

## Jean Anderson

### Blizzard

That papery wisp of voice comes first, then the glide and thump of slippers on the worn carpet of the stairs leading up to the front hallway. *"Now this one,"* says the voice. It's barely audible, but those are the words, Twila's certain: *"And this one."*

Twila can see more than hear the individual gnarled fingers of that long left hand, the bony flat palm lifting and sliding, pushing against the wall as her mother-in-law ascends—she'd swear to it. And the hall door creaks on its hinges, the slippers thump softly and glide forward in the darkness like snowshoes—it's a wonder she's pulled on her slippers this time, Twila tells herself—and the reedy voice whispers again, closer, more distinct: *"Yes, there she is. Asleep. She's asleep. Sleeping. Yes, she's asleep."* Twila, who's become good at it, keeps her eyelids shut tight and does not move.

*"Well, she's asleep,"* says the quavery voice, suspirant, not quite a sigh, and Twila's trying hard not to breathe: that old-lady smell—is it real or imagined? Should I sit up? *No!* Then the slippers, and the voice, change directions in the dark and begin the return trip, the descent back down the unlit staircase to the big bedroom Twila's daughter Rose turned over four summers ago, with no hesitation, to her Gran. Rose moved her own things into the tiny, slant-roofed guest bedroom under the stairwell till she went off to college, two long winters ago, Outside, the Lower 48, on a scholarship to the university in Seattle.

I should worry about the darkness, Twila tells herself. But her mother-in-law's mind seems pared down to something like an essential sixth sense. Ordinary dangers elude Edwina, even on the rare occasions when she wanders away. Ed's mother wears her body like a battered shield now, Twila's thinking, sidling carefully forth at that oddly protective angle inside it in some final round of self-preservation.

*"Yes, self, damn her. Her or me."* Twila hisses it, then sighs at her own mean-spirited assessment and tosses off the afghan to sit up. She's wide

awake, rubbing at her cold upper arms, hearing sing-songy words like a schoolyard taunt: *Dr. Twila Lawrence sleeps on the couch.*

It's how she often comes awake after teaching, Edwina or not: curled up with a book, cold, on the living room couch, narrating her own maddening life. A wet spring snow, a real blizzard, blew in from Siberia during her Tuesday evening class—471, *The History of Russian-Alaskan Contact*. Fierce snow sent like a joke to enfold that grim history; not just Russian *matryoshkee* to match her own life, but long generations of troubles nested like dolls.

By the time she'd talked with three students, changed books for Wednesday—201, *Western Civ*—and put things away in her tiny four-person office, she was bleary-eyed.

But lucky, yes, she knew it, lucky even to have a job these days. The night-school person, in an office thanks to the kindness of tenure-track people with real jobs. So why couldn't she feel lucky?

She'd pulled on parka and boots, warmed up the snowy car, then dug and backed her way off campus to the highway for the half-hour drive from hell. Climbing into bed at 11:15 with Ed, who'd rolled onto his side snorting when she opened their bedroom door, seemed—as usual, and to quote Ed's grunts when she tried—“*not a viable option.*”

At 5:00 a.m., only half awake in the cold living room, she'd plumped the pillow again, pulled the afghan over her ears and was trying to decide if there might ever have been a perfect man for her. A working-class man like her father, maybe? Probably not Karl after all, she'd decided, and certainly not Ed—when she'd heard Edwina's voice on the stairs.

Twila's tried, often, to describe such events to Ed, including her own increasingly bitter reactions. But her husband scoffs—less at the notion of his mother as innately selfish than at the possibility that any human ability at all remains, speech included, miraculously sheltered in that bent husk of Edwina's diminished and wizened form. She's less his mother to Ed now than some maddeningly painful and incomplete ruination.

Still, it's true that only Edwina's voice, even in this ghostly version, remains anything like her old self. And of course Ed rarely hears that. Twila admits it. Wina no longer speaks by day, except, in whispers, to the TV screen. Or to her own blurred image in the light-catching mirror on the north wall in the living room, offering up her pitiful stacks of carefully folded Kleenex. Or her hands, her wrists: “*Would you like these?*”

Edwina Simmons Lawrence was as lovely as Rose once. Twila lies back on the couch to consider this, sighing and fingering the afghan, trying to make her heart stop thumping so damned hard. Or at least

very attractive. Twila prefers that version. Yes, Wina was full-busted and stylish—like Rose—when Twila first met her. Nearly thirty years ago, impossible to believe all that! But, yes, beautiful. And Twila sees a sudden vision of Edwina at their wedding, hers and Ed's: Edwina so gorgeous in that peach-colored spring suit. How could a fifty-year-old woman manage to outshine a twenty-two-year-old bride? And why was she smiling now at that once-bitter memory?

