

Fiction by Mary Gordon

Dilly

When I first met Dilly, my husband had just left me. He had left me for another woman, but I didn't know that, not at the time, although it seemed that everyone else knew.

He had a lot of money, my husband, and he satisfied his conscience in regard to me by making sure that I would never have to worry about money – that “my lifestyle wouldn't have to change” as a result of losing him. I forbade him to use the word “lifestyle” again, taking a sharp pleasure in at least forbidding him certain words. “All right,” he said, “I don't want you to have to change your way of life.” I realized then that it meant nothing to him at all that I had made him modify his language, and I felt a fool for my brief moment of false triumph.

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I was exhausted from fighting a battle that I couldn't win, and that I didn't really care that much about winning: what I cared about was not being perceived to have lost. So I gave up, and I indulged myself by hiring a cleaning woman for our house in the Berkshires, although I was the only one there (our children, my children, were far away – one in California, one in Buenos Aires) and I could easily, in some ways, clean up after myself. But I didn't want to clean up after myself; I wanted someone else to clean up for me. The truth is, I have always been untidy. Tidy people think untidy people are comfortable in their untidiness, and some may be but I was not. My living quarters were important to me, and when they were orderly and clear I was much happier than when they were in disarray; it was simply that keeping them that way was a task I found overwhelming or beyond me, as if someone were asking me to scuba dive without an air tank or a mask.

I told myself that I was making this decision as a sign that I was serious about my writing. I was three-quarters of the way through a novel, and I thought that the best use of my time would be to write compulsively till it was done. The writing would be both a distraction and a satisfaction, and if the book were a suc-

cess, a fuck you to my husband, who had never created anything but capital and who'd claimed to be "really impressed" by my ability to "make things up out of whole cloth."

I found Dilly's name and number in the supermarket. I chose her because her advertisement was entirely business-like and plain. Too many others tried to be witty, and they seemed formally drawn to the interrogative: "Do you love the smell of lavender?" "Don't you have better things to do than clean your house?" Or they had line drawings, probably done by one of their children, of flowers or teddy bears or houses with chimneys producing smoke in the form of a series of conjoined S's. Dilly's advertisement was only straightforward words printed in upper case: "House-cleaning, weekly, monthly, seasonal. Ten years experience cleaning in the area. References available." She was the only one I called.

It was a brilliant August morning when she arrived for her interview. The sky was cobalt and the air smelled of heat, a heat that was warming and delicious now but in a few hours would fall like a curse. The minute she got out of the car, I liked her looks. Is that why I hired her, because I liked her looks? Certainly that had something to do with it. But it wasn't only that I liked her looks, I liked the idea of what her looks suggested.

It occurred to me even then that nobody could not like Dilly's looks. Her frame was lithe; her calves and upper arms were lightly muscled, the muscles rounded, like apples; their roundness and liveliness suggested flexibility rather than strength, and the freckles on her upper arms suggested the kind of speckles on an early apple. She wore her thick red hair pulled back in a long ponytail, using the hair itself as a kind of circlet to

make the tail. She was wearing a flowered sundress, red flowers (I thought they must be nasturtiums) against a background of light cream, and her sandals were made of thin straps, brownish red, and clearly not real leather. Her accent was Massachusetts working class: that and her hair suggested Irishness, and I was pleased with that, since I believed the Irish were well known for being able to get a joke, and that was important to me in anyone I hired.

I showed her around the house and asked her some undemanding questions: there wasn't much to explain and not much for her to assert. I took her references; they were all enthusiastic about her work. "You'll love her," "She's a doll," "A real workhorse," "A lifesaver."

When I had finished speaking to all four people whose names Dilly had given me, I realized that I had just performed a fool's errand. I didn't know the referees; I didn't know anything about them. They could be Dilly's relatives, or they could all be members of a criminal gang who were planning to rob my house and shoot me in my bed. I had no way of knowing. We had lived in the house for two years – or really I had, my husband rarely came. It was meant to be my writing getaway. Later, I understood that while I was in the house he was seeing his mistress in our Beacon Hill apartment. But because I had been quiet and withdrawn and private while I was there, we knew almost no one in the town. The man who mowed the lawn and shoveled the driveway, the plumber, the electrician came and did their work and went. We paid their bills, but that was the end of our relationship. I simply had to take it on faith, that the people whose name Dilly gave me were people of good will, were the people who they said they were: homeowners, people who could afford to hire someone to clean their

house, therefore people of some substance, some dependability, whom people the likes of me, a stranger, could feel free to trust.

