

## *Erica Funkhouser*

# Snapper

LAST WEEK ALICE spotted the snapper again. It surfaced, “like a dragon,” she reported. “Like a dragon that killed a knight and stole his armor.”

“It’ll break into the house and bite us with its awful yellow teeth,” cried Lucy.

Megan corrected her. “Turtles don’t have teeth. It’ll wring our necks and swallow us whole.”

Now Phil and the girls were sleeping together on the living room floor. If he didn’t get rid of the turtle, he’d never get them back into their beds. He’d never get them into the pond. He’d installed a rope ladder at the end of the dock, and his boss had given him a truck inner tube big enough to hold all four of them; but the girls weren’t going to leap into the water, holding their noses and scissoring their long skinny legs, if he didn’t get rid of the snapper.

They’d known it was there. Earlier in the spring a pair of mallards had arrived on the grassy island in the shallow end of the pond. After several days of poking and weaving, they fashioned a nest in the grass. Eight eggs appeared. Five hatched. For a few weeks, the girls thought of nothing but the ducklings. First thing every morning they ran down to the pond to make sure the ducks were still there, tip-toeing as they approached the water, nearly bursting with silence. Megan photographed them, slipping the photos into the sleeves of a bright yellow album the instant she’d retrieved them from the drugstore. One Day Old. Three Days Old. Ducklings At One Week. Lucy wanted to leave food out, but Phil forbade it, explaining that wild animals need to develop their instincts in order to survive. Reluctantly, she obeyed and set about naming the new arrivals: Nutmeg, Cinnamon, Clove, Ginger and Chili Powder. She could tell them apart.

When the ducklings made their first excursions out onto the water, the girls applauded from the grass. Led by their determined mother and followed by the drake, the line of eager trainees paddled across the pond, falling in and out of place like beads on a loosely strung necklace. Twirling in their own wakes, they bumped into each other and hurried to paddle back into line.

Phil had thought the ducklings would be safe on the island: foxes shy away from water, and the hawks could find plenty of mice in the neighboring fields. Then, on a warm Sunday evening in May, while he and the girls sat on the hill above the pond eating pizza and watching the mallards settle down for the night, the snapper surfaced. By the time they knew what it was, the turtle was at the nest, its mouth wide open, a bright yellow cave of hunger. It took no time at all to pull each duckling underwater, drown it and swallow it whole, the awful sequence of gestures repeated so often that, like a movement under strobe lights, it was impossible to say where one assault ended and the next began.

As the girls pitched pizza and ice cubes at the turtle, shouting at the mallards to fight back, Phil stood frozen on the hill. He'd never seen a snapper this big. It was nearly two feet long. It had to weigh over fifty pounds. Eighty, even. More than Alice. Who knew how often an animal this size had to eat? The adult ducks had been driven deep into the weeds by the turtle's attack; they huddled there, quacking at the impassable distance between themselves and their ducklings. Lucy covered her eyes and screamed.

The turtle was in no hurry. When it had completed its meal, it lay across the mallards' island, head slightly retracted, huge forelegs splayed luxuriously over the green weeds. It lay like a meteor fallen from the sky, nothing moving except its long ridged tail sawing contentedly back and forth in the still water. Once the thick eyelids opened and came slowly to a close. Finally the turtle slid back down into the water, tail first, and disappeared.



When Jean left, she wrote Phil a note on a piece of lined paper torn from one of the girls' notebooks. "I'm going away. I won't be back. Now is better than later. Everything here is yours. You keep it all. I know you love the girls and will look after them forever."

He'd driven to work early that morning—a raw November day, he remembered, so cold he'd regretted not grabbing his gloves before he left. Jean must have written the note after the girls caught the bus for school. She would have handed them their lunches, kissed them goodbye, closed the door, and left. When Phil came home at noon to pick up some solder, he noticed the breakfast dishes still lying on the kitchen table, waffle crumbs in puddles of syrup, napkins like partially collapsed tents. And there, under the bottle of maple syrup, lay the note folded into thirds, as if Jean had intended to place it in an envelope, "Philip" printed on the top fold in broad blue marker.

