

The Iron
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Alice's eyes fluttered open once, twice, three-four times. In the half-instant before she fully awoke, a blurry certainty stumbled into her mind that she had seen — well, *something*.

She could not put a name to it: no shadowy, ski-masked human figure by her bedside or fleeing out the window; no bogeyman in the closet. But there had been something, damn it, some *thing*, some compact physical presence just off to one side of the bed, a concrete precipitate of her sleeping mind.

She switched on the reading lamp affixed to the headboard. Hoisted herself into sitting position. Looked around the bedroom.

Gray, cloudy-summer morning light filtered in through the bedroom window as if to placate her with little fragments of reassuring ordinariness:

Here, said the morning light. Here is your bureau, and all the little doo-dads cluttering up its top. The loose change, the jumble of unmatched and mismatched earrings, the box of facial tissues, the picture of Pete and you at the guest house in the mountains. The coffee mug, patinaed inside with a hardened tan goo from over a week ago. And here, the nightstand, the pile of books on the floor, the bed, the comforter, and over there your dumb old hot-raspberry furry slippers and an armchair and a floor lamp and a wastebasket jammed to the brim with glossy Sunday newspaper ads and balled-up tissues, and on the walls familiar framed prints and a mirror. All real, and you remember all this, right?

Nothing new, the morning light said; nothing unexpected. See? No mysterious Somethings. Go back to sleep.

Alice did close her eyes for an instant. She licked her lips and swallowed, and then opened her eyes again, silenced the now-shrieking alarm, and swung her feet out of bed.

Her sleep and waking had been screwy and disjointed all summer, whenever Pete was out of town on one of his frequent days-long business trips. Always a late-night glass of wine to help her sleep, always an early-morning pre-alarm awakening. This sense of disquiet, now: *that* was new. But it evidently had nothing to do with anything here in the bedroom.

Nor with anything in the kitchen. And its source wasn't to be found in the morning newspaper, either, chockablock as it was with only the usual accounts of disasters variously natural, economic, political, and technological. She turned to the comics page and peeked at her horoscope, down there (as always) in the lower left corner. Sometimes it teased her with a provocative forecast. Not today, though. Nothing today but bland ambiguities: "Your cycle," it said, "indicates a willingness to take charge. Domestic concerns central. Sunny side up!"

So no: there was nothing anywhere at all as far as she could tell, around her or even within herself — nowhere anything to validate her sense of something about to happen. Yet the feeling persisted: the world seemed to want to speak, and not just to plain-old "say" but to *utter* something, an oracular pronouncement stuck for now on the tip of its tongue.

"I really must be cracking up," she said, aloud. Then she shrugged, stood up from the table, and got on with her morning.

"Know what the problem is, right?" said Coreen, the library's all-knowing summer intern, that afternoon. "You're bored. Always happens to me like that. Get to thinking I'll die if something don't happen to me soon, next thing I know I'm convinced something really *is* gonna

happen.” She popped her gum and keyed into the library’s computer the bar code from the new book Alice had handed her. “That’s how us women’s minds work.” Cynical, worldly-wise, and a little too glib, for all her fifteen years.

Maybe that *was* the problem. This was, after all, the first summer in over two decades of teaching that Alice hadn’t worked, *really* worked. She and Pete didn’t need the money, of course, now that the twins had been off living on their own for over two years in the city. And Alice had wanted a change from the year-round grind of getting spiffed up in the morning just to stand up all day, at school for nine months and in Lowell’s department store during the summer. The volunteer work here in the town library this summer, this was heaven: she wasn’t expected till noon, and because she was unpacking and shelving books and moving bookshelves from one aisle to the next she was not expected to “dress up.”

But maybe Coreen was right; maybe she was bored.

She sighed, and handed Coreen another book. “That’s probably it. Maybe I need a boyfriend. You have a spare?”

“Ha!” Coreen barked, but looked at Alice from the corners of her unsmiling eyes.

But no, Alice didn’t really think she was bored. Maybe she just missed Pete, and when he got home tomorrow night the feeling would evaporate. Maybe that was it.

She tested the pieces of that possibility against a template of anticipation. Pete. Tomorrow night. Walking in, jet-lagged and smog-cranky, sorting through the mail; drinking a quick brandy; asleep in bed before Alice was even out of the bathroom. Not exactly a film clip from a romantic comedy starring Tom Hanks and (God knew) Meg Ryan.

Nope; that wasn’t it either. Nothing in that picture said to her, *That’s it, that’s the source of your mystery*. That picture provided not a fix, but a statement of the problem. Whatever the world might be on the brink of uttering, it wasn’t *that* — the world had been saying *that* for years. On the other hand no more likely candidates stepped forth, so it would just have to do: she simply missed Pete, missed his smile when he first saw her every morning, his easy laughter over the phone on his daily commute home from the office.

