices on the men, the blooming rose or brusque pirate image inside each of them still fondly cherished.

“I hope you slept well,” says Wilma.

“I had such a dream!” says Tobias. “Purple. Maroon. It was very sexual, with music.”

His dreams are frequently very sexual, with music. “It ended well, I hope?” she says. She’s overusing the word *hope* today.

“Not very well,” says Tobias. “I committed a murder. It woke me up. What shall we have today? The oat creations, or the bran ones?” He never pronounces the actual names of the dry breakfast cereals in Wilma’s repertoire: he finds them banal. Soon he will make a remark about the absence of good croissants in this place, or indeed of any croissants whatsoever.

“You choose,” she says. “I’ll have a mixture.” Bran for the bowels, oats for the cholesterol, though the experts keep changing their minds about that. She hears him rummaging: he’s familiar with her small kitchenette, he knows where the packages are kept. Here at the Manor, lunch and dinner are served in the dining room, but they have their breakfasts in their own apartments; those of them in the Early Assisted Living wing, that is. In the Advanced Living wing, things are different. She hasn’t wished to imagine exactly how different.

There’s a clanking of plates, a rattle of cutlery: Tobias is setting out their breakfast on the small table over by the window. He’s a dark shape silhouetted against the bright glaring square of daylight.

“I’ll get the milk,” says Wilma. She can do that much, at least:

open the mini-fridge door, locate the cool plasti-coated cardboard oblong, carry it to the table without spilling.

“It’s done,” says Tobias. Now he’s grinding the coffee, a miniature buzz-saw whirr. He doesn’t tell the story today about how much better it would be to grind the coffee in a hand grinder, a red one with a brass handle, as was the custom in his youth, or possibly in the youth of his mother. In somebody’s youth. Wilma is familiar with this red, brass-handled coffee grinder. It’s as if she once owned it herself, though she never did. Yet she feels its loss; it’s become part of her inventory, it’s joined the other objects that she has in fact lost.

“We should have eggs,” says Tobias. Sometimes they do, though the last occasion was a minor disaster. Tobias boiled the eggs but not enough, so Wilma made a shambles of hers, and it squirted all over her front. Taking the top off the shell is a precise operation: she can no longer aim the spoon with accuracy. Next time she’ll suggest an omelette, though that may be beyond the culinary skills of Tobias. Maybe if she directs him, step by step? No, too hazardous: she wouldn’t want him to get burned. Something in the microwave, perhaps; some baked French toast affair. A cheese strata; she used to make those, when she had a family. But how to find a recipe? And then follow it. Maybe there are audio recipes?

They sit at the table, munching their cereals, which are brittle and cindery and take a lot of chewing. The sound inside her head, thinks Wilma, is of crisp snow underfoot, or of Styrofoam packing peanuts. Maybe she should switch to a softer cereal option, like instant porridge. But Tobias might disdain her for even mentioning such a thing: he scorns anything instant. Bananas: she’ll try for bananas. They grow on trees, or plants, or bushes. He can’t possibly object to bananas.

"Why do they make them into circles?" Tobias says, not for the first time. "These oat things."

"It's the shape of an O," Wilma says. "O for oat. It's a sort of pun." Tobias shakes his blobby head against the light.

"A croissant would be preferable," he says. "These also are made in a shape, a crescent, from when the Moors almost captured Vienna. I do not see why . . ." But he breaks off.

"Something is happening at the gate."

Wilma has binoculars, sent to her by her Alyson for viewing birds, though the birds she had managed to view were mainly starlings and the binoculars aren't of use to her any more.

Her other daughter sends mostly slippers; Wilma has a glut of slippers. Her son sends postcards. He doesn't seem to grasp the fact that she can no longer read his handwriting.

She keeps the binoculars on the windowsill, and Tobias wields them to survey the grounds: the curved driveway; the lawn with its clipped shrubs – she remembers those from when she first came here, three years ago – the fountain with a replica of a famous Belgian statue, a naked angel-faced boy urinating into a stone basin; the high brick wall; the imposing gateway with its overhead arch and its two ostentatious, depressed-looking stone lions. The Manor was once a mansion in the countryside, back when people built mansions, back when there was a countryside. Hence the lions, most likely.

Sometimes there's nothing to be seen by Tobias except the usual comings and goings. Every day there will be visitors – "civilians," Tobias calls them – marching briskly from the guest car park towards the main door, bearing a potted begonia or geranium, hauling a young, reluctant grandchild, summoning up

false cheer, hoping to get this rich-old-relative thing over with as fast as possible. There will be staff, both medical and cooking/cleaning, who drive in through the gate and then around to the staff parking and the side doors. There will be snazzily painted delivery vans bringing groceries and washed linens, and sometimes flower arrangements ordered up by guilty family members. The less dapper vehicles, such as the garbage collection trucks, have an ignominious back-entrance gate of their own.

Every once in a while there's a drama. An inhabitant of the Advanced Living wing will escape despite all precautions, and will be seen wandering aimlessly, in pyjamas or partly clothed, peeing here and there – an activity welcome in a cherubic fountain ornament but not acceptable in a decrepit human being – and there will be a mild-mannered but efficient chase to surround the errant one and lead him back inside. Or her: sometimes it's a her, though the men seem to take more initiative in escaping.

Or an ambulance will arrive and a brace of paramedics will hurry in, carrying their equipment – "like the war," Tobias once remarked, though he must have been referring to films because he hasn't been in any wars that Wilma is aware of – and then after a while they will exit at a more leisurely pace, wheeling a shape on a gurney. You can't tell from here, says Tobias as he peers through the binoculars, whether the body is alive or dead. "Maybe you can't even tell from down there," he's been known to add as a sepulchral joke.

"What is it?" Wilma asks now. "Is it an ambulance?" There haven't been sirens: she's sure of that, she still hears quite well. It's at times like this that her disability is most discouraging

to her. She'd rather see for herself; she doesn't trust Tobias to interpret; she suspects him of holding things back. Protecting her, he'd call it. But she doesn't want to be protected in that way.

Perhaps in response to her frustration, a phalanx of little men forms up on the windowsill. No women this time, it's more like a march-past. The society of the tiny folk is socially conservative: they don't let women into their marches. Their clothing is still green, but a darker green, not so festive. Those in the front rows have practical metal helmets. In the ranks behind them the costumes are more ceremonial, with gold-hemmed capes and green fur hats. Will there be miniature horses later on in the parade? It's been known to happen.

Tobias doesn't answer at once. Then he says, "Not an ambulance. Some sort of picketing. It looks organized."

"Maybe there's a strike," says Wilma. But who among the workers at Ambrosia Manor would be striking? The cleaners would have the most reason, they're underpaid; but they're also the least likely, being illegal at worst, and at best in strong need of the money.