Dilly said she could come in ten days; she was about to go on her honeymoon. She was going to the Poconos. I had never known anyone who had gone to the Poconos for a honeymoon, but it was one of those places that somehow everyone knew one fact about: the bathtubs and the beds were heart-shaped. Why it had become the place of a certain kind of person to go on a honeymoon no one ever seemed to question, and it was a history I had no hope of ever finding out. I wrote the question, "Why do people go to the Poconos for honeymoons?" under a heading in my journal, "Information there is no hope of finding out."

On Dilly's first day of work, less than two weeks after we met, she finished her tasks quickly and asked if there was anything else that I'd like done. I said I couldn't think of anything. She looked around and asked if I'd like the birdbath emptied then hosed out. She said birds were quite fussy about clean water, and she'd be glad to do it. I was ashamed that the birds' fastidiousness was something I hadn't known about, or if I'd known it I had cynically or carelessly forgotten it. But when I started to express my embarrassment she said, "No biggie," and laughed. "The birds are fine. I just want you to be popular in the neighborhood."

She said she was particularly partial to the finches, though she had no idea what their song was. "For the life of me I can't tell the sound of one bird from another." And she laughed at her own lack in a way that entirely took away my impulse to educate her; I had been on the point of saying she could buy tapes that would demonstrate the song of each bird, but

instead I laughed and then admitted that I had bought the tapes but found them incomprehensible, and that, although I liked having the birds around, I could only identify four or five species. When I looked in the bird book and thought I'd identified a new one, I would often be chastened by a description like, "Native of Madagascar."

When I gave her a check, she asked if I'd mind making it out to cash; she didn't want to have to pay tax on what I gave her. From that time on, when it was Dilly's day to clean I left a pile of bills on the counter, under a stone whose shape had pleased me when I found it on the Cape with my husband, where we used to go in the summers when the children were young.

She came once a week and often we did tasks together, tasks I'd been wanting to do for years – like alphabetizing the spice rack or making potpourri of the herbs in the herb garden – things that made the house pleasant and fragrant and light in a way that it hadn't been before it had known her touch.

One day that first summer, she called and said her mother wasn't feeling well, and would it be possible for her to bring her kids with her. Just this once. "They're quiet; they know how to mind," she said. I said of course they were very welcome; I went upstairs to the room where, looking forward to future grandparenthood, I kept my children's old books and toys, although my children, both in their early twenties, showed absolutely not one sign between them of the immediate or even near prospect of settling down.

I knew the children's ages: they were five and seven. I had expected that the children would look like her, but I was quite surprised to see that they didn't resemble her in the slightest. They were both blond, and their skin was pale,

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tending to sallow. The older one, Scott, was large for his age, heavy, not fat, that is not that kind of soft fat like those up-setting boys you can't bear to see in a bathing suit, their overripe pectoral flesh too much a reminder of a misplaced voluptuousness. Scott was wide, with thick but not long legs, like tree trunks, and a broad bull-like chest. He looked very strong. The smaller one, Trevor, was slight, fast, feral. I saw that he would never be fat; I feared he might one day turn brutal. I assumed they looked like their father, but I didn't know who their father was – if he was the person she had just gone to the Poconos with, or someone else – and I understood that I couldn't possibly ask. I wrote, "Is your new husband the father of your children?" in my journal under the heading, "Questions that cannot possibly be asked."

