

Trudy Carpenter

Stepping Out

I know I should feel something, pain somewhere maybe, but I'm standing next to my body and all I'm aware of are smells—the odors from so many mouths too close to my face. Peppermint, Old Spice, White Shoulders, black coffee. I take half a step back to lean against the wall, hoping I won't faint inside my black dress. I hold my breath when Marvin Oakes, Shirley's husband and President of the Board, whispers a sour smell through waxy teeth, "You were a helpmate to him, Lillian, a fine wife. None better."

"She did her duty like we all do," snaps Shirley, his wife.

Stacks of blue hymnals prop open both front doors of the church, letting in cool November air. The line winds down the concrete steps to the parking lot. It looks like everyone came, all dressed in Sunday clothes on a Friday afternoon, calf-length dresses that pull across widening hips, suit coats shiny from heavy irons. Mid-priced sedans keep weaving in from the cemetery, headlamps still on, a few braking in front to let out the elderly or young women with babies. A gust scuttles a curled red maple leaf across the floor, and I shift my weight forward again.

Abruptly, Shirley thrusts her arm back through the tight line to my elbow. When she grasps bone, her small diamond ring slips sideways and she flicks it up with her thumb. "You just stay put as long as you need to," she insists to the rest of the procession, "We're not going to rush you." In unison, heads nod.

I know that another couple will soon be sent by the Bishop for the congregation's approval, and the chosen will sleep in the double bed Karl and I shared for three years, hang their clothes on the same hangers, use up the parsley, cook with the same pots and pans. The house wasn't ours. That was made clear at the start. My early proposal to paint the white kitchen yellow had been vetoed by the parsonage committee, but, without asking, I hung a framed print, a Picasso with a scrambled design of body parts, above the sofa. When Karl frowned, "What's that

supposed to be?” I told him I didn’t know exactly, but it made me feel free. Shirley squeezes to bone one more time, smiling, “And now aren’t we glad we left those kitchen walls white? One less thing to worry about during this tragic time.”

I remember the Christmas Eve Karl stood in my parents’ living room and grabbed my shoulders, his hot breath flaming my face. I closed my eyes and parted my lips, eager for even more passion. Instead he announced his miraculous calling, his forever vocation. Bewildered, I opened my eyes and closed my mouth. All that fire, but not for me. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Nothing’s changed. We can still marry in June.”

Marian Ballard shakes my hand, drops her eyes, bites her loose lower lip, and whispers a statement that curls up at the end, “I know I shouldn’t ask you this right now, but I hope you’ll still play for the choir this Sunday?” Marian continues, shaking her head, “Mrs. Kesson won’t do it on such short notice.” I blink away anger but Marian has already assumed and smiles her expected relief.

Next clumps Carol Wickern on squat heels, a tissue balled in her hand and waving shreds when she swipes at her eyes. She sobbed on the couch in the parsonage because Shirley complained that the altar bouquet looked like a bunch of weeds. It was my job to soothe Carol, praise her use of natural beauty, later joking to Karl, “How did Christ do all that work without a wife?” Karl contracted his brows, tried to laugh, got as close as a grimace.

Five or six people down the line, old Mrs. Weber, who is hard of hearing but insists she isn’t, blurts to the woman behind her, “So shocking.” For a wild moment, I think it’s something I’ve done and drop the hand holding mine. That stalls the line, and faces ripple worry until I again hold out my palm. My legs feel stiff; I’m not even sure I can walk when I need to.

When the congregation shuffles me forward, Mrs. Weber cups my face between thin green-veined hands, “My poor dear, you must come to dinner on Sunday.” The smell of her face powder triggers memories of the Sunday procession of 12:30 dinners, roasted chicken, lamb, pork, beef, always an animal, the choicest parts carved for the minister’s wife. The exchange of polite words skimming like flat stones over a lake.

The air stills when Marvin shuts the wide front doors, one then the other, behind the last straggler, sliding the hymnals aside with the edge of his shoe. “It’s so hard to find a good fit,” complains old Mabel Otney to herself as she trails down the stairs. “I’m not serving on that committee again, that’s for darn sure.”

Marvin supports my elbow down the steep linoleum treads edged with metal, nineteen in all. The stairs are too narrow, so he holds my arm from behind, like we're dancing an old-fashioned reel. At the last step, he swings to my side, leading me through bright fluorescence. Food waits on a long white plastic table, and card tables sag with desserts. It is only three-thirty, two hours before most people in town eat their suppers, but the cold wind at the cemetery and the long receiving line have starved everyone. By now, the first through the line have stood idle in the basement for half an hour, tapping their fingers on the backs of folding chairs, waiting to sit until the widow arrives, late like a bride. Marvin Oakes waves his hand for attention, clears his throat and raises his voice, "Bless this food to our bodies, O Mighty Lord, and us to Thy service. Amen."