"No," says Tobias slowly. "I don't think it's a strike. Three of our security are talking with them. There's a cop, as well. Two cops."

It startles Wilma whenever Tobias uses slang words like *cop*. They don't go with his standard verbal ensemble, which is much more pressed and deliberate. But he might permit himself to say "cop" because it's archaic. He once said, "Okey-dokey" and at another time, "Scram." Maybe he gets these words out of books: dusty second-hand murder mysteries and the like. Though who is Wilma to make fun of him? Now that she can no longer fool around on the Internet, Wilma has lost track of how people talk. Real people, younger people. Not that she'd fooled around on

the Internet very much. She was never interactive, she was just a lurker, and she was only beginning to get the hang of it before her eyes started to go.

She'd once said to her husband — when he was still alive, not during that year-long dream-nightmare period of mourning when she'd continued to talk to him after his death — that she'd have *lurker* written on her tombstone. Because hadn't she spent most of her life just watching? It feels like that now, though it didn't at the time, because she'd been so busy with this and that. Her degree had been in History — a safe-enough thing to study while waiting to get married — but a fat lot of good all that History is doing her at the moment, because she can't remember much of it. Three political leaders who died having sex, that's about it. Genghis Khan, Clemenceau, and what's-his-name. It will come to her later.

"What are they doing?" she asks. The marchers on the windowsill have been heading to the right, but suddenly they wheel around and quickstep left. They've added lances with glittering points, and some of them have drums. She tries not to be too distracted by them, though it's such a pleasure to be able to see anything in such intricate and concrete detail. But Tobias doesn't like it if he senses that her attention is not fully focused on him. She wrenches herself back to the solid, invisible present. "Are they coming in here?"

"They're standing around," says Tobias. "Loitering," he adds disapprovingly. "Young people." He's of the opinion that all young people are lazy freeloaders and should get jobs. The fact that there are few jobs available for them doesn't register with him. If there are no jobs, he says, they should create some.

"How many are there?" asks Wilma. If only a dozen or so it's nothing serious.

"I'd say about fifty," says Tobias. "They've got signs. Not the cops, the other ones. Now they're trying to block the Linens for Life van. Look, they're standing in front of it."

He's forgotten she can't look. "What's on the signs?" she asks. Blocking the Linens for Life van is not compassionate: today is the day the beds are changed, for those who don't need extra linen services and a rubber sheet. The Advanced Life wing is on a more frequent schedule; twice a day, she's heard. Ambrosia Manor isn't cheap, and the relatives would not take kindly to ulcerating rashes on their loved ones. They want their money's worth, or so they'll claim. What they most likely want in truth is a rapid and blame-free finish for the old fossils. Then they can tidy up and collect the remnants of the net worth — the legacy, the leftovers, the remains — and tell themselves they deserve it.

"Some of the signs have pictures of babies," says Tobias. "Chubby, smiling babies. Some say *Time to Go*."

"Time to go?" says Wilma. "Babies? What does that mean? This isn't a maternity hospital." About the opposite, she thinks caustically: it's an exit from life, not an entrance. But Tobias doesn't answer.

"The cops are letting the van through," he says.

Good, thinks Wilma. Change of sheets for all. We won't get so smelly.

Tobias leaves for his morning nap — he'll come by again at noon to lead her to the dining room for lunch — and, after a few false starts and a cheeseboard knocked to the floor, Wilma locates the radio she keeps on her kitchenette counter and switches it on. It's specially made for those of diminished vision — the on-off and the tuning dial are the only buttons, and the whole radio is sheathed in grip-friendly, waterproof lime-green plastic.

Another gift from Alyson on the West Coast, who worries that she's not doing enough for Wilma. She would surely visit more frequently if it weren't for the teenaged twins with unspecified issues and the demands of her own career in a large international accounting firm. Wilma must call her later today to assure her that she herself is still alive, at which time the twins will be forced to say hello to her. How tedious they must find these calls, and why not? She finds them tedious herself.

Perhaps the strike, or whatever it is, will be on the local news. She can listen while washing the breakfast dishes, which she does fairly well if she goes slowly. In case of broken glass she'll have to connect with Services on the intercom and then wait for Katia, her personal on-call cleaner, to arrive and sweep up the damage, tut-tutting and lamenting in her Slavic accent all the while. Splinters of glass can be treacherously sharp, and it would be unwise of Wilma to risk a cut, especially since she's temporarily forgotten which bathroom drawer she keeps the Band-Aids in.

Blood puddles on the floor would give the wrong signal to the management. They don't really believe she's able to function on her own; they're just waiting for an excuse to slot her into Advanced Living and grab the rest of her furniture and her good china and silver, which they'll sell to support their profit margin. That's the deal, she signed it; it was the price of entry, the price of comfort, the price of safety. The price of not being a burden. She's kept two of her nice antiques, the little *escritoire* and the dressing table — the last relics of her former household. The rest went to her three children, who had no use for such things really — not their taste — and no doubt stuck them all in the cellar, but who were reverentially grateful.

Upbeat radio music, jovial chit-chat between the male host and the female one, more music, the weather. Heat wave in the north, flooding out west, more tornadoes. A hurricane heading

for New Orleans, another one pummelling the eastern seaboard, the usual thing for June. But in India it's the opposite story: the monsoons have failed and there are worries about a coming famine. Australia is still gripped by drought, with, however, a deluge in the Cairns area, where crocodiles are invading the streets. Forest fires in Arizona, and in Poland, and also in Greece. But right here all is well: it's a good moment for the beach, grab some rays, don't forget the sunblock, though watch out for storm cells popping up later. Have a good day!

Here's the main news. First, a regime topple in Uzbekistan; second, a mass shooting in a shopping mall in Denver, the doubtless hallucinating assailant then killed by a sniper. But third – Wilma listens harder – on the outskirts of Chicago, an old-age home has been set on fire by a mob wearing baby masks; and a second one near Savannah, Georgia, and a third one in Akron, Ohio. One of the homes was state-run, but the other two were private institutions with their own security, and the inhabitants of them, some of whom were fried to a crisp, were not poor.

It was not a coincidence, says the commentator. It was coordinated arson: a group naming itself Artern has claimed responsibility on a website whose account-holders the authorities are attempting to track down. The families of the elderly dead people are naturally – says the newscaster – in shock. An interview with a weeping, incoherent relative commences. Wilma switches it off. There was no mention of the gathering outside Ambrosia Manor, but it's probably too small and non-violent to have registered.

