

Parker brought the car around at seven; George was going to meet the dinner guests at the station. Sarah said incredulously, "They're coming up by train?"

"Buddy Calucci broke his wrist last week and can't drive," George said, "and his wife has some kind of phobia about it. And the alien of course can't drive either."

Of course. Of course not. Couldn't drive, couldn't wear pants, probably couldn't eat anything Sarah had had Cook prepare for dinner either. All the alien could do was put her poor old George's firm out of business with its strange advanced fuel products, whatever they were. Sarah stood before the fireplace and regarded her husband as he picked up his coat from a leather chair.

"If it's supposed to be such a discreet meeting that you can't have it in the city, why are they taking the train? Why didn't your Mr. Calucci order a car and driver?"

"I don't think it would occur to him."

"This is going to be horrible, George. It really is. I'd just as soon have Parker and Cook and Cook's criminal brother-in-law. The one in Attica."

George shrugged into his coat, crossed the room, and put his hands on Sarah's shoulders. "I know, darling; it's too bad. But necessary. And if they come by train, they can't stay late. The last train back is the 10:42. That's something, at least."

"At least," Sarah said. But she made herself smile at George; it wasn't his fault, after all, and whining like this was really terribly unattractive. These... people were coming, and that was that. Just the same, with George's florid face inches from her own, she suddenly remembered something Louise Henderson had said to her just last week at the gallery. You know, darling, George is getting awfully fat. He

should go back to tennis instead of golf. If he's not careful, he'll start to look like that man that runs the hardware store. Sarah had laughed; Louise had a wicked eye. But Sarah had been stung, too: George did look a little like the man in the hardware store. The same shape to the brow, the same chin. Friends had joked about it before. After George had left for the station, Denise brought in a tray of canapes and fresh ice. Sarah made herself a Scotch and water, drank half of it, poked at the fire, finally settled on a chair. The living room looked well by firelight, she thought. She loved this house, even if it had seemed a little empty since Emily had gone off to Rosemary Hall four years ago. Brass and mahogany gleamed in the firelight; wainscotting and molding took on subtle curves; the colors of the old Orientals glowed. In the bookcases leather bindings and Chinese vases jumbled comfortably against each other, both slightly dusty. Emily's violin leaned against one corner. Had Emily, home for the weekend, practiced today? Probably not; too busy with the horses. Sarah smiled. finished her Scotch, and considered moving a pile of old Smithsonians and Forbes off the wing chair beside the violin. She decided against it.

She heard the car, and they were here. Sarah rose to meet her guests. "Hello."

"My wife Sarah," George said. "Darling, Mr. Calucci, Mrs. Calucci, Mr. C'Lanth."

"Call me Buddy," Calucci boomed at the same moment that his wife said,

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure. I'm Mabel." Buddy Calucci seized Sarah's hand and pumped it. He wore a coat with hugely padded shoulders and a bright yellow tie, carefully knotted, printed with daisies. Mabel Calucci wore heart-shaped glasses and a red satin dress cut so low that Sarah blinked. She avoided altogether looking at the

alien. Not just yet.

"Nice place you got here," Calucci boomed. "Looks real homey." His eyes, Sarah saw, missed nothing, scrutinizing the portaits as if appraising them.

"My, yes", Mabel Calucci said. Her mouth pursed slightly at the magazines tossed on the wing chair.

Sarah said, "Would you like a drink?" and started towards the sideboard. Calucci's words stopped her.

"No, no, Mabel and I never touch the stuff. Christian Temperance. But you folks go right ahead -- feel free.

"You don't drink?"

"Lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine," Mabel said roguishly. "This must be your dog -- let him right into the living room, do you?" Her eyes moved to the spot by the fireplace where Brandy usually lay; Labrador hair clung to the Oriental.

"We got a dog, too," Calucci said. "Doberman. Meanest guard dog you ever saw. Not that we need it now with the new security system on the country home. Del EverGuard. Seven thousand for the fencing alone."

"How interesting", Sarah murmured. George threw her a warning glance. She poured herself another Scotch and water, then one for George.

The alien said, "I'd like one, too, please."

Sarah turned in surprise. She had assumed that an alien wouldn't drink alcohol. Not that she actually knew much about the aliens, really -- she hadn't kept up. The television set, a small black and white, had broken a few months ago, and with Emily only home occasional weekends Sarah hadn't yet gotten around to getting it repaired. She didn't watch TV.