The children had absolutely no interest in any of the books. They were polite children, so they feigned attention for a few minutes, but after a while they began walking around the yard aimlessly, throwing sticks for the dog, who took no interest after one or two attempts, his interest as feigned in sticks as theirs was in my books. "They're not much into reading. Kind of like me," Dilly said. I didn't know what to say to her because there was no way I could pretend that her saying that didn't open up a gulf between us, particularly because she showed absolutely no regret about the state of affairs she was describing. But after a few minutes, the simplicity of her description, and her entire lack of shame about it – as if she were saying to me, your hair is black and mine is red – allowed me to relax, to feel something I had never felt before: that I could like someone, could like them very much indeed, although the written word didn't matter to them at all.

And in fact her competence became essential to me. She could do many things around the house that a man could do; it wasn't that she took the place of my husband, but she made it possible for me to believe I didn't need a husband. She could fix a dripping faucet or a broken shelf or stand on a high ladder. If heavy lifting was required, she had only to dial a number and some large willing male appeared to carry a table upstairs or move an armoire into a spare bedroom. Nothing in the animal kingdom seemed to nonplus her. I called her when I came upon three field mice that had drowned in a bucket of rain water. I couldn't bring myself to deal with it. They seemed so overwhelmed in the bucket, floating, spinning, their paws delicately articulate and their eyes tight shut as if they were sleeping. But their deadness was so complete, so entirely separate from the world of the living, that I couldn't bear to look at them – much less to figure out how they might be disposed of. "No problem," she said, when she'd done whatever it was she did with them. "They're very stupid, mice. They were just looking for a drink. I think they should have found a friendlier bar."

She said this when she was washing her hands, then drying them on the dishtowels she had ironed the week before. She said there were some tasks she actively enjoyed. Ironing was one of them. But what she loved most, she said, was painting rooms, and that if I had any painting projects in mind to please ask her. This encouraged me to look closely at the dingy walls of my study and the downstairs bathroom; together we chose colors, and for a week, she came each day, in paint-covered overalls, and I could hear her singing as she stepped on and off the ladders and ripped masking tape from large blue

rolls. When she had finished painting the bathroom – melon and lime green – and my study – white with a hint of violet and cobalt for the baseboards – we were both so delighted that I asked her out to lunch. She said she'd love it, but she wanted to clean up first. She said a friend of hers had just opened a place that made great soup and salad, and that's how I found the Mountain Breeze café, where I began going every morning to have coffee and homemade muffins and to read *The New York Times*. My mornings changed from a lonely time to a convivial one; and I made friends with a woman there who urged me to join her gym, where I signed up for yoga and Pilates, and met a group of women who all liked each other and began meeting for lunch after every Wednesday's class.

It was only six months after she began working for me, six months after her honeymoon in the Poconos, that her mother called to tell me Dilly couldn't come that day because her husband had just died. She said that if I really needed someone to clean, she'd come and do it. I said no, of course not, Dilly should just call when she was ready to come back. She did call, a week later, and when she came to the door I could see that she had not been altered by her grief as I had feared. I offered my sympathy, and she nodded and said he'd probably been misdiagnosed – he'd probably had some kind of cancer of the blood for a long time. She didn't seem to want to talk about it; she turned from me more quickly than she had at any of our other greetings, and made her way to the broom closet. I didn't know what to say, and her reluctance to give me any information silenced me completely. I didn't know who the husband was, and I never had been able to ascertain whether he was the children's father. She never suggested the tragedy of an early death, and

her mood didn't seem dampened in the least. So I didn't feel that I had any right to talk to her about it; I believed it was her tragedy and her right to cope with it any way she liked. Only once did she speak of his illness, and that was with the only sign of bitterness I'd seen in her. She said they were in debt up to their ears because he had a lousy insurance policy that didn't cover a lot of the extras.

It is only now that I understand – now that things will be different, will have to be – how much the changes in my life can be traced to Dilly. After she'd told me about her unpaid medical bills, I was determined to help her in some way that wouldn't be shaming for her. It is probably an exaggeration, but not an enormous one, to say that my decision to move to the town full time was helped along by my desire to do something for Dilly. I figured that if I made her my personal assistant, I could give her more money, and be sure she had steady and pleasant work. It occurred to me that since I really didn't have a full-time job, I didn't need an assistant, but my husband had given me the generous sum he did because he believed I was a working writer. And I thought that if I were going to finish that novel, it would be of great help to me to clear the domestic decks. To give to Dilly the tasks that ate away at my days and irritated me like gnats around the eyes on a summer's evening. Many of the tasks that had fallen to my husband, that I hadn't even noticed he'd habitually done.