Artern. That's what it sounded like: they didn't spell it. She'll ask Tobias to watch the television news – an activity he claims to dislike, though he's always doing it – and tell her more. She ignores the festival of little people that's going on in the vicinity

of the microwave, a pink and orange theme with multiple frills and grotesquely high beflowered wigs, and goes to lie down for her morning nap. She used to hate naps, and she still does: she doesn't want to miss anything. But she can't get through the day without them.

Tobias leads her down the hallway towards the dining room. Theirs is the second sitting: Tobias considers it gauche to lunch before one. He's walking more quickly than usual and she asks him to slow down. "Of course, dear lady," he says, squeezing her elbow, which he's using to propel her. Once he'd slipped his arm around her waist – she still does have a waist, more or less, unlike some of the others – but that had unbalanced him, and the two of them had almost toppled over. He's not a tall man, and he's had a hip replacement. He needs to watch his equilibrium.

Wilma doesn't know what he looks like, not any more. She's probably embellished him; made him younger, less withered, more alert. More hair on top.

"I have so much to tell you," he says, too close to her ear. She wants to tell him not to shout, it's not as if she's deaf. "I have learned they are not strikers, these people. They are not retreating, they have increased in number." This turn of events has energized him; he's almost humming.

In the dining room he pulls out her chair, guides her into it, pushes the chair back in just as her bottom is descending. It's an almost-lost art, she thinks, this graceful ladies' chair push, like shoeing horses or fletching arrows. Then he sits down opposite her, an obscure shape against the eggshell wallpaper. She turns her head sideways, gets a vague impression of his face, with its dark, intense eyes. She remembers them as intense.

"What's on the menu?" she says. They're given a printed

menu for each meal, on a single sheet of paper with an embossed, fraudulent crest. Smooth, creamy paper, like the theatre programs of a former era, before they became flimsy and cluttered up with advertisements.

"Mushroom soup," he says. Usually he dwells on the daily offerings, disparaging them gently while reminiscing about gourmet banquets from his past and reflecting that no one knows how to cook properly any more, especially not veal, but today he skips all that. "I have been delving into it," he says. "In the Activity Centre. I have been trolling."

He means he's been using the computer and searching the Internet for clues. They aren't allowed personal computers in Ambrosia, the official explanation being that the system isn't up to speed. Wilma suspects the real reason is that they're afraid the women will fall victim to online scammers and start up unsuitable romances and then piddle away their money, and the men will be sucked into the Internet porn and then get overheated and have heart attacks, thus causing Ambrosia Manor to be sued by indignant relatives who will claim the staff ought to have monitored the old boys more carefully.

So no individual computers; but they can use those in the Activity Centre, where controls can be put on access, as for prepubescent children. Though management tries to steer the inhabitants away from the addictive screens: they'd rather have the customers fumbling around in mounds of wet clay or gluing geometric shapes of cardboard into patterns; or playing bridge, which is supposed to delay the onset of dementia. Though, as Tobias says, with bridge players how can you tell? Wilma, who once played a lot of bridge, declines to comment.

Shoshanna, the occupational therapist, does the rounds at dinnertime, pestering the clientele about everyone's need to express themselves through Art. When urged to participate in

the finger-painting or pasta-necklace-making or whatever other bright idea Shoshanna has cooked up to give them all a reason for staying on the planet for another sunrise, Wilma pleads her limited sight. Shoshanna once upped the ante with some yarn about blind potters, several of whom had achieved international recognition for their beautiful hand-thrown ceramics, and wouldn't Wilma like to expand her horizons by giving it a try? But Wilma froze her out. "Old dog." She smiled with her hard, false teeth. "No new tricks."

As for the Internet porn, some of the crafty lechers have cellphones and treat themselves to the full freakshow that way. This is according to Tobias, who gossips with anyone in sight when he isn't gossiping with Wilma. He claims he himself doesn't bother with the tawdry and inelegant cellphone porn, because the women on view are too tiny. There's a limit, he says, as to how much you can shrink the female body without turning it into an ant with mammary glands. Wilma doesn't entirely believe this tale of abstinence, though maybe he's not lying: he just might find his own invented sagas more erotic than anything a mere phone can come up with, and they have the added virtue of starring him.

"What else did you learn?" Wilma asks. All around them is the clanking of spoons on china, the murmur of thinning voices, an insect vibration.

"They say it's their turn," says Tobias. "That's why they put *Our Turn* on the signs."

"Oh," says Wilma. Light dawns: *Artern. Our Turn*. She'd misheard. "Their turn at what?"

"At life, they say. I heard one of them on the television news; naturally they're being interviewed all over the place. They say we've had our turn, those our age; they say we messed it up. Killing the planet with our own greed and so forth."

"They have a point there," says Wilma. "We did mess it up. Not on purpose, though."

"They're only socialists," says Tobias. He has a dim opinion of socialists; everyone he doesn't like is a socialist in some disguise or other. "Just lazy socialists, always trying to grab what others worked for."

Wilma has never been sure how Tobias made his money, enough money to be able to afford not only all the ex-wives, but his quite large suite in Ambrosia Manor. She suspects he was involved in some dubious business deals in countries in which all business deals are dubious, but he's cagey about his earlier financial life. All he'll say is that he owned several companies in international trade and made sound investments, though he doesn't call himself rich. But then rich people never call themselves rich: they call themselves comfortable.

Wilma herself was comfortable, back when her husband was alive. She's probably still comfortable. She no longer pays much attention to her savings: a private management company takes care of that. Alyson keeps an eye on them, as much as she can from the West Coast. Ambrosia Manor hasn't kicked Wilma out onto the street, so the bills must be getting paid.

"What do they want from us?" she asks, trying not to sound peevish. "Those people with the signs. For heaven's sakes. It's not as if we can *do* anything."

"They say they want us to make room. They want us to move over. Some of the signs say that: *Move Over*."

"That means *die*, I suppose," says Wilma. "Are there any rolls today?" Sometimes there are the most delicious Parker House rolls, fresh from the oven. As a way of helping their clients feel at home, the Ambrosia Manor dieticians make a conscious effort to re-create what they imagine were the menus of seventy or eighty years ago. Macaroni and cheese, soufflés, custards, rice pudding,

Jell-O dolloped with whipped cream. These menus have the added virtue of being soft, and thus no threat to wobbly teeth.

"No," says Tobias. "No rolls. Now they are bringing the chicken pot pies."

"Do you think they're dangerous?" says Wilma.

"Not here," says Tobias. "But in other countries they are burning things down. This group. They say they are international. They say millions are rising up."

"Oh, they're always burning things down in other countries," Wilma says lightly. *If I live that long*, she hears herself saying to her former dentist. It's the same throwaway tone: *None of this can possibly ever happen to me*.

Idiot, she tells herself. Wishful thinking. But she simply can't bring herself to feel threatened, or not by the foolishness outside the gates.