She took her uneasy sense of portent, of sunshine or storm or sudden breeze abrew in the heavens, and placed it out of sight in a back corner of her mind. Life was complicated enough just dealing with reality.

So it was that that evening, in the thin little sliver of a dark moonless summer night between the last morsel of her microwaved dinner and the first nudge of an inkling that it was time to get ready for bed, as she stood at the downstairs powder-room sink rinsing her face with cold water — so it was that she was quite unprepared when she first saw, out of the corner of her eye, outside the powder-room window, the iron.

She did not recognize it at first *as* an iron. “What the—?” she asked herself, having glimpsed only a metallic-white flash over in that direction. She went to the window for a better look, cupping her hands in a shallow tunnel between eyes and glass.

It was an everyday steam iron. Not really white, she could see now, but rather ivory, with a charcoal-gray base. The usual steam vents on its underside, in the usual multiple bowed-V pattern. Electric, she assumed, though it had no cord that she could see, nor could she make out any brand markings; too far away for that— But hold on, wait, damn it, *stop*, the amazing thing about it was, it was *outside*, seeming to float in the night-time air over the backyard, twinkling in the thin silver starlight. And it wasn’t, you know, *ironing*; it just sat on its back end, on its heel, as though parked on some ghostly unseen ironing board. Waiting for the laundry.

An *iron*? Hovering in the air over her backyard? She closed her eyes, shook her head to clear it. Then she opened her eyes and again looked through the window. The iron was still out there, gleaming, tranquil, silent, and almost — well, almost *majestic*. But *Jesus Christ*, the whole notion was too *ridiculous*, how the heck could it be *majestic*... Alice slid the window open for a view uncomplicated by interior reflection. The iron disappeared.

Aha! *Now* she understood! Like all those UFO “sightings” over the years, debunked as weird temporary reflections or refractions in a flawed window; what she thought she’d just seen was, clearly, no more than a trick of light. She lowered the window again, and the “iron” re-materialized. Up, it departs; down, it returns. Simple. She chuckled at her credulousness. Probably something on the powder-room wall that’s being reflected off the glass here somehow. She turned and looked back over her shoulder. Behind her, in a direct line from the window, was nothing but the powder-room door. Hmm. Well, if it’s reflecting *something* from *somewhere* in here all I’ve got to do is turn out the light—

But turning out the light did not clear up the mystery; on the contrary, it made it worse. For now that the window held no light at all from the interior, the iron did not disappear; still present out there, it seemed now not merely to gleam with reflected starlight but to radiate a pale luminescence of its own, a dim *aura* which, Alice could now see, was yet bright enough to cast faint shadows here in the powder room...

This was *still* ridiculous. All right, so the “iron” wasn’t a reflection. Therefore it stood to reason that it must be a trick of light from *outside*, filtering through a warp or microscopic crack in the glass in such a way as to, uh, well, look like an iron. So maybe if she just crouched down here and peered through the window at a variety of angles, she’d find the real source of the illusion: a streetlight, a distant neighbor’s car headlights, or even — recalling with a giggle another UFO legend — a glowing cloud of swamp gas. She had just begun this bobbing, ducking scrutiny when the iron began to rotate.

Just as it had hung in the air, serenely, it rotated in a quiet stately manner, altogether without ostentation. It looked as though it might be perched on a motorized Lazy Susan or a turntable, going slowly around, and around, and around, showing off its features for the home viewers of a televised home shopping network. And like the moon it seemed to go through *phases*: gibbous, full, waning, and — when the dark soleplate faced her — new.

Feeling a little panicky now, Alice raised and lowered the window a few more times. Up, the apparition vanished; down, it appeared; its rotation seemed unaffected by whether or not it was visible, so that when she raised the window, waited a few seconds, and then lowered it again, the iron had moved another quarter-turn.

Muttering, she hurried from the powder room and into the kitchen, snatched up a flashlight and went out the back door. Standing at the center of the backyard, she saw nothing (of *course* she saw nothing, there was nothing to *see*) — nothing that resembled an iron, let alone a glowing iron, let alone, damn it, a glowing iron hovering in mid-air like a toy helicopter. She played the flashlight’s beam into the woods behind the house, and off into the empty fields to either side. Nothing. She looked up into the silent sky; nothing but stars up there: neither moon, nor aurora, nor whirring saucer-shaped object. Nothing. She licked an index finger and oh-so-tentatively raised it into the air, about where she imagined the iron must be... What a relief: no sizzle, no burn. Really nothing out here. Looking back over her shoulder into the yard every few steps, Alice returned to the house.

