Their house was still except for shuffling, mumbling, the slow caretaking of possessions. She was dead and most of him was too. Frank didn’t walk up the stairs anymore to where their room had been. He now slept in the back bedroom near the kitchen, where the guests used to sleep. That’s what he had become, a guest in this world, and he treated himself cruelly so that he could bear the guilt of being alive.

Frank’s oldest boy, Jim, was dead also. Bald tyres, ice in March, a telephone pole. Jim’s wife remarried and took the grandkids to Pittsburgh. They sent crude postcards “to Grampa” twice a year, Christmas and Easter, but these were class projects mostly, mandatory affection enforced by their teachers.

Bruce, Frank’s other son, had never really kept in touch, even when Helen was alive. He and his father had argued incessantly during his teens, and Bruce left for overseas as soon as the Navy accepted him. Frank once found a letter from Bruce to his mother when she was ill, but the strange vitriol inside — concluding with “Dad was obsessed with you, but didn’t give a damn about us” — had made Frank wince and throw it away.

Then there was Judy, the youngest — once his little princess — but she didn’t visit anymore either. Not since her mother’s funeral. He didn’t blame her — it was a terrible day and he had been delirious with grief. Incoherent at the wake, Frank had called Judy “Helen” over and over, and he kissed her on the mouth in an inappropriate manner until they pulled him away and sat him down. After that, he drank heavily for three months straight, sometimes waking up with the urn in his lap. He would gently replace it on the mantle with their family photos and the small watercolours Helen did her final summer.

So he occupied the house alone, brooding out on his acreage. He had abandoned the farm work soon after she was first diagnosed. Gradually, he sold off the livestock to neighbours, then the equipment, and finally her blue Cadillac, which Helen had loved beyond words and drove majestically to her canasta games each Saturday night. It had been his gift to her one year when profits were particularly good, even though his tractor was broken at the time and Bruce had needed braces. Frank cried when he sold that car — it was the one piece of her that he didn’t keep yet wished he had, that goddamned beautiful car that smelled of her perfume on the driver’s seat.
The corn had died without harvesting and years later some battered stalks still poked through the snow like cancerous bones. Frank liked the way they looked from the kitchen window, the sprawling fields of snow whiskered with long-dead corn. It proved that not all things died and immediately went away. Some things lingered and made their presence felt forever. Frank spent much of his time in the kitchen. It was full of reminders and, although no longer clean and bright, it was the room where he could most easily picture Helen, bustling and chattering through the day.

At the table, Frank sipped his coffee and read his mail without interest. He could no longer even muster the energy to walk out to the mailbox, so his neighbour Gene came by once a week with a handful of letters. Sometimes junk mail addressed to Helen would still arrive and Frank carefully put them in their own pile on the counter. He didn’t know why. Her stack was quite large now and Frank wondered how a dead person could receive so much mail. But it consoled him that there were others, even if strangers, who also wanted Helen to be alive. They wanted her to buy things. Frank wanted to buy her things. Another Cadillac, perhaps, if it would make her happy. Sometimes, people called for her, badly mangling the German last name. Frank used to curtly tell them she was gone, but the voices on the phone persisted, and eventually he just sat there numb and shaken, listening to things they wanted Helen to do or purchase. “She’ll call you back,” he said occasionally and it made him feel less hollow to think it was true.

His first year alone, Frank watched a lot of television, but it made a poor wife, so he put it out in the barn. He preferred to look at photographs and other reminders. The house became a vast museum of his mourning. Her cast-iron omelet pan, her tiny shoes. A long eyelash nestled in the couch could occupy him for hours as he held it to the lamplight, remembering her wink. Hairs, lashes, bits of nail. These were rarities, treasures, for him. All the rest was in that goddamned urn. He stared at that too and talked to it softly. It listened. When he lit a fire, the urn’s shadow moved and made it look like a living thing. Frank enjoyed that.

He slept with her bathrobe — ratty and coffee-stained red terrycloth with an odour like earwax — crumpled next to his pillow. It was like him, needing Helen to give it form and shape. Otherwise, it just lay there. Limp and useless. Yet, he clutched the robe and tried to believe that it was more. In his pleasant dreams, Helen smiled. She held his hand and sometimes even lectured him adoringly about mundane matters. Their house had huge dream rooms that swirled with brightness and the children were still small and active. They jumped across their father’s path, but when he tried to hug them they squirmed
free. He usually gave up trying to catch the children and went back to find Helen. In the best dreams — which would have seemed saccharine and ludicrous to anyone but him — she would honk the car horn and he would find her in the driveway dressed in her Sunday best, looking as young and radiant as when he married her. They would drive away and laugh at the sky.

In his nightmares, the house was much darker and Helen was difficult to find. Some of the rooms held burning coffins or empty hospital beds. Her final oncol ogist, Dr Corrigan, often appeared with two faces, grabbing at Frank and sternly murmuring numbers and medical jargon: “Metastasizing ... spreading from the lungs ... It's in the bones ... Stage four.” In the worst dreams, Helen would trudge past Frank, frail and oblivious, dragging a snarl of tubes behind her. It was when he awoke from these that Frank wished he still drank.

The glaring winter persisted. Frank refused to go outside except to take out the garbage. The air in the house grew foul and stale. In his heart, he hoped this was his last winter, but death never did the expected. When he wanted nothing but for Helen to live, death came quickly. Now, he wanted to die himself and death was absent. Apparently, he thought, death only made its entrance when it could gouge at love by scarring another. It liked an audience, a second victim to torment.