In the afternoon Tobias invites himself for tea. His own room is on the other side of the building. It has a view out over the back grounds with their gravelled walks, their frequent park benches for the easily winded, their tasteful gazebos for shelter from the sun, and their croquet lawn for leisurely games. Tobias can see all of this, which he has described to Wilma in gloating detail, but he can't see the front gate. Also he has no binoculars. He's here in her apartment for the vista.

"There are more of them now," he says. "Maybe a hundred. Some are wearing masks."

"Masks?" Wilma asks, intrigued. "You mean, like Halloween?" She pictures goblins and Draculas, fairy princesses, witches and Elvis Presleys. "I thought masks are illegal. At public gatherings."

"Not quite like Halloween," says Tobias. "Masks of babies."

"Are they pink?" says Wilma. She feels a slight tremor of fear. Baby masks on a mob: it's disconcerting. A horde of life-sized, potentially violent babies. Out of control.

There are twenty or thirty small people holding hands, circling what is most likely the sugar bowl: Tobias likes sugar in his tea. The women are wearing skirts that appear to be made out of overlapping rose petals, the men shimmer in iridescent peacock-feather blue. How exquisite they are, how embroidered! It's hard to believe they aren't real; they're so physical, so finely detailed.

"Some of them," says Tobias. "Some are yellow. Some brown."

"They must be trying for an inter-racial theme," says Wilma. Stealthily she inches her hand across the table towards the dancers: if only she could catch one, hold it between thumb and forefinger like a beetle. Maybe then they'd acknowledge her, if only by kicking and biting. "Do they have baby outfits on, as well?" Diapers maybe, or onesies with slogans on them, or bibs with incongruously vicious images such as pirates and zombies. Those had been all the rage, once.

"No, just the faces," says Tobias. The tiny dancers won't give Wilma the satisfaction of allowing her fingers to pass through them, thus demonstrating their non-reality once and for all. Instead they curve their dance line to evade her, so perhaps they're aware of her after all. Perhaps they're teasing, the little rascals.

Don't be silly, she tells herself. It's a syndrome. Charles Bonnard. It's well documented, other people have it. No, Bonnet: Bonnard was a painter, she's almost sure of that. Or is it Bonnivert?

"Now they're blocking another van," says Tobias. "The chicken delivery." The chickens come from a local organic and free-range farm, as do the eggs. Barney and Dave's Lucky

Cluckies. They always come on Thursdays. No chickens and no eggs; that might get serious in the long run, thinks Wilma. There will be querulousness inside the walls. Voices will be raised. *This is not what I paid for.*

"Are there any cops?" she says.

"I don't see any," says Tobias.

"We need to ask at the front desk," says Wilma. "We need to complain! They ought to be cleared away, or something — those people."

"I already asked," says Tobias. "They don't know any more about it than we do."

The evening's dinner is more vivacious than usual: more chattering, more clattering, more sudden bursts of reedy laughter. The dining room appears to be short-staffed, which on a normal evening might result in increased peevishness, but as things are there's an atmosphere of subdued carnival. A tray is dropped, a glass shatters, a cheer goes up. The clients are warned to be aware of the spilled ice cubes, which are barely visible and slippery. We wouldn't want any broken hips, now, would we? says the voice of Shoshanna, who is wielding the microphone.

Tobias orders a bottle of wine for the table. "Let's live it up," he says. "Here's looking at you!" Glasses clink. He and Wilma are not a twosome tonight, they're at a table for four. Tobias proposed it, and Wilma surprised herself by agreeing: if there's no safety in numbers, at least there's the illusion of safety. If they stick together they can keep the unknown at bay.

The other two at the table are Jo-Anne and Noreen. Too bad there can't be another man, thinks Wilma, but in this age group the women outnumber the men four to one. According to Tobias, women hang around longer because they're less capable

of indignation and better at being humiliated, for what is old age but one long string of indignities? What person of integrity would put up with it? Sometimes, when the bland food gets too much for him or when his arthritis is acting up, he threatens to blow his head off, if he could only lay his hands on the necessary weapon, or slit his wrists in the bath with a razor blade, like an honourable Roman. When Wilma protests, he calms her: that's just the morbid Hungarian in him, all Hungarian men talk like that. If you're a Hungarian man you can't let a day pass without a suicide threat, though – he'll joke – not nearly enough of them follow through.

Why not the Hungarian women? Wilma has asked him several times. Why is that they too are not razoring their wrists in the tub? She enjoys re-asking questions because the answers are sometimes the same, sometimes not. Tobias has had at least three birthplaces and has attended four universities, all at once. His passports are numerous.

"The Hungarian women aren't up to it," he said once. "They never know when it's game over, in love, life, or death. They flirt with the undertaker, they flirt with the guy shovelling the dirt onto their coffin. They never give up."

Neither Jo-Anne nor Noreen is Hungarian, but they too are displaying impressive flirting skills. If they had feather fans they'd be hitting Tobias with them, if bouquets they'd be tossing him a rosebud, if they had ankles they'd be flashing them. As it is they're simpering. Wilma longs to tell them to act their age, but what would it be like if they did?

She knows Jo-Anne from the swimming pool. She tries to do a few laps twice a week, manageable as long as someone helps her in and out and guides her to the change room. And she must have met Noreen before at some group function like a concert: she recognizes that pigeon-shaped laugh, a tremulous coo. She has no

idea what either of them looks like, though she notes via her side vision that they're both wearing magenta.

Tobias is far from unhappy to have a whole new female audience. Already he's told Noreen that she's radiant tonight, and has hinted to Jo-Anne that she wouldn't be safe in the dark with him if he were still the man he once was. "If youth only knew, if age only could," he says. Is that the sound of hand-kissing? Gigglings come from the two of them, or what would formerly have been gigglings. Closer to squawking, or cluckings, or wheezings: sudden gusts of air through autumn leaves. The vocal cords shorten, Wilma thinks sadly. The lungs shrink. Everything gets drier.

How does she feel about the flirtation that's going on over the clam chowder? Is she jealous, does she want Tobias all to herself? Not all of him, no; she wouldn't go so far. She has no desire to roll around in the metaphorical hay with him, because she has no desire. Or not much. But she does want his attention. Or rather she wants him to want her attention, though he seems to be doing well enough with the two inferior substitutes on hand. The three of them are bantering away like something in a Regency Romance, and she has to listen because there's nothing to distract her: the little people haven't shown up.

She tries to summon them. *Come out*, she commands silently, fixing what would once have been her gaze in the direction of the artificial flower arrangement in the centre of the table – top quality, says Tobias, you can hardly tell the difference. It's yellow, which is about all she can say for it.

Nothing happens. No manikins appear. She can control neither their appearances nor their disappearances; which seems unfair, since they're products of nobody's brain but hers.