Because that's how she'd felt at the time. Outshone. Plain, intelligent Twila trying not to look at her new mother-in-law. Odd to remember all that now, but yes, lovely was the only word for Wina back then. Except for that haughty stance, the characteristic upthrust of her shoulders, which—thankfully, maybe—spoiled the effect for Twila.

Yet Wina was not haughty in fact, only witty and full of self-doubt, traits she'd tried hard to hide. She was bright and generous, very loving—Twila learned all that slowly. Edwina had taught school for forty-eight years, starting off at sixteen in a one-room schoolhouse, and the gestures, Wina said, were part of a carefully cobbled together plan: *classroom demeanor*.

Armor again, Twila thinks, sighing. Edwina's told Twila how terrified she was to step into a classroom, some students a head taller than she was: big farm boys who hated school. Twila, who began teaching adults at forty-one, can identify. And Twila's mind tosses up a sudden image of Edwina at sixteen, her first year, jumping rope in the schoolyard with her students, crying herself to sleep at night out of sheer loneliness—for her sister, brother and widowed mother, miles away. Wina was not rehired at the end of the year: she was a good teacher, the school board told her, but she'd played too long with the children at recess. Life, Twila's thinking, what a tangle of sorrows and jokes!

When Ed, Wina's only child, asked Twila if she'd agree to sell his mother's condo in Chicago and bring her to live with them here in Anchorage—well, much as Twila longed to refuse, there'd been no choice. Not after the diagnosis. Alzheimer's. Wina could no longer care for herself, but she was not yet ready for a nursing home. Too confused to understand any part of it, Wina had at first resisted the move. Then, to Twila's continuing amazement, she'd cast all her sympathies with Twila, not Ed, as soon as she set foot in the house.

Once, after an especially vicious and yet typical-enough husband-and-wife quarrel—not a lovers' quarrel at all, Twila thinks angrily, remembering. Were she and Ed ever lovers? Chained combatants maybe, or a yoked pair of worn-out oxen. Even Wina's arrival seemed like just one more increment in that endless cycle of work and worry and fault-finding

that surely defined their marriage. Well, that time anyway—nearly four years ago—Twila had gone to Edwina afterwards and told her she was leaving Ed. Today, maybe. The kids were almost grown, Rose eighteen and the boys, the twins, fifteen. She'd finally get a divorce, she was that fed up. But Wina must not blame herself in any way, Twila was careful to try to explain that. The divorce would have nothing to do with Edwina. Not with her illness or her presence in their life.

Edwina had said: *"I know, I know. You must have your own life, Twila. I've divorced two men for exactly that reason."* Twila laughs softly, remembering: Edwina—still in her bathrobe, regal-looking in the burgundy-colored robe, clear-headed for the moment, very cheerful, and—typical—so generous, mouthing exactly those words.

Twila had not left, of course. Giving up was not her style. As witness herself sitting up now, alternately shivering and smiling on the couch, remembering life for Edwina. Her self-assigned role these days, maybe: worrying over Edwina. And over Rose. Rose, Rose, like a sore tooth in her mind.

The furnace creaks, comes on, and Twila's mind shifts again, who knows why: to the birthday package she must wrap and put in the mail. Today. Can we afford to enclose a check? For the twins, Paul and Mark, freshmen in Fairbanks. Nineteen years old in three days! On their own for the very first time and doing well, decent grades, she and Ed still managing to afford dorm fees and in-state tuition despite the hopeless economy. But where have the years gone! And she sinks back against the pillow.

This was the hour, once, that she'd saved for Karl. They'd never been lovers, never really had "an affair," maybe not even "a relationship" as her students might phrase it. No, maybe neither—to choose two likely and similar soap-opera terms Twila hates. She's a person made for commitment, she supposes, sighing again. Surely she and Ed, difficult though it's been from day one, have lasted through twenty-eight years so far of this hopelessly complicated marriage mostly by dint of commitment.