After that, Phil had gone from room to room looking for other notes, as if this were a practical joke or a treasure hunt. "Everything here is yours"—wasn't that some kind of clue? He was looking for the note that said, "Fooled you, didn't I? Love, J," or the one that said, "Phil, Couldn't clean up one more breakfast. Have gone to the mall to spend \$50.00 recklessly, then to work. Home by 6 PM." But there were no other notes, not under the bed pillows, not wedged into the bathroom mirror.

He studied each room, trying to figure out what was there and what wasn't. Jean had taken some things with her: a jacket, her fanny pack, some clothes. Not her flip-flops. Not her electric toothbrush. Not the checkbook. No photographs—well, maybe some photos. He wasn't sure. Phil really couldn't say for sure what was missing. Jean was missing.

They'd been married for 15 years. Three daughters—eleven, nine, and five. All healthy. He was 42. Jean had just turned 38. Like everyone, they had their disagreements. Over the years Jean had complained that Phil's dream house was going to kill her if she had to tape one more inch of sheetrock or sand one more cabinet while holding a screaming baby. "It's our dream house, not just mine," Phil reminded her once.

“In my dreams there is no house,” Jean said, staring at him wearily.

“What is there?”

“A whole day in which I do nothing at all. I don’t even watch anyone do anything. At the end of the day comes a surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a spider monkey.”

Phil didn’t even know what a spider monkey looked like.

In recent years most of the work had shifted outdoors, to Phil’s shop and the garden and the pond, and Jean had gone back to accounting full-time. In bed at night, after the girls had settled down, she told Phil stories about her clients: Mrs. Hollister, age 83, was collecting all the vegetable waste at Ferndale to make what she called her “chocolate compost,” available for free to any resident. Dr. Li, age 91, had been temporarily slowed down by the loss of her eyeglasses (she found them in the candy dish, hidden by her favorite ginger chews), but now she was back on track and circulating a petition to improve bus service in town. Mrs. Ryan’s son was trying to get her to hand over her condo in St. Petersburg, where he’d been living rent-free for years, but Mrs. Ryan was on to him and had asked Jean to recommend a good lawyer. Jean kept the accounts for several women at Ferndale. All of them trusted her in their homes and with their money. For years she’d done their taxes.

Listening to Jean, Phil would grow pleasantly blank. Her stories never conjured up corresponding stories from his own day; on the contrary, they made him go slack with affection and amusement; they relaxed him; and then, often, the ease of listening to Jean tightened into desire. A casual glance or a playful wisecrack would expose a deeper seam of need or readiness, and they were off.

No, it wasn’t the sex. Their bed was still a place of comfort at the end of long days. Or was it? Every night, Jean hogged three of the four pillows, cushioning herself for the night’s reading. For years she’d surrounded herself with catalogues, Town Reports and fitness magazines; more recently she’d turned to stranger fare. In the past she’d kept Phil awake with complaints such as

“Listen, this town has 25 miles of shoreline and no recreational swim program for kids,” or questions like “Did you know that sardines contain as much calcium as milk?” But lately she’d come to bed with an article about the last surviving mustangs and a big library book on Indonesian shadow puppets.

Every night she wore some version of the same drab pajamas—grey, fuzzy, formless. They looked like workout clothes. The pants had a drawstring, like sweatpants. Phil remembered confessing once that he was turned on by her drawstrings. “These?” she laughed, fingering the frayed cord knotted at both ends so it wouldn’t slide through its grommets in the wash.

“Not really those,” he’d said, slipping his hand inside to touch the smooth belly below. She’d bend to his warm hand, his palm planing her tenderly, and soon her long toes were working their way along his calf muscles toward his knees. She knew what he liked.

Had she been kidnapped? Phil contacted the police, but after an extensive investigation they concluded there had been no foul play. When he suggested to Drew Brown, the Chief of Police, a locally famous tight end who’d been two years ahead of Phil in high school, that someone might have kidnapped Jean, Drew pondered the idea for a few moments before saying, “Kids get stolen, Phil. Babies and young children. In some countries, rich old men. But nobody kidnaps middle-aged women, it’s a fact.”