The clam chowder is succeeded by a ground beef casserole with mushrooms, followed in turn by rice pudding with raisins. Wilma concentrates on eating: she must locate the plate out of the corners of her eyes, she must direct the fork as if it's a steam shovel: she must approach, swivel, acquire payload, lift. This takes effort. At long last the cookie plate descends, shortbread and bars as usual. There's a brief glimpse of seven or eight ladies in off-white frilly petticoats, a can-can flash of their silk-stockinged legs, but they morph back into shortbread cookies almost immediately.

"What's happening outside?" she says into a gap left in the web of compliments that's been spinning itself among the others. "At the main gate?"

"Oh," says Noreen gaily, "we were trying to forget all that!"

"Yes," says Jo-Anne. "It's too depressing. We're living for the moment, aren't we, Tobias?"

"Wine, women, and song!" Noreen announces. "Bring on the belly dancers!" Both of them cackle.

Surprisingly, Tobias does not laugh. Instead he takes Wilma's hand; she feels his dry, warm, boney fingers enclosing hers. "More are gathering. The situation is more grave than we at first apprehended, dear lady," he says. "It would be unwise to underestimate it."

"Oh, we weren't *underestimating* it," says Jo-Anne, striving to keep her conversational soap bubbles in the air. "We were just *ignoring* it!"

"Ignorance is bliss!" chirps Noreen; but they're no longer cutting any ice with Tobias. He's dumped his *Scarlet Pimpernel* foppish-aristocrat frippery and has swung into his Man of Action mode.

"We must expect the worst," he says. "They will not catch us napping. Now, dear lady, I will escort you home."

She breathes out with relief: he's come back to her. He'll take her as far as the door of her apartment; he does this every evening, faithful as clockwork. What has she been afraid of? That he'd leave her to fumble her way ignominiously, deserted in full view of all, and scamper off into the shrubbery with Noreen and Jo-Anne to commit threefold sexual acts with them in a gazebo? No chance of that: the security men would scoop them up in no time flat and frog-march them into the Advanced Living wing. They patrol the grounds at night, with flashlights and beagles.

"Are we ready?" Tobias asks her. Wilma's heart warms to him. *We*. So much for Jo-Anne and Noreen, who are, once again, merely *they*. She leans on him as he takes her elbow, and together they make what she's free to picture as a dignified exit.

"But what is the worst?" she says to him in the elevator. "And how can we prepare for it? You don't think they'll burn us down! Not here! The police would stop them."

"We cannot count on the police," says Tobias. "Not any more."

Wilma is about to protest — *But they have to protect us, it's their job!* — but she stops herself. If the police were all that concerned, they would have acted by now. They're holding back.

"These people will be cautious, at first," says Tobias. "They will proceed by small steps. We still have a little time. You must not worry, you must sleep well, to build up your strength. I have my preparations to make. I will not fail."

It's strange how reassuring she finds this snippet of melodrama: Tobias taking charge, having a deep plan, outfoxing Fate. He's only a feeble old man with arthritis, she tells herself. But she's reassured and soothed all the same.

Outside her apartment they exchange their standard peck on the cheek, and Wilma listens while he limps away down the hall. Is this regret she's feeling? Is this a fluttering of ancient warmth?

Does she really want him to enfold her in his stringy arms, make his way in towards her skin through the Velcro and zippers, attempt some ghostly, creaky, arthropod-like reprise of an act he must have committed effortlessly hundreds, indeed thousands of times in the past? No. It would be too painful for her, the silent comparisons that would be going on: the luscious, chocolate-sampling mistresses, the divine breasts, the marble thighs. Then only her.

You believed you could transcend the body as you aged, she tells herself. You believed you could rise above it, to a serene, non-physical realm. But it's only through ecstasy you can do that, and ecstasy is achieved through the body itself. Without the bone and sinew of wings, no flight. Without that ecstasy you can only be dragged further down by the body, into its machinery. Its rusting, creaking, vengeful, brute machinery.

When Tobias is out of earshot she closes the door and embarks on her bedtime routine. Shoes replaced by slippers: best to take that slowly. Then the clothes must come off, one Velcro tab after another, and must be arranged on hangers, more or less, and placed in the closet. Underwear into the laundry hamper, and none too soon: Katia will deal with that tomorrow. Peeing accomplished with not too much effort, toilet flushed. Vitamin supplements and other pills washed down with ample water, because having them dissolve in the esophagus is unpleasant. Death by choking avoided.

She also avoids falling down in the shower. She takes hold of the grips and doesn't overuse the slippery shower gel. Drying is best done sitting down: many have come to grief attempting to dry their own feet while standing up. She makes a mental note to call Services for an appointment at the salon to get her toenails trimmed, which is another thing she can no longer do herself.

Her nightgown, clean and folded, has been placed ready on her bed by silent hands at work behind the scenes during the dinner hour, and the bed itself has been turned down. There's always a chocolate on the pillow. She gropes for it and finds it, and peels off the foil paper, and eats the chocolate greedily. It's the details that differentiate Ambrosia Manor from its rivals, said the brochure. Cherish yourself. You deserve it.

Next morning Tobias is late for breakfast. She senses this lateness, then confirms it with the talking clock in the kitchen, another gift from Alyson: you hit the button – if you can find the button – and it tells you the time in the voice of a condescending grade two arithmetic teacher. "It is eight thirty-two. Eight thirty-two." Then it's eight thirty-three, then eight thirty-four, and with every minute Wilma can feel her blood pressure shooting up. Maybe something has happened to him? A stroke, a heart attack? Such things occur in Ambrosia Manor every week: a high net worth is no defence against them.

Finally, here he is. "There is news," he tells her, almost before he's inside the door. "I have been to the Dawn Yoga Class."

Wilma laughs. She can't help herself. It's the idea of Tobias doing yoga, or even being in the same room with yoga. What had he chosen to wear for this event? Tobias and sweatpants don't compute. "I understand your mirth, dear lady," says Tobias. "This yoga business is not what I would choose, given other pathways. But I have made a sacrifice of myself in the interests of obtaining information. In any case there was no class, because there was no instructor. So the ladies and I – we could chat."

Wilma sobers up. "Why wasn't there any instructor?" she asks.

"They have blockaded the gate," Tobias announces. "They refuse to let anyone in."

"What's happened to the police? And the Manor security?"

Blockaded: this is not frivolous. Blockades require heavy lifting.

"They are nowhere in sight," says Tobias.

"Come in and sit down," says Wilma. "Let's have some coffee."

"You are right," says Tobias. "We must think."