She heard the phone ringing before she reached the back door, and hurried to pick it up. It was not a Proctor-Silex public relations officer, calling to ask if she’d seen anything unusual in

the neighborhood; it was only her friend Monica.

Monica prattled on about her job and about how her and Bob's summer was going, and Alice offered token grunts and conversation-nudgers to foster the impression that this was a dialogue. But well over half of her attention was still occupied by the iron in the yard. Or in the powder-room window, might be a better way to put it; here in the kitchen, through the back windows, she could perceive nothing at all unusual in the backyard. Maybe it's gone, she thought. She moved into the hallway, toward the powder room. The telephone cord would not reach all the way to the powder-room door, but maybe if she just took the receiver away from her head for just a moment and stretched her arm full length she'd be able to— Yes, that did it. She could see through the powder-room window: the iron was still there.

Back in the kitchen, when she brought the receiver to her ear again, she found that Monica had stopped speaking and was, apparently, waiting for her to say something. "Alice? Are you there?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, I was just looking at something—"

"Are you all right, Alice? You sounded a little out of breath when you answered the phone."

"Umm. I was, well, I was out in the backyard. Looking for something." Wincing. Why hadn't she anticipated that a conversation with Monica would take this turn?

"Looking for something?" Monica asked. "Outside? What, you lose something out there? My God, not a prowler, Bob come quick, Alice has a prowler in her yard—!"

Well by that point of course it had gone too far; by that point she just *had* to tell Monica the whole story, starting with her morning's sense of formless premonition. Once again there was a brief silence; and then, once again, Monica's querulous voice.

"An *iron*? In the, in the air, over your yard—?"

"I know, Monica, sounds crazy. I know. I don't really believe it myself, I keep looking out the window..." She let her protests trail off when she realized Monica was no longer listening. Ambiguous muffled voice-noises came from the receiver, and Alice guessed that Monica was repeating the story for Bob's benefit. Finally she reported back to Alice, her speech cobbled with mirth.

"Sorry, Alice, I was just telling Bob, hee-hee, he says you should hang a shirt out on the line and see if it's pressed in the morning."

Alice ha-haed politely, but winced again. It wasn't uncommon for her to wind up feeling defensive after talking to Monica for a few minutes, and she made as though to hang up.

"Wait wait wait!" Monica said. "You didn't say if you and Pete could make it!"

"Make it?"

"The party, the barbecue on Saturday, I just *told* you not even five min— Oh, never mind," giggling again, "I forgot, you were caught up with your domestic appliance then." More giggles. "Hee-hee, sorry Alice, all I said was that Bob and I are having a party this Saturday. A cook-out. Starting, say, six o'clock or so. Can you and Pete make it?"

They could make it, sure. In the meantime, in the few days between now and then, there were a few things to be gotten over — all of the important ones, in Alice's mind, connected with the vision in the air over her backyard.

She didn't stay up that entire first night, staring as though hypnotized at the iron, but she might as well have; even with the ritual, usually-effective glass of wine, she was up every couple of hours. She had a second glass and then a third. Not only did the wine fail to bring her sleep; it

also failed to banish the iron.

She found there were lots of ways to look out into the yard and *not* see it. You could look out any window except the powder room's — windows upstairs or down here on the first floor; you could even go down to the basement and, standing on tiptoes before the laundry tubs, peek through the casement window set into the top of the basement wall — and you'd never glimpse anything even remotely unusual. You could of course simply raise the powder-room window. But as long as the window was down and you were here in the powder room, the iron was always out there: turning; turning; ceaselessly, silently, turning.

Later still, towards dawn, the sky began to take on light not only from the nearing sun but also, it seemed, from the iron. As Alice perched on the vanity with a cup of coffee in her hands, gazing through the window, the iron — still rotating — faded from opaque and glowing to translucent, finally passing altogether into a transparency every bit as mysterious and portentous as its visibility had been. It was like a Cheshire cat, or one of those weird coffee mugs whose lettering disappears as the liquid inside cools.

"Jeez," Coreen said at the library that day, her gum cracking and popping in disapproval, "you look like shit. You partyin' last night or somethin'?"

Alice reached up self-consciously and touched her cheeks and chin and eyelids. She thought she'd done a pretty good job making up today, under the circumstances. "Ha ha, no, just had a hard time sleeping. Pete will be home tonight, then I think I'll be okay."

"I know whatcha mean. Nooky always helps my mom sleep, too. Hand me the tape, wouldja?"

Nooky? Coreen was unbelievable. But Alice didn't bother correcting her; she couldn't believe she'd told even *Monica* about the iron — Coreen, Jesus, *Coreen* would surely think she'd lost her mind. Later, during the afternoon break, she declined to sit outside at the white umbrellaed patio table while Coreen did her nails and drank Diet Pepsi and burped and chattered in scarcely believable scatological detail about her boyfriends. Instead, Alice stayed indoors and browsed through the library's catalogue on the computer in the main reading room.

