

SMOKE HURLED ITSELF UP out of a field a couple of miles to the north, toward Shanksville. Up ahead was a white farmhouse with a crooked chimney and, nearer the road, a boy and a dog staring, the boy's hand on the dog's head like a piece of Americana hokum.

Phoebe said, "If that's a controlled burn, they've lost control of it."

Dana said, "It's the wrong color for a burn."

They were side-by-side on the backseat of the limo, both still stupefied by the fumes that poured from the collapsing towers on their TV screens not two hours ago. Dana thought of the crematorium where they were headed; and it also came to her that the smoke out the window — not mushroom shaped but rather like an oak in summer, thick trunked and burgeoning — was the color called *taupe* or *mole*, which is a good color for the upholstery of a mortuary limousine (her fingers splayed on the seat beside her) but not a good color for a burning field.

But the possibility did not occur to her that the ash was mixed with Pennsylvania dirt and limestone spewed from a thirty-foot crater made by the nose cone of a plane where another forty-four had

been pulverized. It was only later, when she understood her place as an incidental widow — her experience, whatever it would have been, shunted aside by general catastrophe — that she thought how one thing follows on another, how nothing keeps something else from happening, how foolishly we suppose that we have earned respite, that Armageddon will not be followed by emergency, that because the car is totaled the pipes won't burst.

A mirror was mounted on the window between them and the driver — mourners need to check their mascara — and it gave back her blanched face, brown hair lopped at the chin, regular and unremarkable features except for a full, mobile mouth, out of which it would (and did) surprise anyone to hear an acerbic remark. A good face for a politician's wife. Whereas her friend Phoebe, a lawyer in her own right, had a glimmering black coif and high color, interesting bones. Wit fit her. It was Phoebe who wore the mascara.

Dana said, "What if I threw a funeral and nobody came?"

And Phoebe: "Do you want to cancel?"

At which Dana lifted her hands far enough off the upholstery to suggest the pointlessness; and Phoebe let out her disconsolate bark of a laugh, and the limo hit pothole after pothole on the weather-beaten turnpike west toward Somerset.

She had hated him, and then he died.

No, it was more complicated than that. They had met in college, bantered, flirted, become infatuated, married, and were disillusioned; then he slowly came to disregard her, and they lost a baby, and she came to dislike and then to scorn him, until shockingly before his fortieth birthday he was diagnosed with an already-metastasized colon cancer, and she nursed him gently, dutifully, until he died.

No, but it was more complicated. Graham Scott Ullman had in ways she could no longer remember reminded her of her father (who was also a Republican, though in midcentury mode). At Pitt he had financed himself by inventing a kind of dating service for potential roommates. His entrepreneurial enthusiasm was (like her father's) infectious. He got in on the business side of a nerd-rich

software start-up, and when OmniOptions, Inc., went public he took his cut and his place on the board and went public also, into the Somerset County Council and then into the State Senate. He was still a banterer, and Dana only gradually realized that the banter was always at someone's expense, and that banter is not the same thing as conversation, and that the cleverness he most admired tended toward spin and scam.

She was not a bad politician's wife. Art history is a classy background with no threat attached. She'd spent most of her childhood in the backseat of a Chevy Malibu and knew how to be still while bored. She could cook, and liked to, and playing hostess kept her from having to talk too long to anyone. Through two campaigns and two terms in Harrisburg, she did volunteer things that were good for Graham's career without committing her to one of her own, mostly in libraries and children's wards; and she supposed she would be a stay-at-home mother when the time came to stay at home.

She got at last joyfully pregnant, but faltered in the third trimester with toxemia. Her calves and ankles swelled. She was hospitalized at thirty weeks and gave birth a week later to a girl—they named her Chloe—whose heart was faulty and who died at two days old.

Since she had known, held, watched Chloe for less than forty hours, people, including Graham, supposed the trauma was of a generic nature. But for Dana the little girl was so uniquely formed, so particularly her infant self—the broad translucent toenails, the fully articulated lifeline in her palm, the feathery blue burst of iris, the kidney-shaped mole under her left ear—that though she and Graham had always agreed about cremation, Dana could not commit her baby to the flames. They buried her in a country graveyard near Somerset.