They sit at the little table and drink their coffee and eat their oat cereal; there's no more bran, and – Wilma realizes – scant hope of getting any. I must appreciate this cereal, she thinks as it crunches inside her head. I must savour this moment. The little people are agitated today, they're whirling around in a fast waltz, they sparkle all over with silver and gold sequins, they're putting on a grand show for her; but she can't attend to them right now because there are more serious matters to be considered.

"Are they letting anyone out?" she asks Tobias. "Through the blockade." What was that book she read about the French Revolution? Versailles blockaded, with the royal family stewing and fretting inside.

"Only the staff," says Tobias. "They are more or less ordering them to go. Not the inhabitants. We have to stay. So they appear to have decreed."

Wilma thinks about this. So the staff are allowed to leave, but once out, they won't be readmitted. "And no delivery vans," she says, a statement rather than a question. "Such as chickens."

"Naturally not," says Tobias.

"They want to starve us to death," she says. "In that case."

"It would appear so," says Tobias.

"We could disguise ourselves," says Wilma. "To get out. As, well, as cleaners. Muslim cleaners, with our heads covered up. Or something."

"I doubt very much that we would pass unchallenged, dear

lady," Tobias says. "It is a question of the generations. Time leaves its markings."

"There can be some quite old cleaners," Wilma says hopefully.

"It is a matter of degree," says Tobias. He sighs, or is it a wheeze? "But do not despair. I am not without resources."

Wilma wants to say that she is not despairing, but she refrains because it could get too complicated. She can't pinpoint exactly what it is that she's feeling. Not despair, not at all. And not hope. She only wants to see what will happen next. It certainly won't be the daily routine.

Before doing anything else, Tobias insists that they fill up Wilma's bathtub, as a provision for the future. His own bathtub is already filled. Sooner or later the electricity will be cut, he says, and then the water will cease to flow; it is only a matter of time.

Then he makes an inventory of the supplies in Wilma's kitchen and mini-fridge. There isn't much because she keeps no lunch or dinner staples on hand. Why would she, why would any of them? They never cook those meals.

"I've got some yogourt raisins," says Wilma. "I think. And a jar of olives."

Tobias makes a scoffing sound. "We cannot live on these things," he says, shaking a cardboard box of something or other as if scolding it. Yesterday, he tells her, he took the precaution of visiting the snack shop on the ground floor and making a discreet purchase of energy bars, caramel popcorn, and salted nuts.

"How clever of you!" Wilma exclaims.

Yes, Tobias admits. It was clever. But these emergency rations will not hold them for long.

"I must go down and explore the kitchen," he says. "Before any of the others might have that idea. They are likely to raid the stores, and trample one another. I have seen such a thing." Wilma wants to come with him — she might act as a buffer against trampling, for who would consider her a threat? And if they have indeed beat out the raiding hordes, she could carry some of the supplies back up to her apartment in her purse. But she does not suggest this, because she would of course get in the way: he'll have enough to do without shepherding her hither and thither.

Tobias seems to know of her wish to be of use. He has considerably thought of a role for her: she is to remain in her apartment and listen to the news. Intelligence gathering, he calls it.

Once he's gone, Wilma turns on her kitchenette radio and prepares to gather intelligence. A news report adds little to what they already know: Our Turn is a movement, it's international, it appears aimed at clearing away what one of the demonstrators refers to as "the parasitic dead wood at the top" and another one terms "the dustballs under the bed."

The authorities are acting sporadically, if at all. They do have more important things to attend to: more floods, more runaway forest fires, more tornadoes, all of which are keeping them on the hop. Sound bites from various head honchos are played. Those in the targeted retirement institutions should not succumb to panic, and they should not attempt to wander out onto the streets where their safety cannot be guaranteed. Several who rashly decided to brave the mobs did not survive the attempt, one of these having been manually torn apart. The blockaded ones should stay where they are, as everything would soon be under control. Helicopters may be deployed. The relatives of those under siege should not attempt any interventions on their own, as the situation is

unstable. Everyone should obey the police, or the troops, or the special forces. The ones with megaphones. Above all, they must remember that help is on the way.

Wilma doubts this, but she stays tuned for the panel discussion that follows. The host first suggests that each one of the panellists state his or her age and position, which is done: academic, thirty-five, social anthropologist; energy-sector engineer, forty-two; financial expert, fifty-six. Then they quibble to and fro about whether this thing that's going on is an outbreak of thuggery, an assault on the whole notion of elders and civility and families, or is on the other hand understandable, considering the challenges and provocations and, to speak quite frankly, the shambles, both economic and environmental, that those under, say, twenty-five have been saddled with.

There is rage out there, and yes, it's sad that some of the most vulnerable in society are being scapegoated, but this turn of affairs is not without precedent in history, and in many societies — says the anthropologist — the elderly used to bow out gracefully to make room for young mouths by walking into the snow or being carried up mountainsides and left there. But that was when there were fewer material resources, says the economist: older demographics are actually big job creators. Yes, but they are eating up the health-care dollars, most of which are spent on those in the last stages of . . . yes, that is all very well, but innocent lives are being lost, if I may interrupt, that depends on what you call innocent, some of these people . . . surely you are not defending, of course not, but you have to admit . . .

The host announces that they will now take calls from their listeners.

"Don't trust anyone under sixty," says the first caller. They all laugh.

The second caller says he does not understand how they can

be making light of this. The people of a certain age have worked hard all their lives, they've been taxpayers for decades and most likely still are, and where is the government in all of this, and don't they realize the young never vote? Revenge will be taken at the polls on the elected representatives if they don't snap to it and get this thing cleaned up right now. More jails, that's what is needed.

The third caller begins by saying that he does vote, but it's never done him any good. Then he says, "Torch the dusties."

"I didn't catch that," says the host. The third caller begins screaming, "You heard me! Torch the dusties! You heard me!" and is cut off. Upbeat radio music.

Wilma switches off: that's enough intelligence for today.

As she's rummaging around for a teabag – risky, making tea, she might scald herself, but she'll be very careful – her big-numbers phone rings. It's the old kind of phone, with a receiver; she can't manage a cellphone any more. She locates the phone in her peripheral vision, ignores the ten or twelve little people who are skating on the kitchen counter in long fur-bordered velvet cloaks and silver muffs, and picks it up.

"Oh, thank god," says Alyson. "I've seen what's going on, they showed your building on TV with all those people outside and the overturned laundry van, I've been so worried! I'm getting on a plane right now, and . . ."

"No," says Wilma. "It's fine. I'm fine. It's under control. Stay where you . . ." Then the line goes dead.

So now they're cutting the wires. Any minute now the electricity will go off. But Ambrosia Manor has a generator, so that will hold things in place for a while.