She found what she was looking for, easily enough: a slender volume, written thank God by a college professor, not a fringe-religious mystic or a tabloid-newspaper reporter. Its title was *Out of the Ordinary*. According to its dust jacket, it provided an overview of a half-dozen cases, from the last century or so, in which people had had miraculous encounters with everyday objects. Perfect.

After putting away the groceries that evening, over her microwaved dinner (and yes, while waiting like a vampire, one eye cocked on the sky's progress toward sunset), she scanned the book's pages.

It cited one case, for instance, of a rock with apparently supernatural healing powers (but able to heal only chicken pox); another, of a conch shell from within which a professional medium claimed to hear not the sea, but voices of the spirit world whispering urgently in a tongue that only he could decipher.

But the tone of the book was all wrong, not what Alice had hoped for at all. The B. Kliban cartoon which appeared as a sort of epigraph in the front of the book should have tipped her off; according to its caption, it depicted the miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary to a Volkswagen in Denver. And all the "miracles" were recounted without verve; all the author's enthusiasm was reserved for jocular quasi-psychoanalyses of those who had experienced them.

She snapped the book shut and picked up a final lukewarm kernel of microwaved corn, placing it into her mouth. As she worried at the corn with her tongue and teeth, an unpleasant

possibility occurred to her: suppose when he got home tonight, Pete couldn't see the iron? For that matter, suppose she herself couldn't see it any longer? Suppose it was *gone*?

She hurried to the powder room. Sunset was no more than a half-hour away. Was that a presence, materializing out there in the center of the yard, shimmery and translucent?

Back to the kitchen for a glass of wine, and then back to the powder room. She sat again on the vanity, placed her feet again on the toilet lid. Yes, that was it, she saw with relief after a few anxious moments: it was really the iron once again, coalescing from the dust particles of the air in a silent but inexorable reversal of the morning's disappearance. It was like the unstopping of a drain at the bottom of everyday life, the spiral gathering speed and condensing into the iron-shaped vacuum out there. It was — well, it was *beautiful*.

Pete would be home in a couple of hours. She didn't want him to think he'd discovered this miracle himself; she wanted to *present* it to him. She raised the window, the iron of course disappeared; she lowered it once to confirm that it still re-appeared, and then raised it again and this time left it up.

When Pete did come in it was amid the usual masculine cloud of apologies and job preoccupations: stories of triumphant meetings with people whom Alice could never quite visualize, of restaurants Alice would have loved, of missed connecting flights and garrulous fellow passengers who would have annoyed the bejeezus out of Alice as they had Pete himself. (They loved comparing notes about the people with odd or unhygienic habits whom they encountered on vacations.) Only when he had finished unpacking and was seated in the easy chair in the family room, sipping at the last of his snifter of brandy, did he take note of Alice as something other than an audience.

"Hey," he said, "Jeez honey you look *tired*. You been sleeping all right?"

"Umm, well, not last night, no—"

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, everything's okay. Just kept waking up, is all."

He seemed to consider this information. But then he drained the snifter and placed it on the table alongside the chair, yawned, and stood up. "Well, speaking for myself I'm gonna head up to bed. You need to use the bathroom?"

The bathroom. "Yes, as a matter of fact I do, why don't you use the powder room down here?"

Pete looked at her, one eyebrow slanted up quizzically. But then he shrugged, and headed, without comment, for the powder room.

Alice did not proceed upstairs to the bathroom but stood in the hall, a few feet away from the powder-room door. She didn't want to listen, exactly, to intrude on Pete's privacy — and anyhow, she reminded herself, there was nothing for him to *see* as long as he left the window up.

His voice, calling out to her upstairs (or so he thought), nearly startled the empty wineglass from her hand. "Alice!"

Her heart thumped. "Yes?"

"Is the air conditioning on?"

The air conditioning? What was he talking about? "Yeah, uh-huh, why?"

"How come the window's open in here?"

"Ah — oh, just airing it out. Leave it up for now, all right?"

He didn't answer, merely talked to himself for a handful of seconds more. Her ear now pressed against the door, Alice felt as though she were listening at that magic conch shell in the

book. Then the toilet flushed, and the door opened, and right *there* stood Alice, facing him at the door, the wineglass held before her like a sacramental chalice. “Wh—?” he blurted.

“Shhh. Come here, I want to show you something.” She brushed on past him to the window. “Look outside. See anything?”

“*See* anything? It’s pitch dark out there, how could I see anything?”