And happily often. Another strange fact, but true. They've often been happy. Anyway, flings of any sort seem trivial to Twila, silly and pointless. Except, of course, for these flights of the mind that are so inescapable yet so essential. Think, think, think. Ridiculous maybe. Ed says so. But then, don't people lead such thoughtless-seeming, trouble-filled lives because they don't know how to think? Can't be bothered to think ahead? And she sits up.

It's the terrifying thing about Rose's life in Seattle these days. So thoughtless-seeming—a love triangle? But she must not let herself begin

all that. No, Twila decides, no. Or she'll never be able to teach tomorrow. Today, that is. Tonight. Western Civ.

But maybe there'd been a triangle of sorts in her own life once, too. Was that what it was? Beyond herself and Edwina and Ed. Karl was her colleague at the university back then, a language professor, teaching German and Russian. Nearly seven years ago: like yesterday.

He was divorced, unhappy as she was, rearing his two young sons alone because his former wife needed her own space, her own life. Which she'd gone off to lead—not quite alone, Karl hinted. First in Canada, then in California and Mexico. They'd never been lovers exactly, she and Karl, though the feelings between them—she believes this still, always will, probably—were passionate and enduring, a shared form of love.

Mostly they'd talked—endlessly, earnestly, passionately—about the humanities and teaching. About students and their lives, or life itself. Rarely about themselves. In her tiny shared office before a class or, more often, in his, since Karl had tenure and a real office. On and on, talking and talking. Sometimes they'd had coffee together.

Pathetic? Maybe so.

But she'd loved him. Deeply, purely, strange as it seems. Always an insomniac, an early waker and light sleeper her whole life through, she'd saved mornings for Karl in those days. For thoughts of him. Like a daily meditation, nearly a prayer, mental pushups for the life of a person she loved: sending forth her wish that Karl's life would be ... but what? Fine, she supposes. Full and happy, meaningful as it should be. That's all it had amounted to.

Until Karl moved south to take a teaching position in Idaho. Wina arrived shortly after, and Twila in truth had rarely thought about Karl since then. No time, no energy, with Wina and teaching—part-timers have to work so much harder! And with so little to show for it! It was so damned unfair! But—with her own middle age advancing steadily—and Ed's. And of course with the twins to worry over, and Rose—boys from school sniffing after lovely Rose even then. Well, there'd been no energy left to devote to Karl anymore, not even in her thoughts.

But, yes, a triangle must have been what it was. Like Rose. Only twenty-two and “in love.” With a married professor! How could it be? How could it have happened? That's what she's asked Rose, over and over, and received no answer. Was Rose a “home-wrecker” then? But, no. He was separated, alone for nearly a year.

*“He has a child, Rose,” Twila had said on the phone last week. “Think of that, please. Think of her.”*

*"Lots of people have children, Mother. Having children doesn't absolve a person from the human race."* That's what she'd answered! Like a foot race, Twila thought—a damned foot race! Rose, Rose! Maybe she and Ed had damaged the girl with all their ridiculous quarrels. With this pitiful excuse for a marriage. Would Rose go through life unable to love appropriately?

But then, what is "appropriate love" after all? Twila stood up suddenly to think that.

Could anybody ever love merely appropriately? Was it possible? Could such a vast emotion be so narrowly circumscribed? And should it be? Of course not—and she sat again.

Besides, Rose is no longer a child. Respect her age and intelligence. Twila told herself that now. And don't focus so much on her body, plunging her into womanhood at twelve. So like Edwina in that. Rose had inherited Edwina's lovely complexion too: creamy skin, strawberry blonde hair, and that good bustline, which men simply could not resist.

But she was also intelligent. Her mind very like Edwina's once purely factual one, that calm and bold practicality. So like Edwina, once. Maybe she'd think her way through. Or was Rose's mind actually more akin to her own complicated and drifting one? This nearly useless-seeming, wandering intellect. Not a historian's mind at all probably. Rose, gifted or cursed with this same strange mind? *Mom's sift-y-sorty, East-meets-West mind*, as Rose joked when she was fourteen or so. Was that what Rose called it: *sift-y-sorty? East-meets-West?*

And this so-called professor—an adjunct only, like herself. No future to speak of, most likely. Thinking "love" must be what he lacks rather than an actual job, a real life, academic fairness and equity! Well, he must be to blame. He's twenty-seven, an adult after all—and a professional! He must not be allowed to prey on a student. On Rose! I'll phone a dean in Seattle to register a formal complaint, she thought yet again. Though Rose would be furious at that.