As she's drinking her tea the door opens, but it's not Tobias: no scent of Brut. There's a rush of footsteps, a smell of salt and damp cloth, a gust of weeping. Wilma is enfolded in a strong, dishevelled embrace. "They say I must leave you! They say I must! We are told to leave the building, all workers, all healthcares, all of us, or they will . . ."

"Katia, Katia," says Wilma. "Calm down." She disengages the arms, one at a time.

"But you are like a mother to me!" Wilma knows a little too much about Katia's tyrannical mother to find this complimentary, but it's kindly meant.

"I'll be fine," she says.

"But who will make your bed, and bring your fresh towels, and clean up the things you have broken, and place upon your pillow the chocolate, in the night . . ." More sobbing.

"I can manage," Wilma says. "Now, be a good girl and don't cause trouble. They're sending the army. The army will help." It's a lie, but Katia needs to leave. Why should she be trapped inside what's looking more and more like a besieged fortress?

Wilma asks Katia to bring her purse, then gives her all the petty cash left inside it. Someone might as well get the use out of it; she herself won't be going on a shopping spree any time soon. She tells Katia to add the stash of wrapped floral-scented soaps from the bathroom, leaving two of them for Wilma just in case.

"Why is there water in the bath?" Katia asks. At least she's stopped weeping. "It is cold water! I will make it hot!"

"It's all right," says Wilma. "Leave it there. Now, hurry along. What if they barricade the doors? You don't want to be late."

When Katia has gone, Wilma shuffles into the living area, knocking something off a bookshelf in the process – the pencil jar, there's a sound of wooden sticks – and collapses into the

armchair. She intends to take stock of her situation, review her life or something of the sort, but first she'll try to wend her way through another sentence or two of *Gone with the Wind* on the big-print e-reader. She gets the thing turned on and finds her place, a wonder in itself. Is it time for her to learn Braille? Yes, but that's unlikely now.

Oh, Ashley, Ashley, she thought, and her heart beat faster... Idiot, thinks Wilma. Destruction is at hand and you're mooning over that wimp? Atlanta will burn. Tara will be gutted. Everything will be swept away.

Before she knows it, she's nodded off.

She's wakened by Tobias, gently shaking her arm. Was she snoring, was her mouth open, is her bridge in place? "What time is it?" she says.

"It is time for lunch," says Tobias.

"Did you find any food?" Wilma asks, sitting up straight.

"I have acquired some dried noodles," says Tobias. "And a can of baked beans. But the kitchen was occupied."

"Oh," says Wilma. "Some of them stayed? The cooking staff?" That would be consoling news: she notes that she's hungry.

"No, they are all gone," says Tobias. "It is Noreen and Jo-Anne, and some of the others. They have made a soup. Shall we descend?"

The dining room is in full swing, judging from the noise: everyone's getting into the spirit of things, whatever that spirit may be. Hysteria, would be Wilma's best guess. They must be

carrying the soup in from the kitchen, acting as waiters. There's a crash; much laughter.

Noreen's voice looms up, right behind her ear. "Isn't this something?" she says. "Everyone's just rolling up their sleeves and pitching in! It's like summer camp! I suppose they thought we couldn't cope!"

"What do you think of our soup?" Jo-Anne, this time. The question is not addressed to Wilma but to Tobias. "We made it in a cauldron!"

"Delicious, dear lady," Tobias says politely.

"We raided the freezer! We put in everything!" says Jo-Anne. "Everything but the kitchen sink! Eye of newt! Toe of frog! Finger of birth-strangled babe!" She giggles.

Wilma is attempting to identify the ingredients. A piece of sausage, a fava bean, a mushroom?

"The state of that kitchen is disgraceful," says Noreen. "I don't know what we were paying them for, the so-called staff! Certainly not for cleaning! I saw a rat."

"Shhh," says Jo-Anne. "What they don't know won't hurt them!" They both laugh gleefully.

"I am not alarmed by a simple rat," says Tobias. "I have seen worse."

"But it's awful, about the Advanced Living wing," says Noreen. "We went to see if we could bring them some soup, but the connecting doors are locked."

"We couldn't open them," says Jo-Anne. "And the staff are all gone. That means..."

"It's terrible, it's terrible," says Noreen.

"There is nothing to be done," says Tobias. "The people in this room could not care for those other people, in any case. It is beyond our powers."

"But they must be so confused in there," says Noreen in a small voice.

"Well," says Jo-Anne. "Once we've had lunch, I think all of us should just stiffen our will power and form up into a double line and march right out of here! Then we can tell the authorities, and they'll come in and get the doors open and move those poor people into a proper location. This whole thing is beyond disgraceful! As for those stupid baby face masks they've got on . . ."

"They will not let you through," says Tobias.

"But we'll all go together! The press will be there. They wouldn't dare stop us, not with the whole world watching!"

"I would not count on that," says Tobias. "The whole world has an appetite for ringside seats at such events. Witch-burnings and public hangings were always well attended."

"Now you're frightening me," says Jo-Anne. She doesn't sound very frightened.

"I'm going to have a nap first," says Noreen. "Gather my strength. Before we march out. At least we don't have to do the dishes in that filthy kitchen, since we won't be here much longer."

Tobias has done a circuit of the grounds: the back gate is besieged as well, he says, as of course it would be. He spends the rest of the afternoon in Wilma's apartment, availing himself of her binoculars. More people are gathering outside the lion gate; they're brandishing their usual signs, he says, plus some new ones: TIMES UP. TORCH THE DUSTIES. HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME.

Nobody ventures inside the perimeter wall, or nobody Tobias has spotted. The day is overcast, which makes for lower visibility.

It's going to be an unusually chilly evening for this time of year, but that's what the TV was saying before it went silent. His cellphone is now inoperative, he tells Wilma: the young people out there, although lazy and communistic, are adept at manipulating digital technology. They tunnel secretly here and there inside the Internet, like termites. They must have got hold of a list of Ambrosia's inhabitants and accessed their accounts, and switched them all off.

"They have oil drums," he says. "With fires inside. They're cooking hot dogs. And drinking beer, I suspect." Wilma would like a hot dog herself. She can picture walking out there and asking politely whether they might be inclined to share. But she can also picture the answer.

Around five o'clock a scanty clutch of Ambrosia Manor inhabitants musters outside the front door. Only about fifteen, says Tobias. They're arranging themselves in a double line, as if for a procession: twos, and the odd three. The crowd outside stills: they're watching. Someone among the Ambrosiads has found a megaphone: Jo-Anne, says Tobias. Orders are given, indecipherable through the window glass. The line moves forward, haltingly.

"Have they reached the gate?" asks Wilma. How she wishes she could see this! It's like a football game, back when she was an undergraduate! The tension, the opposing teams, the megaphones. She was always in the audience, never in the game, because girls did not play football: their role was to gasp. And to be fuzzy about the rules, as she is now.