Night after night Phil retold himself the story of their years together, looking for something new and revealing in the details. He was thinking about their marriage now more than he ever had, looking back on it as if it were a grand vista and he himself had arrived at the scenic overlook; only the view, however panoramic, supplied no reassurance, no answers, certainly no inspiration. He could remember Jean shouting at him once, during an argument over why he’d spent the whole weekend helping Alice make a model of Mt. Vesuvius instead of finishing the kitchen counter, “I’m not as good as you are and I never will be. Being good is an act for me.” What had she said after that? Phil couldn’t remember. He only remembered that she had snarled at him like a cat, showing all her teeth.

His rambling thoughts made Phil feel stupid. He needed to get organized and reassure the girls, get them back into a solid routine, but the fear that he had somehow driven their mother away haunted him. Sure, he'd pushed to get the house renovated and pushed to complete the dock, refusing to give in to Jean's proposals for a weekend alone together or a trip to Disney World with the girls while they were still young enough to enjoy it. He wanted this place to be what his family enjoyed. First here; later the rest of the world.

The dock had taken him a long time to finish—he had only nights and weekends to work on it—but he'd built it to last. The fittings were deeply buried, and he'd sanded all the boards and the rungs of the ladder by hand so the girls wouldn't get splinters. From a tall post at the end of the dock he'd hung a red and white rescue buoy. The dock led out over the prickly waterside weeds and the muddy shallows toward the cool, spring-fed center of the pond, where the water was at least twelve feet deep, safe for diving.

Months after their mother's disappearance, the girls were still going to bed crying, and at breakfast they were crying again. If he let one of them stay home from school and come to work with him, she'd cry there, in his truck on the way out to a job, or in the damp corner of a stranger's basement, crumpled up against a dozen gallons of old paint.

When Jean finally called, it was only worse. Megan took notes during her mother's calls, notes that Phil couldn't stand to read. Call #1, what she said: She is safe. She loves us. Daddy will take good care of us. What I wonder: What does she mean "safe"? Should we still love her? How does she know Daddy is okay? Call #2: She moved to a different state. She has a little apartment. She put our pictures on the refrigerator. She works there, like she did here. Why doesn't she just come home? Call #3: Daddy got on the phone and started yelling. "No, they won't understand some day," he said. "The longer you're gone the less they understand."

Phil's boss let him off early enough every afternoon to pick the girls up from school, but there was nothing worse than being home alone with his daughters on those bleak winter afternoons

after Jean left. No one could open a kitchen drawer or throw away a magazine without thinking of her. One of them would start to tremble and then the rest would collapse like the four unsteady legs of an old card table.

Once, aware of the desperation in his own thoughts but incapable of curtailing them, Phil suspected that the girls must be keeping something from him. Surely they knew something he didn't. They had all joked with Jean about things Phil knew nothing about—lip gloss and cat's cradle and the difference between knitting and purling. How could they not know where she had gone?



Phil's boss told him that the only way to catch a snapping turtle is with raw meat, preferably beef heart. "You hook the heart up like you're going after bass," he laughed. "That's how you get those suckers."

One Saturday morning while the girls were at the beach with neighbors, Phil stood in the kitchen and fumbled with the plastic wrap covering a sprawling maroon heart on a white Styrofoam tray. He was using a knife and fork to unwrap the package, afraid that any human scent on the lure would alert the turtle to danger. Do turtles have a good sense of smell? If they smelled stainless steel, would they be wary? He had no idea. Doesn't every animal have a better sense of smell than we do?

The beef heart was bigger, redder and bloodier than he'd expected. It smelled rich and faintly metallic as it oozed over the edges of the white tray like a severed planet, like Mars yanked from its position in the solar system and shrink-wrapped for sale. It had been surprisingly easy to find a beef heart; they were right there in the meat aisle as if people ate them all the time, like chicken wings.

He pounded two 4x4's into the earth on either side of the pond, with O-rings to hold the thin length of cable, and then he rigged up a bass hook to hold the bait. Once he'd worked the hook well into the heart, he strung it onto the cable, fastened one end of the cable to one of the posts and walked the other end around the pond to attach it to the post on the other side.

He pulled the line taut until the dark red organ dangled just above the surface of the pond, unmistakably a heart, with its asymmetrical sides and its forceful valves, and unmistakably bait, strung out, as it was, a livid, oozing temptation, over open water. The work of a sick man, thought Phil. Bugs'll get after it. Maggots. The girls will think I'm a monster.