And suppose everything just blew over. Began to seem tiresome and stupid, silly all at once to both of them. Not love after all. That could happen. In a way it seemed quite probable. Yes, very likely. Maybe Rose would come to her senses.

She and Ed had tried to instill decent values. They'd stuck to their own marriage—and not just for the kids' sake, though they'd thought of that. Rose was surely a good person. Affectionate and kind, intelligent, brave. And responsible, too—she'd always been *so* responsible, and very hard-working—just like Ed and herself.

Maybe it was Alaska. Could raising Rose here be to blame? Such a free-spirited place, at such a remove from their families. But, no. Coming to Alaska had been the best part of their life, the central event in Twila's own life, certainly. She still remembers the smells of the boreal forest as they drove the highway north through Canada that first time. Like coming home—or like falling in love. The Chugach Mountains, the slant of daylight that first summer, almost no darkness at all. And the North Pacific, whales spouting in Cook Inlet, the rocky coast. How could any of that possibly harm anyone? Surely such a world could only make Rose stronger. So where had they gone wrong? Where had they failed?

And Ed—typical!—he simply refused to talk about it. Refused. Not another word. That's what he'd said on Sunday: "*She's an adult now by God, we have problems of our own, Seattle's a long ways off, and we know too damned little. Now, not another word.*"

But of course a person *needed* to talk. Talk is life in a way, isn't it, for people?

And before Twila had time to think what she was doing in the dark, she was groping her way down the stairs. Not even turning on a light. Her fingertips nearly able to feel the path just traced by Edwina's fingers. Heat or something—though she could not quite sense it when she tried again, not even in her mind.

When she reached the bedroom—of course—Edwina was back in bed. As usual. Asleep, yes, in Rose's old powder-blue bedroom.

Twila smoothed the covers over her mother-in-law's small bony frame hunched on the bed like a child—and smelly. *Phew!* A bath today. So hard to give lately—incontinence next?

And Wina was suddenly snoring like an ox! Louder than Ed's formidable snores. Shocking to hear such a hardy and ugly noise—and so loud!—issuing forth from such a tiny, weak-looking elderly woman. Poor Wina, Twila thought. Not long till the end, probably. Or a nursing home, if she and Ed could ever bring themselves to that. Or afford it! Especially these days!

Twila stood for a minute bent over the bed where she'd read so many bedtime stories to Rose, and simply let the noise wash over her. Not music of course, but something else. Something human. It was pouring over and through her.

Then she was not hearing it anymore—not Edwina at all, but something more, faint but clear. She was hearing words in her ears, letting her own lips form words: "*This too shall pass.*" Wina's old motto, her personal key to the world: Beowulf. Exactly the notion that's needed. Yes, Beowulf, Edwina's



response to every problem, once. And there'd been so many problems! Edwina's father's sudden death coming first, when she was fourteen. Then the death of her first young husband, from TB.

And drinking. Both Ed's Dad and Edwina's sister Cora were alcoholics. And Edwina *had* married three times after all: "*Marriage is just another word for trouble, Twila,*" as Wina once loved to joke. Also the Depression and both world wars, then Ed sent off to Vietnam though he was far too young—all that. Edwina teaching days, going to school nights for almost two decades to earn a teaching degree and get certification.

Too. Nearly what Twila herself did. Studying history as well as she could, here, working so damned hard for a decade or more to enter a field she loved—just to become a second-rater. A part-timer, "an adjunct." A mere shadow in the university world.

Like Edwina. Nearly a ghost. Alzheimer's. The gradual loss of one's mind, one's self: a real curse, to end life by losing your mind. Twila sank into Edwina's old orange plaid rocker they'd shipped up from Chicago, breathless again, thinking that she and Edwina were so much alike after all. Except that, despite everything, her own life was far easier.