So in the fall of 2002, eighteen months after I first met Dilly, I sold my apartment on Beacon Hill and moved to the country full time. I offered Dilly a twenty-hour-a-week job as my personal assistant.

When she agreed, and it seemed to me that she was very pleased, I said we

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would have to be very careful to be honest with each other, because resentments could crop up unless we cleared the air quickly whenever either of us was displeased. She said, “You couldn’t be more right.” But nothing ever did crop up, because Dilly was so expert at anticipating my needs, at picking up my preferences. She told me about her life, but not in a way that suggested that she needed my help. She introduced me into the life of the town, where she’d been born, and that made all the difference.

My children thought my life was taking an alarming turn; they worried that I would become dull and flaccid of mind in the country. My daughter noticed that I wasn’t talking so much about writing my novel, that I seemed more focused on local politics, particularly on issues of ecological concern. I only understand now that Dilly had something to do with that too. With what I now think of as the end of my writing life.

Because the last story I wrote was a story about Dilly. And I realized that it was a story I couldn’t write. And that it didn’t matter to me very much whether the story got written or not. Written, that is, by me. Which is a way of saying, of course, written at all, for it existed only in my mind and if I didn’t make something of it, it would simply disappear.

It was a day in late September. Dilly walked in the door in a state I’d never seen her in before. Her face was flushed, and she was clearly agitated.

“I just need to calm down a minute,” she said. “I had a talk with Scott’s teacher, and I’m really hopping mad.”

I told her to sit down; I suggested herbal tea, and she took me up on it. I took some cookies from the top shelf – I leave them there so I’ll have to get on the stepladder to reach them. Overeat-

ing is a danger when you live alone; it’s a sop against boredom, and I didn’t want to reinforce my children’s fears about me, that my mind was growing flaccid, by presenting them at Christmas with a flaccid body. And certainly, I didn’t want to appear beside my ex-husband’s whippet of a new wife as the tired old shoe he’d rejected for a pair of sharp stilettos.

“So she calls me in, she says she wants to talk to me about Scott.”

“How old is he now?” I asked.

“He’s eight. Now if it was Trevor, I’d have been worried – he can be a hellion – but Scott has been nothing but good since the day he was born. So she says, ‘I think Scott has some issues with boundaries.’ Now I don’t know what the hell she’s talking about, some kind of garbage talk that means she doesn’t want to come out and say what she has to say. So I ask her what she means, and she says, ‘Scott is, as you know, large for his age. And he’s a very affectionate little boy. So he shows affection by hugging people. But I think he’s hugging too much. And some of the little girls don’t seem to like it.’

“Then she says to me, ‘Don’t get me wrong, he’s a great kid, I know he’s coping with an overwhelming loss, his father’s death and all, but it’s just not appropriate to express his needs and feelings in this way.’

“So I just lost it with this one, she’s about twenty-five years old, I think she’s taught for two years, and I say to her, ‘You can call me in if my son is fighting, or cursing, or bringing a gun to school, or selling drugs. You don’t tell me there’s a problem because he wants to hug people he likes. You’re the one with the problem.’ And I just slammed the door on her and walked out.”

She looked at me for the first time since she’d walked in the door. “You

don't think Scott'll pay because I mouthed off, do you?"

"She sounds like a jerk to me," I said. "I think you were exactly right. You have to be on your son's side, Scott is a great kid, and we can't have a world in which people are afraid to express affection."

"If you ask me, that's why men are so screwed up, because they can't express affection. So I bring my kids up to be affectionate and loving, and they get trashed. I have a good mind to have him switched to another class."

"I think that would be good," I said.

The next week, Dilly was more radiant than ever. She had had Scott switched to the classroom of an older teacher who'd discovered that he really liked math; she was thinking of moving him up into a higher group.

"Thanks for your help," she said.

