

Which one are you? my father asks plaintively in those first days, at moments when I am alone with him, my sister somewhere else, polishing, spraying product on surface, rubbing, shining. Wax on, wax off.

I don't clean. My disinclination for this activity I call by various names: sloth, depression, boredom. It's not that I dislike clean. I like it when it is done but I don't want to do it. I don't want anybody else to do it for me either. I make exceptions. I clean the toilet, I wash my clothes, but organised housecleaning is as foreign to me as saying a rosary.

My parents' house is not clean. Even by my standards, it is not clean. My sister arranges for a team of helpers, three in all, to come in. They will care for my father when we go back to where we came from, my sister and I. In the meantime, they will clean.

The first one pitches in bravely when we show her the fridge. She is red-haired and childless, married, with animals. She was a local downhill ski champ in her youth, before life sat her down and layered pound after pound onto her wide farmgirl frame until she is winded by the effort of standing up. That plus the cigarettes.

Dad skied too, decades ago. In unlikely fashion, they will bond.

Hours later, that first day, she whacks the fridge door shut and says, You want blow by blow, or gist? Gist, my sister and I say in unison.

Ok. At the back, nothing identifiable. It would take carbon dating. Had to sacrifice the crockery. Some sausages back there, those mothers were not coming unstuck.

She peers at us for confirmation that she has done the right thing. We nod. It's like Lord of the Fridge.

Toward the middle, she continues, a delicatessen period, bad idea. Mayonnaise does not age well. Why grow your own penicillin when the pharmaceutical complex will do it for you? Anyhoo, she shakes her head, whatever.

At the front, a semblance of normal, she says. Milk, eggs, butter, dated within living memory.

She snaps her damp cleaning cloth. I saved what I could, she concludes.

My sister is silent, maybe thinking about how she would have gone about the job otherwise. I step in.

Thank you, I say with feeling. Please come back tomorrow. It will get better.

Count on that, she says, and lumbers out carrying the black garbage bags she has filled up.



Which one are you, my father asks me, affecting the crinkly twinkly blue-eyed pseudo-stern frown that served him well with the ladies in his youth.

I'm the one from Australia, I say, opting for geography.

You must tell me about the ashram sometime, he says.

That's not me, I say. That's the other one.

What's an ashram anyway, he says.

Not sure, Dad. You'll need to ask the other one. I say her name for him, her present name. I do this because my sister changed what we were allowed to call her some years ago. She said that hearing her childhood name cast her back into the black chasms of before and we were not to do it.

Your other daughter, Dad, I say.

One day in a few months, when my sister and I are both back in our own homes, my father will sit in reflective mode with his helper and say, I have two daughters, you know.

I know, she says. I know them. She is flicking through channels with the remote, looking for the baseball. She knows there may be a meltdown if she can't find it. How about

those Orioles.

He repeats it. I have two daughters. I adopted them after the war. That gets her attention. You what? she says.

Oh yes, he says. I adopted them. Sisters. And I hired a crazy woman to look after them. Had to get rid of her, eventually.

Crazy as a loon, he says, turning his attention to the screen. Don't have to worry about her anymore.

The helper will report this to us on the phone, fondly, just proof for her of her employer's encroaching dementia, which as it progresses, she hopes, will gradually make her the most important person in his life.

I will reject this angrily when I hear it. In my books, she'll be wrong.

I won't think, then or later, that he has dementia. His years will just be closing in on him, like the chutes the prairie cattle run through to get onto the trucks and then off the trucks and into the yard where they take their last free breath, the width of the chutes diminishing as they go, the last ones into the slaughter-house just wide enough for one – no choice but to go forward to the end and to go fast. Move along little doggie.

Life, the extremity. That is what will ail my father.

My sister will also react angrily to the careworker's sharing of Dad's remark, but for a different reason. She is angry that he said we were adopted.

I remind her that when she was little, she told people she was adopted. She wanted to be adopted. It was not an unreasonable position to take, I say, but everyone laughed, because you look so much like Mum.

He's disowning us, she says, her voice steely down the line.

Already done, remember, I say.

Emotionally I mean, she says.

I'm not comfortable telling people they're wrong but I do it anyhow.

You're wrong, I say. He's claiming us. He doesn't want anything more to do with the crazy woman. He needs us but he can't have us around if we are her daughters too. We'd be tainted, dangerous and untrustworthy. But if he adopted us, he chose us. We're nothing to do with her. She can be, in his mind, just a seriously flawed childcare choice. He can live with that.

My words won't help much. My sister will stay mad. She will nurse this new grievance like a seedling.



But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We're not there yet. That's weeks from now. For the moment we are poised to enter my mother's hospital room, my sister and I, my father and his friend. My father may be casting about for confirmation of my identity and my sister's, but my mother has used the 48 hours since the nurses sent everyone home while she calmed down to fine-tune the roles we will all play in her little hospital drama.

She will be the devout mother, devoted to her wildly successful offspring who have flown incalculable distances to stand by her bed of pain.

Praise the Lord, she cries, as we enter. I falter, wondering if we have the right room after all.

She grasps my hand. You're here, she says. Praise be. You aren't too cold, she enquires, coming to this – she waves at the snowbanks outside her window – from where you were.

No, I say. I'm fine.

Kathmandu, I offer by way of explanation, meaning the shop where I bought thermal underclothing before I left home.

She can't know I mean that. She hears the word and infers some serious spiritual endurance training on my part. She turns a cold eye on me, assessing whether I have or do not have the chops to trump her surprising performance of piety with some more exotic ace of enlightenment.

Deciding in the negative, she nods deeply. All paths lead, she says, eyes shining.

Don't they just, I say, studying my boots.

Amen, says Dad's friend.

He has parked my father by the side of the bed. Dad sits there in his wheelchair like an old stork, his wispy hair electric from the touque he was wearing outside against the cold.

He holds my mother's hand, the one that isn't gesturing. Her nails are split and ridged with age and from the chemicals she uses to do something to furniture, something she calls antiquing. He still has beautiful hands, long fingers with perfect, smooth oval nails.

His eyes are bright as he looks at her, mute devotion to the moment that makes it all worth it – this moment when she holds the floor, radiating clarity and benevolence. People are silent around her, captivated. The moment when he can believe that whatever it costs, it is worth it to be enfolded in the aura.

I look around. I am the only one not gazing at my mother. It occurs to me that she is a kind of flesh and blood pyramid scheme, a human Ponzi. You buy in and you are hooked. You have an investment in believing the projections, the evangelical 3D laser image of personal power and aggrandisement, this illusion of depth in thin air.

I look at them and she looks at me. I know I am the only one who has liquidated the position, the only one to have taken the losses on the chin and sold up. It's hard to be sure, but I think she knows it too.