Alice reached up for the window frame. *Please let it be there*, she thought. *Please let him see it*. She pulled down the window.

“Alice, wha—” Pete said, and stopped. He saw it, all right; it was out there, and it was already rotating, rotating. “What in the *hell*?” he finally got out.

In the two days before Monica’s party, Pete became as preoccupied with the iron’s mysteries as was Alice herself — even more so. He repeated Alice’s experiments, naturally, first with the bathroom light, then going out to the yard to search for the iron in the empty air. Not that he didn’t *believe* her, of course; he just wanted, you know, to see for himself. In addition, he thought of a few experiments of his own — more elaborate in objective and execution, some requiring two people. Alice suspected he was soliciting ideas from people at work.

In one of these tests the next night, he propped the long ladder from the garage against the back of the house, by the powder-room window. He wanted to determine, he said, whether you could see the iron from the other side, looking *in* through the window. Alice stayed inside, in the powder room, “assisting” (as he put it) — as if she were one of those empty-headed tootsies in a vaudeville magic act.

“Can you see it?” he yelled to her through the window, from the ladder. “Is it rotating yet?” Yes to both questions, although she had to reposition her line of sight in order to view the iron past Pete’s head and upper body.

She stood back and watched Pete as he twisted about, peering in through the window from various angles and at various positions around the edges of the window frame. His face was lit garishly by the light streaming onto it from inside the powder room; Alice had an eerie sensation of watching someone on television attempting to see out, or perhaps even escape, into her home. Over Pete’s shoulder, off in the distance, rotating, silently rotating, the iron (she fancied) seemed to be laughing to itself.

Afterwards, having failed to see the iron afloat from outside, Pete stood in the kitchen, his arms crossed, backside leaning against the dishwasher. He hadn’t seen a reflection of the iron behind him, either, he said, almost comically dejected. But when Alice observed that she’d had to look *around* him to see the iron, he became energized anew. “Don’t you see?” he said. “That means it’s not in the window itself, it’s out in the yard, really out *there*!”

Yeah, Alice saw that, but what was the big deal? She already knew it was “out there” — what, did he think a rotating steam iron might be stuck *inside* the glass somehow? *Get serious, Pete*, she wanted to say.

He retrieved a long plank from the basement, dabbed runny white-painted markings every foot of length, and toted it out into the yard. From the powder room, Alice was to watch out the window and signal with the flashlight when the iron emerged from the plank’s surface as Pete moved it back and forth across the yard, held vertically. When he stopped in response to her signal, she was to direct the flashlight at the point on the board where the iron was located.

“Don’t you see?” he repeated. “That way we’ll know exactly where it is!”

She saw, of course, and she went along with the little drama just to keep Pete happy. And it really *did* seem like a miracle to Alice at first as the iron rotated through the plane of the board,

like a ghost ship alternately emerging from and disappearing back into a thick fog. But Pete didn't seem to care about the miraculous, just about taking measurements. The point he seemed to miss was that the iron wasn't really just out there after all, regardless of what his tape measure told him. There was, patently, no real iron floating in real air a few feet over their real backyard — the iron was just as much *up here*, in their heads. It was *their* iron, not the backyard's; not a scientific phenomenon but a metaphysical one. *Theirs*. No, she corrected herself: not theirs. *Hers*.

And so the next day, Friday, only by a concentrated effort of will did Alice hold her tongue when Pete told her about the reporter.

He'd been talking about the iron to some guys at work, he said — she'd been right about that — and one thing led to another and one of them said his sister-in-law was a reporter, a feature writer for the local paper, and then this guy said he bet she'd be interested in this story and, well, she'd be here Sunday night.

“*Here? This Sunday?*”

“Uh, yeah, this Sunday. We don't have any plans for then, do we?”

No, they had no plans for Sunday. But a *reporter*? Jesus. Forget the headlines soon to be sneering from the newsstand, MYSTERY IRON IN BACKYARD. The real problem, the frustrating thing was, why in the world did he want to turn this over to someone else? A reporter. *Jesus*.

Saturday night, Monica's party. The usual grab-bag of guests for a Monica-and-Bob affair: a few of Bob's fellow engineering types and their wives and husbands; a young woman with whom Monica worked, un-self-conscious in jeans, a tank top, and two hearing aids; a handful of people from town — the only common denominator, really, being that everyone knew the hosts.

Alice was still steamed, ha ha, about the reporter. Perhaps sensing this, Pete had kept his distance from her for most of the night. Right now, he and a handful of other people were toasting marshmallows over the barbecue coals a short distance away.