"I didn't do anything," I said.

"You don't know what you did. You listened. You let me talk. You gave me the time to figure it out for myself. I won't forget it. I owe you one."

Did I take that as a license to turn her encounter into a story? I certainly embellished the truth, filling in all the blanks in Dilly's life that would have come under the category of "Questions that cannot be asked," or "Information there is no hope of finding out."

I had transcribed almost verbatim the words that Dilly had used to tell me about her encounter with Scott's teacher, but after that I invented a scene that answered for me the questions I had never felt free to ask myself about Dilly's sex life.

I looked at the story today; I haven't looked at it for three years. After the encounter with the teacher, I described her pulling out of the school parking lot at breakneck speed in her beat-up green Taurus sedan, and driving with unaccus-

tomized velocity down the highway. I had her consider whether or not to stop at a bar, decide to, order two drinks, consider allowing herself to be picked up, then reject the idea. I had her drive home, her head spinning because she rarely drank, and speak briefly to her mother, who was watching the sleeping children. I took her clothes off and put her into bed. Then I couldn't make up my mind. I wrote two alternate endings. In one, she takes both her children into the bed for comfort. In the other, she resists the temptation, knowing that's the kind of thing that will weaken them, the kind of thing that got Scott into trouble, the kind of thing that as a mother, she must keep her children from. Reading them over now, I still can't decide which one is right.

I couldn't finish the story. I was troubled by the fact that I was writing about Dilly, who was a real person with a real life, but that I was turning her into a fictional character, something unreal. It made me feel vaguely criminal, and the fact that I didn't know what the nature of the crime was – theft, murder, or garden-variety betrayal – made it all the more difficult. I began to worry about what would happen if I ever published it. I knew it was unlikely that Dilly would ever read any of the small journals that were the only places where my stories had appeared, but suppose someone told her? One of the women from the Mountain Breeze, excited by my tiny fame.

I put the story down. It was September of 2004, and I became obsessed with the presidential election. My friends and I – my old friends in Boston, my new friends from yoga and Pilates and the Mountain Breeze café – obsessively consulted the Internet for the latest polls. We made day trips to New Hampshire to garner names for voter registration;

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we gave more money than we ever had to the Democratic campaign. I never discussed politics with Dilly, though. I suspected that she didn't care much about politics; I feared what I might discover if I asked. I knew my silence was wise when at Halloween I asked the boys what they were going to be for the holiday. Scott said he was going to be a knight in shining armor; Trevor said he was going to be a soldier, "so I can shoot people in Eye-rack bam bam bam."

After George Bush was elected, I was in despair, and I turned back to my writing, thinking perhaps I should attend to it since the larger world seemed hopeless. I felt that everything I'd based my life on was being called into question; every bad childhood nightmare I thought I had escaped was back to stay. The dream of the sixties seemed only a dream, the dream of my youth: the dream of a new world, the kind of world in which large boys were encouraged to hug when they felt affectionate. And it occurred to me that perhaps these things were even less likely in 2004 than they were when I was a child. In what we thought of as the bad old days. That perhaps, in a time when surveillance is not feared but increasingly desired, it was less likely than it was when I was a child that a boy like Scott would be allowed to hug the people he liked. I was trying to find a way to put this idea into my story, and there was nothing in what I knew that would allow a place for it.

One day, when I was trying to work on the story, I saw Dilly stooping and rising to collect wind-fallen apples, which later I made into apple sauce. That evening the house was fragrant with the scent of apples and cinnamon, and I knew this was because of her.

All that fall, I tried to finish the story and I couldn't. I allowed myself to fol-

low the impulse for pure description. I allowed myself to describe sunsets, which I knew were the most obvious things for someone to want to describe. I spent a lot of time watching the sun set from my study window, which faces west. I wanted to write about sunsets, because I knew that watching sunsets was something Dilly would like, something she might do with her children, something the four of us might all enjoy, might even enjoy together. I wrote the descriptions in my journal. I no longer keep a journal. It's odd to open the old one now, but I feel the need to call up that time, that time which has something to do with all the things related to Dilly that I am now trying to understand. I read the words I wrote two years ago:

It was that winter that I got involved in the Preservation Society. I went to the first meeting after my friend Laura, whom I'd met at the Mountain Breeze café and talked into joining me for Pilates, had told me I had to get over my political despair and the best way was to get involved in local issues, where there was at least some chance of making an impact.