Out the window, snow—so peaceful, timeless, falling into its own pure light. Bluish-white and yet luminous. Beautiful flakes, lacy, delicate—but so huge! Still so thick! When Twila stood up to look, the back yard was brimming with snow. Snow up to the window frame, high as the fence posts. Snow just everywhere! No end yet to this damned blizzard! It had the look of ... what was it?

"*A secret stay-at-home day.*" Wasn't that what Rose called snow days as a little girl—snowbound for a few hours or a whole magical day? School and work and every bit of ordinary life cancelled. A holiday they'd always needed. A bit of peace. Needed now too? Just as much? But impossible. *Peace?* For herself and Edwina and Ed? A joke.

He certainly needed it most, of course, with all the cutbacks going on at the airport. Handing out pink slips day after day to friends. Maybe his own next. Her part-timer's job was only semester-to-semester, too. And so many worries about Edwina—how would they ever afford a nursing home? And now Rose.

Atop Wina's chest of drawers, there in the increasing daylight was the embroidered motto Rose had given her Gran for Christmas, its flowery letters glowing under glass: *THE BEST AND MOST BEAUTIFUL THINGS IN THE WORLD CANNOT BE SEEN OR EVEN HEARD. THEY MUST BE FELT WITH THE HEART.* — HELEN KELLER



And Twila was thinking suddenly, through Edwina's snores, of all the Siberian women she'd met in the last decade. Though why on earth had they come to mind now? Siberians just everywhere in Alaska it seemed, since *glasnost* and the fall of communism in Russia. Women like herself and Edwina—amazingly like—including the four Siberian women she knew best. Real friends: Alexandra, the young grandmother from Magadan, who's back hiding out in Moscow with her son, other friends say, so that he—schizophrenic—won't be sent to a work camp. Which they do still have, apparently.

And Svetlana, a translator, barely able to feed herself these days in Yakutsk. Another hard year. And Olga, a language teacher, poorly paid as herself and then some, with a sick mother to care for too, in Vladivostok. And Lena, a lovely bride, a violinist from Yakutsk, trying to learn marriage—no, *life!*—in Alaska. Here in Anchorage with a know-it-all young American husband.

Each of them was like Rose, too. She knew that suddenly. Strong, resourceful women, headlong into their lives—complicated and extremely demanding modern lives. "*Wedded to change,*" as Alexandra had sighed once, joking about being set adrift in post-communist Russia: "*So difficult. Though we're much better off, of course.*" But tossed alive into a new "freedom" that sometimes felt like a curse. Maybe like driving in a blizzard. That loss of all boundaries. The sheer impossibility of any clarity of forward movement. Terrifying, but strangely exhilarating, too—

"*Now they'll join us.*" Karl's old joke over coffee. "*Free but damned—and in debt up to their eyeballs like proper capitalists.*" How she'd loved him! Why hadn't they acted? Cowardice? Fear?

But no. Decency. Good sense. And Ed. She was married—how could they ever make an ugly thing of such a beautiful one? They couldn't betray Ed. She and Karl—and Ed too—were decent, honorable people. Loving people. Like Rose.

Ahhh, love again. What was it?

Anyway, she still loved snow, didn't she? Like Edwina—once. And like Rose. Life was such a puzzle, nothing like the stately and fixed order of history, the known past.

Though equally paradoxical—roiled and tangled in mysterious time. But maybe that's what Wina wanted to say in the dark. That the three of them do have so much in common: Edwina, Twila, and Rose.

She should stop worrying about Rose. She must trust Rose, let her live her own life: If Rose loves somebody, he has to be decent, an honorable person. He must be a fine man. She knew it was true.

So maybe this was the triangle that really mattered: Edwina, Twila, and Rose. She saw it suddenly. Three strong, capable women, generous and loving, born for this world. Edwina's chair seemed to rock on its own while Twila considered that. The motion, even the padding of the old chair Rose loved too, offering its badly needed solace. To be savored, Twila knew it. To be enjoyed and respected.

Like Edwina's still so-human snores: back at full volume again.

And French toast! That's what she'll make for breakfast—she's hungry for it. A Sunday breakfast: Edwina's recipe, laced with a capful of brandy—Ed's best-loved of any breakfast on earth. Everybody's favorite in this family. Today there'll be time.