Neither Monica nor Bob, mercifully, had brought up the issue of the iron. (Monica did ask about the twins, though, and Alice was ashamed she hadn't thought of them even once since the iron first appeared.) But maybe she really wanted to talk about the iron, and just hadn't had the right moment to do so. Maybe her resistance was low. She was sitting in a lawn chair on the patio, sipping coffee from one of those impractically delicate little china cups that Monica always saved for “special occasions.” A glowing purple bug-zapper buzzed and fizzed a few feet away.

In a matching lawn chair a few feet away was a middle-aged man named Pressman, of all things. Tom Pressman. Alice had met him several times before at Monica and Bob's; an ex-priest, he had since married and now worked as a counselor for some charitable foundation or another. He was drinking beer from a diminutive brown bottle which was propped for the moment upon the roof of his paunch, and watching the group around the barbecue grill, their faces mottled with orange light.

“When I was a boy,” Pressman said, “and I went on camping trips with my Scout troop, I used to stare into the coals.” He paused and brought the bottle up almost to his mouth, and then lowered it without drinking. “I used to imagine I could see faces there, on their surfaces. They'd appear and disappear in almost the same instant, you had to be quick or you couldn't see them. And you had to *squint*.” He squinted now, and then — Alice imagining him, in the dim light, reddening a bit — and then he chuckled. After a sly glance over in Alice's direction, as if to say, *Don't take this seriously*, he sipped at the beer.

“How about later, when you were a priest?” Alice asked. “Did you ever see things that

weren't really, uh, *there*? Or did people in your congregation? Your parish, whatever?"

Pressman smiled indulgently. "The miraculous-visions thing. Bleeding statues, all that? No, that never happened to me." He took another drink. "Maybe that's why I am where I am now, you know, insufficiently surprised by the day-to-day experience of my faith."

"I, um, well, that is *we* have this iron that we see..." Oh Alice, you *dolt*. What a way to lead into it! Well, no turning back now...

By this time, other guests had drifted over and were standing about the patio and slurping up molten marshmallows or sipping at coffee or liqueurs or watered-down booze in summer-sweating glasses, and looking (discreetly, yes, but with varying degrees of amusement) at Alice: looking at and listening to her silently, over the tops of their wineglasses or coffee thimbles or whatever, so she couldn't tell if they were grinning or not. Pete, still conscious of his gaffe with but not exactly contrite about the reporter, was still avoiding any eye contact at all. She tried to concentrate just on Pressman, whose glances in her direction didn't seem, well, nervous, exactly — "concerned," that was the word.

"Excuse me," said Mrs. Pressman — what was her first name? — who had moved around to stand behind her husband's chair, so she was harder to ignore than the others. "You did say an iron? Like, steam-and-dry, press-press, *pssssssssshhh*, that kind of iron?" Her imitation of an iron brought subdued titters from a couple of people. The woman with the hearing aids reached up behind one ear to increase the volume, presumably.

"This iron," said Pressman, ignoring his wife, his face now expressionless and unreadable, "there's nothing, nothing *religious* about it, is there? No face of the Virgin flickering across the bottom? No, er, bleeding or anything?"

Bleeding? Stigmata, was that the word? Oh Jesus. A sudden image bloomed in Alice's mind of crimson rivulets streaming from the steam vents. "No no no, nothing like that. It's just, just an iron. As far as I can tell it's not even plugged in or anyth—" Across the patio, Monica burst out in that raucous piercing laugh of hers; mortified, Alice simply concluded, "No, just an iron. No — no stigmata."

She and Pete remained at the party for maybe an hour longer. No one, conspicuously, mentioned the iron further. And while the other guests didn't exactly avoid Alice and Pete, they somehow communicated a sense of clammy discomfort in her presence, if not his. You'd think they expected her to burst into flames or something. When she noticed Pete talking to Bob and Pressman in a corner of the kitchen, quietly and earnestly, stealing glances in her direction, Alice finally decided to collar her husband and call it quits for the night. Behind them, as they went through the open front door, she could almost feel a tide of relief surging in to fill the vacuum left by her departure.

When they got home she proceeded directly to the powder room, where she drew the Venetian blinds over the silent rotating image in the window.

"Alice, this is Bob Van Ness, Monica's husband?" said the voice on the phone the next afternoon, Sunday. "You going to be home tonight?"

Bob and Pressman, it seemed, had been talking with Pete last night about the iron, and finally had both taken it seriously — as seriously as it could be taken — and in retrospect felt guilty about last night's conspiracy of silence, in which they'd participated. They wanted to call on her and Pete tonight to see whatever-it-was for themselves. Bob would bring his engineer's curiosity to the problem, and Pressman would, well, consider it not so much as an iron but as an *icon*.

“Monica won’t be with y— I mean, will Monica be along, too?”

“Ha ha! No, don’t worry, I wouldn’t subject you to *that*. She’s bowling tonight.”