The fact that I couldn't finish the story about Dilly seemed like some sort of sign. I didn't believe that anything I could write was worth even the chance of hurting Dilly. And I thought that meant I wasn't a real writer, that my need to write wasn't as strong as I'd thought it was, as I'd convinced my ex-husband it was. I decided to put my novel aside and concentrate on the project to save the wetlands from greedy developers.

The Preservation Society became the center of my life. The meetings led to social events: suddenly I was invited to dinners, and was giving them. I became

interested in gardening, and since then have had a satisfactory and entirely unbinding affair with the man who owns the best of our many local nurseries. Because of him I've taken up hiking and birding, and it makes the environmental issues that we work for so real to me that they pierce my heart, as if in contemplating the prospect of the degradation of this natural beauty I were contemplating the corruption or loss of a beloved child.

There seemed to be an endless series of issues needing our attention, and I became more proficient on the computer: creating graphics for our flyers and expanding our database. I taught Dilly some computer skills, which she hadn't had before, but which she picked up very quickly. When I suggested she take some computer courses at the community college, she told me one thing she had no interest in was any more school. "The last thing I need is more pressure. No thanks," she said. She could be firm in her refusals, and even when I thought they were unwise, I saw a greater unwisdom in trying to oppose her. There was the time when she told me Scott hadn't done so well in school, and the teacher was demanding that he read three books and write three book reports over the summer to make up his deficiencies. I offered to help. Dilly said, "No, thanks, he needs to learn to do things on his own. He's a real procrastinator. A real buck-passer. Now math, he's all over it. Give him math to do he'll sit on his behind for hours on end. But anything with words, it just bores him and he won't put his mind to it. He's got to break through that himself."

"I'm available any time," I said, but we both knew she wouldn't take me up on it.

Last spring, the Preservation Society got wind of a plan to build a Wal-Mart on the site of what used to be a dairy farm three miles from the interstate exit for our town. The Conservancy went into high gear; this was something we could rally the local population about. We were right that people wouldn't want the traffic and the eyesore of a big box ruining our landscape. We knew there'd be opposition: we were a depressed area and people needed jobs, but we weren't ready for the obviousness and radicalness of the split. Middle-class people didn't want the Wal-Mart, working-class people did.

We tried to have meetings that would make it clear to the people who supported Wal-Mart that in the long run it would be a bad idea for them; Wal-Mart drove out small businesses, and the jobs were lousy and exploitative. I was given the particular task of trying to formulate language that wouldn't be class-inflected and therefore alienating.

I tried to talk to Dilly about it, but she put her hands over her ears and said, "Oh, Eve, you know it's not the kind of thing I can get my brain around." I gave her more and more hours doing things like picking up Xeroxing and taking prospectuses to the sign makers. She said she was glad of the extra money; her kids seemed to grow out of their clothes before they grew into them.

At the very time when I needed her most, when we were preparing for the vote in the town council that would determine whether the formerly farmed area would be rezoned commercially, Dilly came to work more delighted than I'd ever seen her.

"You'll never guess, Eve. Maybe my luck's changing, I never win anything. But my friend, Betsey, she worked for one of those pyramid schemes, selling

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fire extinguishers, and if you let her do a demonstration in your house and wrote up a form saying you'd seen all the stuff and bought one (which I did, we needed a fire extinguisher, I'd never even thought of one), and you mailed it in, I mean the questionnaire, if you did that you were eligible for a raffle to win a trip to Disney World. A whole week, all expenses paid. Do you believe it? I won. Me. So the kids and I are going, in two weeks. It's the dream of a lifetime."