The suspense is making her heart beat faster. If Jo-Anne's group can make it through, the rest of them can get organized and try the same thing.

"Yes," says Tobias. "But something has happened. There has been an incident."

"What do you mean?" says Wilma.

"It's not good. Now they're coming back."

"Are they running?" says Wilma.

"As much as possible," says Tobias. "We will wait until dark. Then we must leave quickly."

"But we can't leave!" Wilma almost wails. "They won't let us!"

"We can leave the building," says Tobias, "and wait in the grounds. Until they go away. Then we will be unimpeded."

"But they aren't going away!" says Wilma.

"They will go away when it's over," says Tobias. "Now we will eat something. I will open this can of baked beans. Humanity's failure to invent a can opener that actually functions has never ceased to dismay me. The design of the can opener has not been improved since the war."

What do you mean by *over*? Wilma wants to ask; but doesn't.

Wilma prepares herself for the proposed excursion. Tobias has told her they may be outside for some hours, or possibly days; it all depends. She puts on a cardigan, and takes a shawl and a packet of biscuits; also her jeweller's loupe and the e-reader, which is light enough to be portable. She worries about trifles; she knows they're trifles, but still, where is she going to put her teeth tonight? Her expensive teeth. And what about clean underwear? They can't carry much with them, says Tobias.

Now they will venture forth, like mice in moonlight. It is the right time, says Tobias. He leads her by the hand, down the back stairs, then through the corridor to the kitchen, then through the storage area and past the trash bins. He names each stage of their journey so she will know where they are; he pauses at each

threshold. "Do not worry," he says. "There is no one here. They have all departed."

"But I heard something," she whispers, and she did: a scuttling, a rustling. A squeaking, as of tiny, shrill voices: are the little people talking to her at last? Her heartbeat is annoyingly rapid. Is that a smell, a fetid animal smell like overheated scalps, like unwashed armpits?

"It's rats," he says. "There are always rats in places like this, in hiding. They know when it is safe for them to come out. They are smarter than us, I think. Take my arm, there is a step down."

Now they've gone through the back entrance; they're outside. There are distant voices, there is chanting – it must be coming from the crowd at the front gate. What is it they're saying? *Time to Go. Fast Not Slow. Burn Baby Burn. It's Our Turn.* An ominous rhythm.

But it's coming from afar; here at the back of the building it's quiet. The air is fresh, the night is cool. Wilma worries that they'll be seen, mistaken for intruders or for escapees from Advanced Living, though surely there's no one around. No men with beagles. Tobias uses his flashlight to guide his own steps and by extension hers, switching it on and then off again.

"Are there fireflies?" Wilma whispers. She hopes so, for if not, what are those sparkles of light at the edges of her vision, pulsing like signals? Is it some new neural anomaly, her brain short-circuiting like a toaster dropped into the bath?

"Many fireflies," Tobias whispers back.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see," he says, "when we get there."

Wilma has an unworthy and then a frightening thought. What if Tobias has made the whole thing up? What if there are no crowds of baby-faced protesters at the gates? What if it's a

mass hallucination, like statues that weep blood or Virgin Marys in the clouds? Or worse: what if it's all been an elaborate ruse designed to lure her out here where Tobias can strangle her to death? What if he's a thrill killer?

But the radio broadcasts? Easily faked. But Noreen and Jo-Anne, their soup kitchen? Paid actors. And the chanting she can hear right now? A recording. Or a group of student recruits — they'd be happy to chant for minimum wage. Nothing like that would be impossible for a well-organized lunatic with money.

Too many murder mysteries, Wilma, she tells herself. If he wanted to kill you he could have done it earlier. And even if she's right, she can't go back: she wouldn't have the least idea of where *back* is.

"Here we are," says Tobias. "Grandstand seats. We'll be quite comfortable here."

They're in one of the gazebos, the one to the extreme left. It's on the far side of the ornamental pond, and commands, according to Tobias, a partial view of Ambrosia Manor's main entrance. He's brought the binoculars.

"Have some peanuts," he says. There's a crackle — the package — and he transfers a clutch of ovoids into the cusp of her hand. How reassuring they are! Her panic ebbs. He stashed a blanket in the gazebo earlier in the day, and two thermoses of coffee. He produces them now, and they settle down to their unusual picnic. And, just as in earlier, dimly remembered picnics she'd been on with young men — campfire events, with hot dogs and beer — an arm solidifies out of the darkness and slides itself confidently but shyly around her shoulders. Is it really there, that arm, or is she imagining it?

"You are safe with me, dear lady," says Tobias. Everything's relative, thinks Wilma.

"What are they doing now?" she asks with a little shiver.

"Milling around," says Tobias. "Milling around is first. Then people get carried away." He draws the blanket around her solicitously. There's a line of little people, men and women both, in dull red velvet costumes, richly textured and patterned in gold; they must be on the railing of the gazebo, which she can't see. They're involved in a stately promenade, arm in arm, couple by couple; they walk forward, stop, turn, bow and curtsy, then walk forward again, golden toes pointed. The women have flowery butterfly-wing crowns; the men have mitres, like bishops. There must be music playing for them, at a range beyond the human.

"There," says Tobias. "The first flames. They have torches. No doubt they have explosives as well."

"But the others . . ." says Wilma.

"There is nothing I can do for the others," says Tobias.

"But Noreen. But Jo-Anne. They're still inside. They'll be . . ." She's clutching — she notices — her own hands. They feel like somebody else's.

"It was always that way," he says mournfully. Or is it coldly? She can't tell.

The rumbling from the crowd is swelling. "They've come inside the walls now," says Tobias. "They're piling objects against the door of the building. The side door too, I suppose. To prevent exit, or entrance as well. And the back door; they will be thorough. They are rolling the oil drums inside the gate, and they have driven a car up onto the front steps, to block any attempt."

"I don't like this," says Wilma.

There's a sudden bang. If only it were fireworks.

"It's burning," says Tobias. "The Manor." There's a thin, shrill screaming. Wilma puts her hands over her ears, but she can still hear. It goes on and on, loud at first, then dwindling.

When will the fire trucks come! There are no sirens.

"I can't bear this," she says. Tobias pats her knee.

"Perhaps they will jump out of the windows," he says.

"No," says Wilma. "They won't." She wouldn't, if it was her. She would just give up. Anyway the smoke will get them first.

The flames have taken over now. They're so bright. Even gazing directly, she can see them. Blended with them, flickering and soaring, are the little people, their red garments glowing from within, scarlet, orange, yellow, gold. They're swirling upward, they're so joyful! They meet and embrace, they part; it's an airy dance.

Look. Look! They're singing!