Dana had long ago given up both her father's hope of paradise and her mother's promise of reincarnation. The heaven she most admired was tempera on Renaissance ceiling plaster. Nothing in her experience suggested that the personality would cohere beyond the body. On the contrary, recycling seemed the fundamental

principle: nothing blooms but through decay. She believed only and absolutely in immortality at the subatomic level, and considered the nitrogen cycle sufficient marvel, sufficient glory.

But that had not been put to the test, and now it was. Tentatively, and then fiercely, she embraced Chloe's dispersal into the universe. She lay awake at night allowing herself to contemplate the little body in its batiste dress in its maple coffin, welcoming the insects and the ooze, not flinching from the translucent larvae, the self-generating maggots. She gathered this corruption in her arms and crooned to it. She held it to her heart. She lived the teeming, and then the subsiding, and then the still, ashen entropy of the beloved matter. Toenails, palms, iris, mole. Dust to dust. And then she slept.

Dust motes danced in the morning sun when she woke.

Night after night she did this. She did not speak of it.

Their friends were very kind, and appropriately promised healing and acceptance. But for Dana it was not the baby but her marriage that had died. Chloe rotting seemed supremely vital, whereas the inert weight of her days with Graham was revealed to her, the mechanical eroticism of their sex, the rote moral disconnect of their conversation, none of which could be raised again to semblance of a life.

So it is perhaps an enigma that, eight months later, as she was gathering herself to leave Graham and found that he was leaving her instead, she felt no hesitation in devoting herself wholly, for the first time, to her husband. He was her patient. She was patient. Quiescence again came easily to her, and she lived in postponement as in a cushioned space. She listened to his long denial and his scattershot anger and his surprisingly brief fears. When there was no further treatment, she brought him home, where he lay for two months on a rose-colored sofa decreasingly coherent and then decreasingly conscious while she patiently, arduously, unresentfully took care of him.

He had been apparently comatose for a week or so when she came in from an omelet supper in the kitchen, to find him, eyes closed, one index finger raised from the blanket.

Smiling, he said, "Mushrooms."

And at this evidence of continuing appetite, the mystery of the persistence of the pleasure of the senses, for the first time she wept, and perhaps for the first time truly loved him.

One finger on the limo door, the driver handed her out, looked down past Dana's elbow and away. He was no more than a kid, color drained behind a black spot on his chin where he had avoided shaving around a zit. This same drained look was on the faces of those who came toward her, Harriet Honeycutt with a smear of foundation on her jaw, Ben Honeycutt with his glasses fogged and his tie askew, Tom Bradshaw nodding like a puppet. She was surprised and a little impressed to see Tom here. He was only a financial adviser; you wouldn't have thought he'd bother.

"Oh, sweetie, it's so awful."

"I'm so sorry, Dana — and just now . . ."

"Oh, my god. Oh, my god."

The condolences had naturally an apocalyptic cast. Thirty or forty gathered in the chapel that had been set up for two hundred. Graham's Senate colleagues would have had to start from Harrisburg at just about the time the Pentagon got hit, so most had not, and A. L. Moran, or his sons, had pulled out a felt board to pin up the regrets that came in by e-mail, phone, and even, in a couple of instances, Western Union. Those who had made it hugged and clung. You could have thought it was the death of Graham Ullman that had forever changed their world, except that people kept disappearing into an alcove, a restroom, the veranda, muffling their chins into their cell phones. *Terrorists? Invasion? War?*

Two of the eulogizers did arrive: Representative Harvey "Rex" Snyder, who never missed a chance to make a speech, and Lee Teriman, a hunting and fishing buddy who had loved Graham for the qualities that made Dana queasy. A few more locals hurried in, everyone determined to go ahead with the rite, like people on a lurching plane who stave off fear by staring at their paperbacks.

A. L. Moran & Sons was a plain-Jane chapel with a stained-glass window so nondenominational it might have been a pile of