I was upset; Dilly's help had never been more crucial. Her connection to all the local merchants and laboring men was vital to our getting the word out. But what could I say? She looked so happy. It wasn't like her not to consider how she might be inconveniencing me. At the same time as I was hurt by it, I was glad for her. She'd never had the luxury of heedlessness, and I was glad to see her don it, like a silly hat or too-high heels. She said her mother would be glad to pitch in if I needed help. I said that I'd love it if she could just do a day's housework; I was up to my neck in political stuff. She said her mother made her look sick as a cleaner, I'd be really impressed. I agreed to have her mother come for one day the following week.

I'd never met Dilly's mother; I'd only talked to her once when she phoned to say Dilly's husband had died. I was surprised when I saw her: I suppose I expected some of Dilly's liteness, her goldness or rosinness, but her mother was heavy in every way that it was possible to be. She was overweight, but that wasn't the most important thing about her heaviness. It was her tread; every step she took seemed like a complaint or a reproach, and although it was late August, and she was wearing khaki shorts, she wore heavy grey wool socks with her tan Reeboks, and they made

my feet feel sweaty and oppressed. She sighed with every item she picked up, and I felt ashamed for everything about my domestic life. She moved the furniture vengefully as she vacuumed in places I wouldn't even know how to name. She refused to use the geranium-scented cleaner I preferred to 409: she said she'd bought some new cleaners for her kitchen and bathroom, and she swore by them, and she wasn't going to use anything else. I didn't feel I had the right to disagree.

I was working in my study when she knocked on the door. Her face was red; her breathing was labored. I thought she was going to tell me she'd had a heart attack. "I found this in the garbage," she said. She opened her closed fist and threw a twenty-dollar bill on the desk.

"Oh, my goodness," I said, in a voice so girlish and abashed I could hardly recognize it. "I can't imagine how it got there." I was telling the truth, I couldn't imagine how twenty dollars had fallen into the wastebasket – I could only guess that it had happened when I was trying to clean out my exercise bag after a bottle of foundation had spilled into it. I was hot with shame, as if Dilly's mother had uncovered something unspeakable, and I thought about the connection between money and shit. And suddenly I didn't understand what had happened because I didn't understand what money was: was it shit or gold, the most desirable thing in the world or the thing that must be hidden, never spoken of. And I was ashamed because of my lack of understanding, and the dishonesty that underlay it – and I was frightened, as Marie Antoinette must have been frightened when she heard herself saying, "Let them eat cake." Perhaps the moment she said it she knew that she'd be led to the guillotine, and that the people who led her there would be right to do it.

“You can’t imagine it. I’ll bet you can’t. Well, I can imagine it,” she said. “I can imagine it very well. You have so much money you can throw it away. Twenty dollars means nothing to you. Nothing. You think money is nothing. You think it’s garbage. You don’t even think about it. Do you know what it would mean to Dilly? It might mean she could buy herself some new clothes or go to the beauty parlor. Or maybe even the dentist. She takes her kids to the dentist, but she can’t afford to go herself. Last year she got a tooth pulled because she couldn’t afford a root canal. I don’t suppose you knew about that, did you. I don’t suppose you ever noticed that gap in the back of her mouth when she laughs hard or smiles wide. No, you wouldn’t. You and your fancy friends. Trying to keep the Wal-Mart away. If the Wal-Mart was there, maybe my Dilly could get a real job. Something that would lead to something. Instead of working for you and your fancy friends. What’s going to happen to her when she gets old? Are you going to take care of her? She won’t even have Social Security. But no, she likes you and your nice ways and your nice things, and that you talk nice to her and take her out to lunch on her birthday. But it’s no good for her. You’re spoiling her. You’re spoiling her just like you’ve been spoiled. But she won’t stand for it forever. She’ll leave you flat one day, just as soon as she gets a little sense.”

“But I thought she wanted it that way, my paying her under the table . . . I thought it was better for her.”

“It would have been better for her if she’d never met you. She might get a regular job in a normal place where she could meet people her own age, maybe somebody she could go out with on a normal date or something.”

Dilly

She pushed past me and took the twenty-dollar bill off the desk. She ripped it in half, then in four pieces, then eight, and then sixteen. She dropped it onto my desk so the pieces fell onto my computer keyboard. Then she walked out the door.