But when his daughters came home they were proud of his work. "You're going to get him, Daddy, I know," said Alice.

"It's just the right size for his mouth," offered Megan.

Lucy ran along the edge of the pond in her sandy bathing suit yelling, "Bee fart, bee fart. We're going to catch you with a bee fart."



On a snowy day back in February, Phil had told the girls he was going to give Jean's clothes to the Salvation Army and they could go through them and take what they wanted. He piled everything from the closet onto the floor, pulled her two drawers from the dresser and swept the shoes out where the girls could see them. The pockets had all been gone through in the first days after Jean disappeared, when Phil was still searching for clues. A phone card. An address. Anything. She'd always had so little use for secrets. The whispered intrigues of her friends, their furtive phone calls and sidewalk confidences, irritated Jean. "I refuse to keep track of what's reportable and what's not," she complained. "If they tell me something, they can't ask me to keep it under lock and key. That's their job."

Now, on this wintry Saturday, months since Phil had touched her or even seen her from across a room, Jean's clothes looked oddly unfamiliar. They were smaller than he'd remembered, more colorful. The girls held up one bright color after another—a red sweater, a pink and white striped T-shirt, yellow checked shorts. They were everyday clothes; they could belong to anyone; still, his children were kneeling on the floor and lifting their mother's clothes up to the snowy window, as if they were looking for a message written in invisible ink.

Lucy strung necklaces over her head and wrapped a few scarves around her wrists, then she removed everything. She coiled the

necklaces neatly on what had been her mother's side of the bed and folded the scarves into squares. Then she flopped onto Phil's side of the bed, hugged his pillow and watched her older sisters. Megan was trying on the shoes, stomping the length of the upstairs hall. They fit perfectly. "I don't like any of these," she said. "Do they go in the same garbage bag as the clothes, Daddy?"

In one of the piles, Alice found her mother's grey pajama bottoms and matching ribbed undershirt. "These are really soft," she said, pulling them on over her own clothes.

"You look like Mum," said Lucy, and she started to cry.

"No she doesn't," said Megan. "Her hair's straight and her eyes are exactly the same color as Daddy's, aren't they, Daddy?" Megan stared at him coldly, her narrow body as stiff as a flagpole. Phil prayed for his eyes to be the right color, the color his daughter wanted them to be, and he held them wide open while she fixed her gaze on him.

At last Megan confirmed that his eyes were the same color as Alice's—"chocolate brown." Lucy cheered up immediately.

"Aren't mine chocolate brown too?" she asked, squeezing her eyes open and pressing her face close to Megan's.

"No, yours are like mine," said Megan, pulling her little sister over to the full length mirror on the back of the bedroom door. "See. Caramel. You and I have got caramel eyes."

Lucy and Megan left the room empty-handed. Alice stood in front of Phil in her mother's pajamas. "We have to keep everything," she said. "Here, I'll help you put it away," and she handed Phil the stack of neatly folded scarves that Lucy had left on the bed.



Some days he was furious—who did Jean think she was, leaving him alone with three daughters?—but in front of the girls Phil tried to stay calm. To do what he'd always done. He couldn't become their mother. He couldn't stand remembering how Jean had done things—always folding the girls' jeans in threes, one fold at the knee and one fold at the crotch; always standing the shampoo bottle on its head so the shampoo would come out

more easily. He hated knowing what she would say in response to a question from the girls. No, you may not leave your windows open all night, no matter how much you love the snow. Yes, it's conceivable that exaggeration is all right, when everyone realizes you're embellishing for the sake of humor; but it's not okay if you do it just to call attention to yourself.

What good could Jean's habits and opinions do him now that she was gone? Whoever he'd thought she was, she couldn't have been that person or she wouldn't have left. He didn't want to act like her, to think like her, for the sake of the girls. He didn't want to be remembering her all the time.

He missed her most at bedtime. Those first weeks after she left, he'd started reading to each of the girls before they went to sleep. Jean had only read to Lucy; the others were old enough to read themselves to sleep, she said. But Phil found himself, once Lucy was asleep, sliding over to Megan's bed. He'd pick up where she'd left off in her chapter book and gratefully disappear into the Middle Ages or the Canadian Northwest. When Megan was asleep, Phil moved to Alice's room, where he'd slump into the chair beside her bed.