I hesitate when Marvin nods, pushes the middle of my back, forcing me to start the line, lift a thick paper plate from the stack and help myself from the offerings—pink ham slices ruffling off a center bone, sliced beef steaming in juice, crusty chicken legs piled high. Mashed potatoes and gravy, mustard potato salad, macaroni with cubes of yellow cheese, creamed peas and peanuts, shredded lettuce dressed in light orange, two wide bowls of bright Jello. From nowhere I hear Karl's laugh, "Funeral food should be real easy to swallow." Hands crossed over their bellies, church women smile behind the full table as I take a small serving from each dish so as not to offend. When my hand trembles, Marvin carries my plate. "God moves in mysterious ways," he mutters, shaking his head, scraping my chair out from under the table.

The church women make the desserts, too, those bright circles of pudding, triangles of pie, squares of brownies, each on a thin paper plate. Desserts require a separate trip. They're reserved for the end, like the reward of salvation. A tall urn of decaf drips onto a plate. When asked, I shake my head no. I never drink coffee. Why does no one remember that? Karl's face floats onto the napkin unfolded across my lap, and I hear, "Eat and drink in remembrance of me." I lower the forkful of beef to my plate, wipe my lips, sip some water, swallow hard.

After it's over, just a blur really, I'm back in the parsonage. Pairs of high heels parade platters and bowls with foil caps, feet stepping exactly where Karl fell just three nights before, shattering his glass of milk into quivering pools and clear shards across the just-waxed linoleum. I came running, blew ragged breaths into his lungs a long time before pulling his head to my chest, rocking him, whispering things he needed to know. Even if he heard them too late.

Wisps of comfort whirl behind the women's retreat through the door. "Try to rest." "I'll call tomorrow." "You're in my prayers." Shirley Oakes frowns at the Picasso as she passes, then turns with an offering, "Mabel's got an apartment over her garage. I'll ask her about it."

"All this food will be wasted," I murmur into the refrigerator, "and someone will have to take back the dishes." The congregation's bereaved are expected to return dishes clean within two weeks, one per day, staying long enough for a refill of coffee. "Gets people out of the house," Shirley explained.

The clock over the kitchen stove keeps up its regular ticking, but when the refrigerator cycles back on, I feel the draft, slam its white door. The dishes of food will grow colder and colder inside on dark shelves. The thought makes me shiver, and I wander the house with one arm wrapped around me, tapping the rough couch and chairs, a smooth white wall, the cold bathroom sink.

In the wall closet at the back of our bedroom, I push beyond Karl's other black suit and starched shirts to reach the leatherette handle of a large fabric suitcase. My jerking it forward knocks over one of Karl's shiny black dress shoes. Shirley insisted they wouldn't show in the casket so it would be selfish not to give them to someone who could use them, but I don't feel settled, probably never will, about burying Karl in his socks with no shoes. It felt disrespectful. He would never have left the house like that.

I heft the case onto the bedspread and spread it wide, returning to the closet, then wrapping my lavender dress in a thin terry towel. I see my younger self joyful, twirling in front of the full-length mirror in my childhood bedroom, dressed for the honeymoon trip, the start of our new life together.

Then I unbutton the long-sleeved black dress, still warm from my body, and watch it flutter into a band around my bare feet, staring a while, then stepping out of the circle. Perhaps Shirley will take it to Salvation Army along with Karl's other suit, shirts, and shoes.

After zipping the suitcase, I wait on the edge of the bed until I can't see the grass on the lawn. My eyes blur, and bright crosses appear through the street lights. Time feels like nothing, and I'm still not wearing my body.

When the furnace starts up, I startle back into the room, rise, bump the suitcase on its stiff rubber wheels through the familiar stale rooms, stopping at the closet just inside the front door. A string snaps on the light, and I tug off my wool coat and scarf, the only clothes left in the closet. The hanger swings wide, setting in motion a chain of rhythmic swaying and tinkling as each empty hanger connects with the next, all the way across the steel rod to the end and then, more slowly, back once again.

Once the motion has stopped, I can open the front door and step outside, pulling the door shut behind my suitcase. The last word from the parsonage is a soft *shhhh* as the metal door locks into its spongy weather stripping.