I sat with my head in my hands, as if I’d just been shot. I must have been sitting that way when the telephone rang. It was Dilly’s mother. “Look, Mrs. Harrison, I’m sorry. Don’t pay any attention to what I said. I get that way sometimes. I think it’s my time of life, you know what I mean. I mean, we’re about the same time of life, so I’m sure you understand. I just go off my head sometimes, and I say things, I don’t even mean them. Dilly’d be real freaked out if she knew what I did. I have to ask you as a favor, as a mother you have to understand, just to keep this between ourselves.”

“Of course,” I said.

“It’s just that I worry about her so much, I always have. She’s not like other people. She’s not like my other kids; she’s my youngest, and I guess we spoiled her, or her father spoiled her, God knows I always tried. ‘Life isn’t a dream, Dilly,’ I was always saying to her. She wanted some kind of life that was only a dream. And then she saw your life, with all your nice things; she loves nice things, she always did, we used to call her Lady Day, and sometimes we’d turn it into ‘Lah-di dah’ when we felt she wasn’t pulling her weight. You could never make her do anything on time, and she liked that about your life: ‘Eve never seems to be in a rush.’ Well, time is money I said to her, and that’s what you don’t have. You see, she isn’t strong. Any kind of pressure does her in. ‘I can’t stand the stress,’ she says that so much, she puts her hands over her ears like someone’s shouting at her. No one’s

shouting at you Dilly, I say, take your hands away from your ears. It's why she didn't go to college. She thinks it's so great. That you never seem to be in any rush to do anything. She thinks it's a real life, what you have. But it isn't. Not for her. It's just a dream, a dream that will keep her from waking up. 'Wake up, Dilly, life is real,' I always used to say that to her. She's got to toughen up. And I don't see it happening. Don't tell her I said any of this to you. She'd die a thousand deaths."

"I wouldn't say anything to Dilly," I said.

"I owe you one," Dilly's mother said, and hung up the phone.

I sat at my desk for half an hour, not knowing what to think or what to do. There was a meeting of the committee that night, and I called my friend Laura and said I was under the weather. Laura was upset: "You can't afford to be under the weather right now. Every day counts." I said I'd be back on board tomorrow.

It's tomorrow now; tomorrow is today and Dilly is home from Orlando. What will I say to her when I see her?

All I can think of are the things I can't say. All the questions I can't ask. Do you think you'd be better off working at Wal-Mart? Do you understand that the wages are terrible and that they cheat you out of benefits? Do you want me to report your income so you can be eligible for Social Security? Do you want me to pay for your health insurance? Do you want me to pay for you to go to the dentist? Do you want half my money?

That's what I really want to say. I want to say, Dilly, I have more than enough money and you don't have enough. Let's share. Let's share until we have exactly the same amount of money, and if I have to work harder to make ends meet, that

will only be fair. And then, when we have the same amount of money, we can talk about the environment and the war and the way the world should be. And until we do, there is nothing we can say to each other. Because otherwise everything is a lie. Or as your mother says, a dream.

And I realized how many of the things that come under the heading, "Things that cannot be talked about," or "Questions that cannot be asked," were about money. That, even more than sex, money was the thing we feared to mention, that could cause ruptures in a friendship that could never be repaired. And I felt very stupid that I hadn't understood that in my life ever before.

Am I bad for you, Dilly, I want to say, when she comes up the path. Was meeting me a bad thing for your life? Should I send you away to make your life better?

She is carrying a plastic bag covered with the images of Disney characters: Mickey, Minnie, Goofy, Donald Duck. "I brought you something – it was the only thing in Disney World I thought you wouldn't hate," she says. She's brought me two pounds of Kona coffee, which smells intoxicating, even through the plastic.

"How was your holiday, Dilly?"

"It was great, but it was stressful. I'm so glad to be home." She looks around my kitchen and opens up her arms. She smiles one of her wonderful smiles. She puts her hand on my forearm. Her hand is warm and firm and slightly but pleasantly damp. "You know, Eve," she says, "I just can't wait to get back to work."