"Scotch and water is fine", the alien said. He had a deep, slightly

hoarse voice. Sarah made herself look at him. Standing with his back to the fire, balancing with what looked like careless ease on both legs and the curving, muscular tail, he wasn't quite as bad as Sarah had expected. The aliens she had seen on the now-dead TV had worn odd-looking, shiny clothes on the top halves of their bodies, nothing below. But this one wore a soft white shirt, no tie, and a tweed jacket cut long enough to cover all but his hairy legs. His head hair, too, didn't look as strange as on the TV aliens; she supposed that a barber must have cut it. It fell thickly from a side part to just over the tops of his ears. Sarah handed him the drink.

"Didn't know you folks imbibed," Calucci said to the alien. He sat on the sofa, pulling up his pant legs at the knees: preserving the crease. "Didn't see that on TV."

"We just got a new set," Mabel Calucci said. "Sony. Hundred-inch screen, remotes, stereo, everything."

"Have to have you all to our big Superbowl party in January," Calucci said. "C'Lanth, your folks like football?"

"No," C'Lanth said. Calucci waited, but the alien said no more, sipping his drink and smiling faintly. Sarah smothered a grin.

"Probably not your native pastime," Calucci said. "Stands to reason. What sports do you guys like? Earth sports, I mean. When in Rome, I always say."

"I like tennis."

"Tennis?" George said, looking surprised.

C'Lanth smiled. "Yes. I'm afraid I've become something of a fanatic. But I'm also afraid I have an unfair advantage -- something about the joints of our thumbs. Do you play?"

"Not as much as I used to," George said ruefully.

"Mrs. Atkinson?"

"Yes," Sarah said, wondering where C'Lanth had learned such good English. But didn't she remember something in the papers about the aliens being natural mimics as well as shrewd businessmen? And about their avidly studying just everything? "I play, but not very seriously, I'm afraid. I prefer sailing."

"Buddy and I bowled in a league," Mabel Calucci said. Her plump rouged face clouded over. "In St. Pete I mean. Before we moved to New York. Now -- I don't know."

"Are there bowling alleys in this cute little country town of yours, George?" Calucci asked.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know."

There was a slight pause. Then Calucci and the alien spoke simultaneously: "Well, now, let's get down to business!" and "I met a friend of yours, Mrs. Atkinson, at an art gallery board meeting Tuesday. Louise Henderson."

George said to Calucci. "Oh, I rather think later might be better, Buddy."

Sarah said to C'Lanth, "You were at the gallery board meeting?"

"Not as a member, of course. Kyle Van Dorr was just showing me around. A tourist." He smiled; Sarah would have sworn it was a self-deprecating smile.

"When do we get down to business then?" Calucci said. His big body shifted restlessly. When he lowered his head like that, Sarah thought, it was the exact shape of a garden trowel. "We have to act fast on this one, George, if we're going to have any kind of alliance here. Before your pals --" he nodded at C'Lanth "-- have their little rule-making meeting on mergers."

"We believe in competition," C'Lanth said mildly. He finished his drink and held out the glass, mouthing "Please? George made him

another Scotch and water. In front of the fireplace Brandy stretched, turned in a circle, and farted. Mabel Calucci looked delicately away, mouth pursed; C'Lanth smiled. Sarah found herself smiling back. What kind of nitwit acted so affected as to be offended by a dog? Denise came to the door and announced dinner.

Sarah ate little. She watched. C'Lanth also ate sparingly, but he tried everything. Mabel Calucci, in the presence of food, turned garrulous; each course seemed to swell her verbally, words coming out at the same rate that calories went in. She talked about her little grandson -- "Cute as a button, and smart as a whip! He can already tell a Caddy from a Buick;" about the redoration of her kitchen in apple-blossom pink; about a woman on a game show who had won \$100,000, had a heart attack, and had to sell the prizes to pay her medical bills; about the street they used to live on in St. Pete when Buddy and her were first married, where people were so friendly they didn't even knock on each others' doors before visiting. Not like here, where you couldn't even see the houses from the street. Not that that was true in New York, of course, where they had their new penthouse, with the cutest terrace you ever saw twelve stories up and just filled with fresh flowers. Buddy Calucci let his wife talk, his eyes appraising the room's furniture, pictures, wallpaper, silver. George, good host that he always was, listened to Mabel Calucci, nodding and smiling. The five of them had just returned to the living room when Emily came in with her boyfriend, the Walker boy, both of them in jeans and sweaters, laughing. Emily's dark hair had escaped its barette and fallen around her face, thick and shining. She showed no reaction to finding an alien in her parents' living room beyond a friendly smile. Sarah felt her heart swell. Her daughter was beautiful, and smart, and mannerly. She was very lucky in Emily. Some of her friends'

daughters had turned just impossible, but Emily was wonderful. George made the introductions.