“Sure, Bob, might as well — Pete tell you a reporter’s going to be here, too? The more the merrier!”

She wished she could really feel that perky and carefree. Her job, evidently, was to spend the afternoon straightening up the house for all these sudden visitors, while Pete labored over little diagrams showing where and how he had pinpointed the iron’s location. He printed his name in small capital letters at the bottom of each diagram. When Bob and Pressman and the reporter arrived, Alice imagined, it would be her responsibility to offer them coffee and drinks and, perhaps, little party cookies, while Pete distributed his diagrams and held forth on what he was now calling “the Iron Effect.” Capital I, capital E, just like that.

When the doorbell rang, a little over an hour before sundown, Pete was upstairs taking a shower. At the door was the reporter, a stunning young woman with straight black hair, dressed in what was probably her TV generation’s idea of a woman reporter’s attire — a tailored lightweight summer suit, with skirt just above her lovely knees, and a complementary-colored silk blouse. She had a mustache, Alice noted.

“Hi,” said the woman. “I’m Sophie Battaglia.” (*Sophie?*) “From the Gazette?” Alice introduced herself and had begun to wave this Sophie through the door when the reporter held up her hand. “I’m sorry Alice — can I call you Alice? — my mother’s out in the car, I was having dinner over her place today, that’s why I’m all dressed up, you know how mothers are, right?” She winked, and Alice stared at her. “I was telling her about this iron thing in your yard and she would just really love to see it for herself, you mind if I bring her in?”

Mrs. Battaglia was a frail elderly Italian woman who latched onto one of Alice’s forearms the minute Sophie helped her through the door. She must have been in her 60s when she had Sophie.

“You can call her ‘Mrs. B,’” Sophie said, “but she can’t speak or understand English so you don’t have to worry about carrying on a conversation with her. And she’s also a little, you know, softening in the noggin.” The wink again. Alice noted the quick tightening at the corner’s of Mrs. B’s mouth and wondered just how little English the old woman understood.

Then Pete, squeaky-clean, was downstairs, and while Sophie made an elaborate show of opening up a pad and rooting in her purse for a pen (my God was that a *diaphragm case* she’d taken out and was holding in one hand while rummaging around?) and taking copious notes, Pete began to lead her on a tour of the house and to fill her in on the background of the Iron Effect. “Alice here saw it first,” he said, and Alice felt herself flush in anticipation of her own dramatic telling of the story of that first night. But then he went on, “And I got home the next night and I was just knocked out, I want to tell you, never saw anything like it—” Alice led Mrs. B, still fastened to her arm, to the kitchen.

“Would - you - like - some - coffee? Coff - ee?” she asked the old woman, straining to enunciate each syllable precisely. Her lips pressed tightly together, Mrs. B nodded firmly but not especially convincingly. Her eyes were very watery.

Alice took two cups from the rack on the counter by the sink, and reached for the coffeepot.

“No! No!” cried Mrs. B, and she took one hand away from Alice’s arm long enough to point with a bent, gnarled finger, at the glass canister full of tea bags.

“Tea? You want tea instead of coffee?”

“*Si*, tea.”

Alice and Mrs. B were sitting at the kitchen table, communing in silence over their second steaming cups, when the doorbell rang again. Bob Van Ness and Tom Pressman this time, of course, and mercifully, as Bob had promised, without Monica. Alice was just starting to figure out how to introduce Mrs. B to the two men when Pete came into the room with Sophie. She was no longer even pretending to take notes, just chattering away, and Pete's face was flushed and, well, *happy*. Boyish.

Introductions were made all around, Sophie leaning down to whisper into her mother's ear — translating, presumably — and then, with sunset approaching, the six of them crowded into the powder room. Alice made a point of leading Mrs. B in first, so the little woman would be able to see out the window. Everyone had just managed to squeeze in, like a rush-hour crowd in an elevator or subway car, when Pete said, "Alice, why don't you get coffee for everybody?"

Alice didn't answer, merely cocked an eyebrow and looked down at the arthritic claws clenched around her wrist, then up and straight and *hard* into Pete's eyes.

"Ah, oh," he said, "well on second thought maybe later."

Six bodies shifted nervously, each person jockeying for a clear view of the window. Then as the sun began to dip down behind the horizon, Pete cleared his throat and launched into a discourse about what they would see now taking shape out there. Did a pretty good job of it, Alice admitted to herself; she could feel the drama of the moment welling up in her as he spoke, as if this were the first time she were seeing it herself.

"Look," he said, "notice how the air over the backyard seems to be rippling at a small point perhaps ten feet above the ground." He paused. "Notice how the spot seems to be condensing, solidifying, out of thin air, and now, just as the sun goes down" — he must have timed this, this is really too good, is this what he's like giving a presentation at work? — "notice now how it all comes together, like a puddle of water freezing into ice," his voice dropping in pitch and volume to a point just barely above the melodramatic, "and *there*, there it is, the... *iron*."