At first she'd said, "You don't have to, Daddy. You look tired." But soon she stopped saying anything. Some nights she saved her math homework for their bedtime reading; some nights she said, "I have to do a Social Studies project. Which is a better topic—the natural resources of Wyoming or the natural resources of Rhode Island?"



Since the snapper had reappeared, Phil and the girls had a new routine. They pushed the couch, coffee table and chairs back against the walls and lay their sleeping bags side by side on the living room rug: Phil's faded blue one like a collapsed parachute, Alice's and Megan's heavy green cotton ones with the red lumberjack lining, and Lucy's bag printed with plump pink unicorns and schematic rainbows. Piles of books, stuffed animals, water bottles and flashlights lay beside the girls' three bags.

They all went to bed at the same time—too late for Lucy, too early for Phil. Alice liked to turn off every light except the one in

the downstairs bathroom. “Time for the story,” she’d say, forging a tradition out of something they’d never done before their first night together on the floor, when she’d had the idea to make up a story together, a circular story. “I’ll start,” she said, “then when I say so whoever wants to can take over.” Lying there in the half dark with his three daughters, the absence of their mother like a palpable dampness in the room, Phil would feel himself pulled into the girls’ stories by their urgent voices. The to-do list in his head had grown ridiculously long since Jean left—would there ever be an evening when he didn’t have phone calls to make, bills to pay, school forms to complete?—but in the dark, in the company of his daughters’ voices, their pungent descriptions and bizarre plot twists, he was overcome with indifference to the demands of the outside world.

How quickly things happened in their stories. A character’s fate could be reversed in a single brief sentence. “The boy only thought his dog had eaten his cat,” began Lucy, when it was her turn to take over Megan’s ponderous tale. “What had really happened was that the dog had dug a hole for the cat under the porch and helped her crawl down there so she could have her kittens in the exact same place she’d been born.”

Compared to the girls, Phil was a dull story-teller. When a car broke down in a story, he’d wait his turn and then fix it, using the opportunity to tell the girls how to change a tire or replace a fuse. If a person had “bad blood” from being raised on evil mushrooms, Phil would arrange for a transfusion. He was limited by his common sense, while the girls invented their way out of every difficulty. With equal ease, they imagined a girl who could fry eggs in her palms or cliffs that lifted and lowered themselves like elevators to accommodate a herd of off-course buffalo.

Lying in the breezy summer darkness, waiting his turn at a story, Phil would listen to his daughters’ voices sparkling with impatience and delight, even triumph. One of them would say, “It was the summer the grass got confused and grew down instead of up,” and he’d lie back and relax, marveling at what his daughters could do with a few simple words. On those nights, he’d fall asleep contentedly, reassured that the world doesn’t get

any bigger than this.

Other nights, after the girls had fallen asleep, Phil would lie on the floor ragged and torn as a dog's old chew-toy. With dread he'd hear the husky voice in his head that could be mistaken for the dark itself. You need to go after her, it would say. Find her. Wherever she went, you've got to go there and do something. Make her hurt. Let her have a broken arm that never completely heals. Let her lose the hearing in her left ear from a sharp jab to the temple.

The voice spoke with authority and in great detail. It wanted Jean to suffer very specifically—a twist of the kneecap that resulted in a permanent limp, or a carefully placed blow to the lower back that required the removal of one kidney and her spleen. It spoke of multiple injuries, one for each of her four victims.



Two days after he put the beef heart out, Phil woke up early to find the snapping turtle hanging from the bass hook. It hung in the misty early morning light like a bronze shield, its legs stretching tentatively, as if to secure a purchase on the mist. The hook had worked its way through the snapper's head and out the back of its neck. He'd have to kill it before the girls woke up.

Upstairs, Phil pulled on workpants, heavy work boots and a denim shirt. On his way into the kitchen, he checked on the girls again—they were still braided together in a knot of sleep. Quickly he grabbed a pair of wire cutters from the utility drawer and pulled the cleaver from the knife rack. He'd never used it before. If Jean had, he didn't know for what. It looked like too much of a knife even for a snapping turtle. Two oven mitts hung from a cup hook on the wall; he'd never used those either, but they'd have to do.