"Enjoying Princeton, Taylor?"

"It's wicked, sir. Especially calculus." Taylor Walker smiled, an attractive easy flash of teeth. "No head for figures, I'm afraid. Professor Boyden is just out of control."

"Hughes Boyden?" C'Lanth asked.

"Yes, sir," Taylor said. "Do you know him?"

"Slightly. I did a lot of reading at Princeton when I first came here. Some of the professors were very helpful. In fact, I was up to Princeton this year for Bicker and Sign-ins."

Taylor and Emily grinned at each other: some private joke. Emily said, "Totally paralytic. I didn't get to bed until 7 a.m."

Mabel Calucci looked at her. Her voice went slightly shrill. "I was always glad that my daughter Tammy had the chance to attend Bob Jones University. The moral standards there are very high."

Fury rose in Sarah. The sheer smug stupidity... Emily, who was Dean's List and honor committee... this horrible stupid woman...

But all she said was, "Can I get anyone a drink? Taylor? Emily?"

"No, thanks, we're off," Taylor said. "We'll be at the club,

Mrs. Atkinson. Nice to have met you, Mr. C'Lanth."

"Pleased, I'm sure" Mabel Calucci said coldly. Taylor and Emily left.

"I liked the young people Hughes Boyden introduced me to at Princeton," C'Lanth said, almost musingly. "There was about them a sort of... playful ease."

Calucci said brusquely, "Not supposed to be easy, is it? Toney school like that. Probably has real high admission standards. Now, George, I really think we got to get down to business. I'm sure the ladies will excuse us."

Sarah looked at Mabel Calucci. She saw that the woman was staring at Brandy, now curled in the wing chair on top of the Forbes and Smithsonians, half of which had tumbled to the floor. She knew that Mabel Calucci as surreptitiously tugging at her red satin neckline, which had slipped even lower. She even knew that in a moment Mabel Calucci would say something conciliatory, bright and sweet and cheerful, from lips still pursed like lemons. "I'll come and listen," Sarah said.

George looked relieved. Calucci looked annoyed. C'Lanth smiled. "Glad to have you" the alien said.

When George came back from the short drive to the station, Sarah was already in bed. She sat up against the pillows and watched George undress. George said nothing until he had flung his coat on a chair, loosened his tie, kicked off his shoes. Finally it burst out.

"That C'Lanth is a cut-throat."

"Oh, I don't know, I thought he was rather amusing."

"Amusing?"

"I thought of seeing if he'd come down the weekend of the third, when we have the Talcotts and the Hendersons."

George turned slowly towards her.

"You know how John Talcott is always complaining that no one he meets can ever give him a really good tennis game. And Louise so enjoys talking to people who actually know something about art. Really, George. don't look at me like that -- it's not such a bizarre idea."

"Sarah -- he's an alien. And you heard how the business talk went, the part of it you stayed for anyway -- where the devil did you go? Mabel Calucci complained in the car that you never came back to the living room. C'Lanth is going to ruin me if we don't get this deal moving."

"Well, wouldn't a chance to get to know him better help that?" Sarah said reasonably. George went on staring at her; after a moment she looked away. He was a dear, but he got so worked up. Unnecessarily, really. After all, they had her money, which was much more than the firm brought in. And when George wrinkled his face like that, he did look like the hardware store man.

"It would be more useful to get to know Buddy Calucci better," George said heavily. "He's the one holding the real clout here. Although C'Lanth might -- "

"Oh, really, darling, do come to bed. It's late, and I don't want to argue. You haven't signed any papers yet, after all. Anything could happen."

George didn't answer. He finished undressing, climbed into bed, turned out the light. Sarah waited. When a few minutes had passed, she said softly, "You might be a little nicer to me, George. I did just spend an evening for you with those two dreadful people."

"I know," George said. She felt him reach for her in the darkness, and she put her head on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I didn't go back to the living room, darling. Truly I am. But her smugness. And that inane chatter. And those little frizzy dyed curls. And him -- that eager hard-eyed grin."

"I know", George said again.

"I did try."

"Yes, you did."

"And you'll think about having C'Lanth down on the third?"

"Might be a good idea," George said sleepily.

Sarah snuggled in closer against his shoulder. She was glad George thought she had tried, glad he wasn't angry. Because of course the truth was that she had been rude to those terrible Caluccis, rude with

a sort of reverse-English rudeness of not having been polite enough, not having picked up the cues, not having tried at all to enter into their territory. But, really, with some people you just couldn't, and it was no good pretending. Everybody knew that, really. With some people, do what you might, the gap was just too wide.