Lethargic, Frank looked at the urn more and more often. He grew envious.

In March, he came out of his haze long enough to remember the anniversary of Jim's death. His son had died two years before his mother. Jim had never known about his mother's illness, since it was soon after his burial when she began seeing doctors. Although she tried to remain courageous and optimistic, Helen suffered terribly in the aftermath of Jim's crash. She ignored the advice of her own doctors and, while she was still able, spent many evenings alone at the grave. Frank became upset that he was losing both her health and her attention, and he quickly came to hate that grave, even the idea of graves. He vowed that if Helen were to pass on, he would cremate her and always keep her near.

So, each March, Frank was reminded of all the horrors of the past five years: the abrupt loss of Jim — and the jealousy and guilt born from his death — and the slow deterioration and suffering of his wife. Down in the basement, there was a box of Jim's boyhood possessions and he brought it upstairs to sift through. Tangled fishing lures and football cards amidst the paperwork of report cards, letters, and pencil sketches. Jim had had his mother's artistic talent, although Frank never encouraged him the way he did Helen.
In the box was a large manila envelope that Frank hadn't opened in three years. He dreaded its grim contents, but this day he felt obligated to look and remember. The photos were stark, black and white, taken at night by the sheriff. In the foreground, Jim's pickup sat there like a smashed spider in a web of cracked glass. The driver's door lay on the snow, after the paramedics had ripped it off trying to free him. There were photos of the cab and the seat was smeared black — thankfully black so it resembled ink — amidst shards of windshield like confetti. One blurry shot had a deputy consoling Helen. She was dazed, with curlers in her hair, leaning into the mangled groove in the front of the truck, where the pole had struck. As if she wished to turn back time, to replace its resistance with her softness, and sacrifice herself for her boy. The wreckage spread out across the ditch and the phone pole teetered obscenely in the background.

Overwhelmed, Frank dropped the pictures and began to sob, but he soon felt like a fraud. Dumbstruck by a revelation, he went quiet. Lurking inside him was the horrid knowledge that his grief was only for Helen and not for Jim, that everything had always been exclusively for her. His children meant nothing in comparison, they never had, and they were right to despise him. Unable to bear this, if only for the shame Helen would have felt had she known his deepest feelings, he drifted and fragmented into something else, a constellation of tiny memories. When the tears dried, he was on the floor in a foetal curl.

He was later startled from his torpor by a phone call. He got up off the floor.

"Hello?" Heavy silence. "Hello?"

"Frank?" It was the whisper he had been waiting for. It was impossible.

"Helen?" The other end of the phone fizzled with discomfort.

"Noooo, it's me, Judy."

"Judy?" His question swam with confusion and disappointment.

"Yes, your daughter? Remember?" Angry yet concerned, her voice cracked slightly.

"Yes." He sounded far away. Unconvincing.

"Are you feeling alright, Frank? I'm calling to check on you. It's Jim's five year, you know. Today ... Are you there?"

"Yes."
"Listen, I was just worried about you on Jim's anniversary. Both Bruce and I were," she lied. "He sends his best ... Can you hear me?"

"Okay," Frank said blankly, still reeling from the moment when Helen had been on the phone. She had said his name. She was dead and she had said his name. He set the receiver down.

"Are you taking care of yourself? Wait, are you there? Hello?" Finally, she had to say the word. It hurt her to be familiar with him again. "Dad? Dad?! Answer me, Dad!" Judy was shrieking, breaking down, a thousand miles away.

Something stirred in his mind and he picked the receiver back up. "She'll call you back." He hung up. He carefully undressed. The telephone rang for another hour and Frank watched it silently from the couch, shivering.

He took Helen down from the mantle. Opening he silver urn, he looked inside and the motion of his breath stirred the ash. Frank cupped his hand, scooped up the dust of his wife, and dropped her across his scalp and down his neck. She drifted in the air. She stuck to his skin. She crawled across him in microscopic bits and he smeared his chest grey. He emptied the urn and covered his nakedness with the powder he adored. If there was anything left of her in the ash, he wanted her to permeate him. If there was anything left of the cancer, he wanted it to destroy him.

Frank lay on the floor and dreamed of lovemaking. The doorbell rang. It was Gene with a handful of mail.

"Frank?" He rattled the doorknob. "Are you there?"

Groggily, Frank awoke, and Gene saw the movement through the pane.

"Frank??? Jesus Christ. You okay?"

The door was locked but flimsy and Gene pushed it open. Filthy and nude, Frank staggered to his feet.

"Oh, Jesus, Frank. Jesus! What happened?" Gene averted his eyes and his voice held fear, as if apprehensive of the answer. He took off his coat and wrapped it across Frank's shoulders. The urn was on the floor, still upright with the lid off.

"Let's get you cleaned up." He swiped at some of the grime on Frank's forehead.

"No!" Screaming, he shoved away Gene's hand.
“Okay, okay. At least put some clothes on. Jesus.” Gene got a pair of overalls from the other room. He managed to get them on him, the way one would dress a sick child.

I'm taking you to the doctor, Frank. Doctor. Understand?”

Grinning, eyes closed, Frank ignored him. Cursing and nauseated at all the loose ash, Gene put some boots on the old man’s feet and led him outside to the truck. New snow wavered softly in the air like the dust of dead clouds.

The hospital was fifteen miles away. During the drive, Gene spoke to him in a gentle monotone, but Frank was somewhere else. Laughing, Helen steered the Cadillac through the blush of summer, and he leaned back in the passenger seat with the wind in his hair. Taking her hand in his, he smiled.

“I've missed you.”