Goose bumps raced up Alice's back. A sharp intake of breath from someone behind her, Pressman maybe. Mrs. B's hands clenched more tightly, trembling, but Alice didn't really notice — Pete was really *good* at this, the goose bumps still flickered up and down....

Bob coughed, breaking the spell. "This is really something, Peter. This is — it's really *something*. You say it turns, too?"

"Uh-huh, that's right, turns at a rate of about—" So that was that, no more drama; back to facts. "... and if it's consistent, it will start to rotate in a little over twenty minutes from now. Why don't we all go out— Wait. Alice?"

"Hmm?"

"Raise the window a couple times, honey. Show them how it goes away, like it's not really out there—" *Of course it's not out there*, Alice thought, but dutifully reached out with her free arm, raised and then lowered the window once, twice, three times. Abracadabra, presto.

"Pete," said Sophie, "are you sure it's out there in the yard somewhere, I mean how do you know it's not just something in the glass?"

"Good question! C'mon, I'll show you," and he was off, with Sophie, Bob, and Pressman in tow, to the backyard. A demonstration of his ladder experiment. Mrs. B did not want to go; she released one hand from Alice's arm and gripped the window sill, fastening Alice in place. A trickle of a tear ran out of the corner of one of Mrs. B's eyes; she was obviously undergoing some kind of profound spiritual transformation.

The others were outside almost the full twenty minutes. First Pete's face appeared in the window, startling Alice as well as the quivering Mrs. B. Next Bob's face ballooned up out of the

darkness, but something else was going on; he climbed back down the ladder without looking and Pressman's face swam into view. Apparently satisfied, Pressman went back down the ladder and a few seconds later Bob was there again.

Afterwards, Alice was never certain exactly what the climactic sequence of events was. While Bob was still at the top of the ladder, was it then? Was that when Pressman said, from the powder-room doorway, "Alice, where's the other bathroom, I need to use the facilities"? Alice turned her head to give him directions, turned back to the window, and saw that the iron had begun to rotate. Mrs. B let out a sob and clutched at Alice's shirt, nearly collapsing in a paroxysm of seeming religious ecstasy, and suddenly Sophie's face was in the window, laughing, looking not into the window but down towards the foot of the ladder, and tossing that damned hair, and then there were two different answering male laughs and some muffled unintelligible words from below, and then Sophie screamed and lurched wildly and the top of the ladder came smashing through the screen and crashed, dead center, into and through the powder-room window. Alice herself screamed, and she pulled Mrs. B to her chest, shielding her from the thousand glass fragments raining in upon them. In the instant before she closed her own eyes reflexively, Alice thought she saw, in a fading kaleidoscopic vision, a thousand tiny somethings, rotating silently and in synchrony, like a troupe of voiceless music-box dancers. Then the vision dissolved, and did not return.

After the guests had shuffled in embarrassment out the front door — the moaning Mrs. B having first been pried, a finger at a time, from Alice's forearm — Pete explained what had happened. He and Bob were just fooling around, he said, jiggling the ladder to give Sophie a little thrill, well, to tease her, sort of. And the ladder, well, it slipped.

"I'm sorry, Alice, I really am sorry," he said for the twenty-first and twenty-second times as he tacked a sheet of plywood over the window frame in the powder room. Alice had already swept up all the glass fragments into the dust pan. "I'll pick up a new window on the way home from work tomorrow, I bet we'll still be able to see it, the iron, you think?"

Alice doubted it. "Don't come in here in your bare feet for a while," she said. "I think I got it all but if I didn't I don't want to find out the hard way." Then she carried the dustpan of glittering fragments into the kitchen for disposal.

The new window held no mysteries — no rotating or even immobile iron; no apparitions of the Virgin Mary, thank God. Sophie, obviously out of embarrassment, never did write up the story. And in the face of Alice's stony silence on the subject of the iron, eventually even Pete stopped talking about it.

But some nights when Pete was out of town, Alice would repair again to the powder room, again with a glass of wine. She'd raise the boring new window, and don a coat if it was winter. Then she'd snap open the velvet-lined jewelry box she kept squirreled away in a back corner of one of her bureau drawers, and from its velvet cradle she'd extract a wide-bladed sliver of broken glass and hold it before her eyes as she perched on the vanity top, facing the backyard, sipping at her wine, gazing as though mesmerized at the slow, stately revolution of a glowing Something out there and, yes, *up here* as well: her mind snuggling into place, wrapped in the deep warm cocoon of a private mystery turning, turning, ever silently turning.