The morning was already warm, with a feathery swirl of mist and mosquitoes over the black water. Phil walked to the far side of the pond and unhooked the cable. Immediately the turtle sank back down into the water. For a moment the cable slipped through Phil's hands, but it slowed down quickly, leaving plenty of slack. The massive turtle hadn't gone to the bottom; like an

old rowboat, it floated half in, half out, of the water.

Phil started to circle back around the pond, the cable a taut spoke between his left hand and the turtle, which remained firmly but quietly in place, a floating hub. There was no sign of resistance and no sign of the beef heart. Even hooked, the turtle must have managed to get the heart down, unless it was still dangling in its throat, unswallowed. If so, the heart hadn't succeeded in suffocating the turtle, whose legs and tail swiped at the pond water as Phil continued around toward the house.

When he got back to the other side of the pond, Phil moved the cleaver and the oven mitts close to his right foot, braced himself against the 4x4, and started to draw the animal in. When he'd pulled the turtle to about four feet from shore, he released the cable a little and stooped down to pick up the oven mitts. Their yellow fabric glowed in the grass. I may as well be wearing socks, Phil thought, as he slipped the boxy mitts over his hands. Why the hell hadn't he gone to the garage for his work gloves?

When he pulled at the cable again, it went taut, but the snapper stayed in place, as if it had set down roots in the few minutes it had taken Phil to put on the mitts. He yanked and yanked again. Nothing. Phil tried holding the line at different angles. With each tug he could see the silvery cable lifting the turtle's head and rubbery neck out of the water. He could see the barbed end of the hook, where it had broken through the turtle's neck, a stainless steel cowlick. Once, the huge mouth opened, like a casket lined in yellow silk, and Phil could see the bar of the hook like a narrow river snaking between the animal's mountainous jaws. There was a little give in the head and neck, but the shell remained impassive. The snapper was caught on something.

Phil started into the water. The first step covered his left boot; when he put his other foot down, it sank a few inches deeper. The pond bottom oozed beneath him. Two, maybe three, steps away, the turtle's ancient face with its black button eyes stared at him. Its head was the size of Phil's fist; its jaw could easily enclose one of his knees. In one swift gesture, Phil raised the cable above his head, snapped the line and dislodged the turtle.

Without lowering his arms, he backed out of the pond and

scrambled up the bank, hauling the snapper into the grass. He couldn't drag it far—the animal was heavier on land, nearly impossible to pull. Its stony shell consisted of broad, smooth, nearly black planes and high pointed ridges of golden brown. At the rear of the shell was a deeply grooved portcullis out of which hung the saw-toothed tail. It was nearly as long as the shell and shifted from side to side, as if taking a reading of the terrain below. The turtle's legs culminated in muddy yellow toes with long curved claws already bent on escape. With its foreleg claws, the turtle was stabbing at the slippery grass, trying to break through to something firm enough to propel itself to safety.

Phil knew he'd have to make his cut through the turtle's thick neck, which wasn't completely withdrawn. It looked as if it went on forever beneath the heavy carapace, as if it were the same body part as the tail. The head, black and scaly and peering, had become ferocious with concentration. The round dark eyes with their yellow centers beamed toward the resistant hillside; the fine nostrils flared. Above the minimal reptilian chin ran a straight line of mouth that wavered between stubbornness and derision. An ageless mouth. Every time the turtle opened it, Phil could see the rows of sharp-edged, horny growths—what any jaw, finding itself toothless, would determine to grow.

With one smack of the cleaver, Phil split the turtle's neck. The knife blade didn't stop until it was half-buried in the moist earth, where it created an instantaneous border between the turtle's severed head and its shell. The eyes were still open, as was the jaw, its flesh a little slack now over the hook. Phil flicked off his oven mitts, grabbed the wire cutters and cut the cable, leaving the hook embedded in the turtle's head. Holding the head at arm's length, he hurried up the hill, past the house to the garage. All the garbage cans were full. He tore open one of the black bags, threw the head into the pile of trash and hammered the lid back onto the barrel with his fist. Pounding and pounding, he beat his way around the circumference of the garbage can lid.

There was no blood, he realized, when he finally stopped hammering. No oozy guts. All he had to do now was get rid of the shell. Maybe he'd even keep the shell. Leave it out in the

woods while the body rotted out and then polish it up for the girls. He pulled the wheelbarrow from the garage and started back down to the pond.

When he came around the corner of the house, Phil saw the snapper plodding up the hill directly toward him. It moved as deliberately as it had with a head. One by one the thick legs lifted themselves slowly into the air; when they resettled, the bony yellow claws tore at the grass, not losing ground.

Phil dropped the wheelbarrow and ran to the turtle. Step after laborious step, the beheaded shell pressed forward, up the hill toward the house. Phil fell into step beside the snapper, towering above it but mirroring its lambent progress, footstep by awful footstep. Behind the animal lay a broad wake of wet, crushed grass, silver in the early morning light.

Minutes went by, and more minutes. A still morning—not one ruffle of wind on the pond, all the leaves quiet on their branches. Phil felt the sweat trickling down from his neck and his armpits and collecting at his waist. The monstrous shell kept hauling itself, one step at a time, up the hill.

The animal's refusal to die rose up around Phil like foul water. He seemed to be mired in a swamp, close to drowning in anticipation of the turtle's death, and yet the snapper continued its climb. He could cut its legs off, and its tail; he could gore its shell with a crowbar—but he did nothing.

At the crest of the hill, just below the living room picture window, the turtle came to a stop. It had started to lift one of its front legs when the leg stalled and fell back. The claws retracted and the leg flesh oozed over the grass. Then the other legs grew slack, the tail tipped limply to one side, and the whole shell sank to the ground.

No twitch. No pulse. Just a leathery stillness more mineral than animal. Phil sat down on the wet grass beside the turtle and ran his hands along the rim of the animal's shell. The edges were rounded and smooth, not sharp. He rested his palms against the shell's broad plates, a whole system of ridges and valleys into which his hands settled comfortably. When he lifted his hands to his face, following the curve of his cheekbones down to his jaw,

it was as if his hands belonged to someone else. To Jean. Her hands used to come to his face like this after they had made love, used to return here from the other parts of his body, letting him know with their delicate touch that he was in one piece. Phil brought his head down next to the snapper and turned his face to one side to rest it against the shell. He felt the animal's stoniness everywhere—in his palms and against his fingers, in the flesh of his cheek and on his cheekbone where it met the upsurge of shell—and he knew he was going to start looking for Jean. Wherever she was, he'd find her; and when he did, he'd find out if she really meant what she'd said in her note, if she'd say those same words right to his face.

When he looked up, he saw the girls in the picture window. He stumbled to his knees and straightened his right arm like a traffic cop, motioning them to stop, to stay where they were. But it was too late. They were already running out of the house in the thin cotton shorts and T-shirts they'd slept in. They surrounded him and the headless turtle: a palisade of girls. Their ankles were a quarter the size of the snapper's. Next to its shell, their tanned summer skin looked as creamy as butter. Their hands were touching Phil everywhere—his back, his shoulders, his head—rubbing and patting him, smoothing the hair off his forehead, tracing the rims of his ears, massaging his fingers. He could barely tolerate their tender caresses, their soft, murmuring condolences. "Daddy, are you alright? Daddy, did he bite you?"

Phil sat back on the grass beside the dead snapper and let the girls into this lap. They pressed their flushed, concerned faces next to his and planted kisses on his cheek, his, nose, his eyebrow. "You're okay, Daddy. You're okay, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said, "I'm fine." All three of them were talking at once, and everything they were saying sounded sweet and possible. Could they touch it? Yes, of course. Could they turn it over and look underneath? Go ahead. It took two of them, Megan and Alice, to overturn the huge shell. It's gold! Let's cover it with nail polish! It's ugly! Please don't make us eat turtle soup, Daddy!

Then they had had enough. They were pulling Phil to his feet. Such a hot day, already. They wanted to go swimming. Finally we

can swim! They wanted him to go with them. Come on, there was plenty of time before work. He could blow up the inner tube with his air compressor. Did anyone know where Lucy's bathing suit was?

"Yes," said Phil, "on the kitchen table."

Was it okay to do cannonballs off the dock?

"Yes," he said, "yes, it's okay to do cannonballs."

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