

(The excerpted beginning of the first story in the novel-in-stories, *Forty Martyrs Suite*)

The Underlife

Over coffee one morning, Rachel McKeel found herself watching her neighbor. Her neighbor was Carol Brown, the sleek handsome second wife of Wally Brown, history professor out at the college. The Browns, as a family, had lived across the street for four years—and Carol and her two kids had lived there longer, since after Carol left her first husband.

Rachel had seen Wally leave for the college right at dawn, his usual habit, and then later Rachel's daughter, Hattie, had ridden off to school on her bike in a throng of raincoated neighbor kids heading the same direction. Normally Rachel would have headed to the college shortly after that. But today she'd lingered at her kitchen table, staring out the bay window into the drizzle. She had the window cracked, and for a while she was noticing how the rain sounded different in each ear. In the left, it had a hushing, meshing sound, like wind in a dried corn field. In the other, she could hear the sparkling, speckling, pecking sound of the individual drops of rain on the window and the sill. Then she was looking out across the cool gray of the morning street, comparing distance vision with each eye. She would cover one eye, looking only with the other. She could see distance just a shade sharper with the left than the right.

It was then that she noticed Carol Brown, cutting between her house and the Fosters' next door, bending down at the crawlspace entrance, climbing through the small window-sized opening into the crawlspace under her house. Watching this strange activity, Rachel was struck by Carol's aloneness—how she moved in the damp, misty air on a mission somehow solely her own. In order to get in and out of this hole, a person had to get on all fours, push head first into the dark leaving a blue-jeaned butt out in the daylight, then ease through the hole taking care not to scrape one's back or shins. Carol carried a flashlight and, after having disappeared through the little window, apparently turned around under there so that she could reach out and get the wood crawlspace cover and replace it. This awkwardness was not Carol Brown's style—she was a lovely graceful woman from New York, from a family tied to opera and politics there. Back before Carol remarried, she and Rachel were close friends for a couple of years. Back then, there wasn't anything they couldn't tell each other—they talked on the phone deep into the night, and they took care of each other's kids. Right here in Rachel's breakfast nook Carol had told Rachel that Wally Brown wanted to take her out, what should she do, and so on.

Rachel wondered if enough of the old friendship still existed that she could sometime ask Carol about the crawlspace thing. It was an idle thought, and it passed. Rachel closed the house and went to work and eventually forgot about the whole episode.

A few months later—in fact, it was shortly after the first of the new year—Hattie came home ill from school, and Rachel left work early to be with her. After getting her comfortable on the couch, with 7-Up and chicken soup and "The Princess Bride" in the VCR, Rachel decided to run out for groceries. As she was backing out of her driveway, she happened to notice a movement in the corner of her eye (it was two in the afternoon, the winter shadows short and solid). Over at the Browns', the plywood crawlspace cover was moving, suddenly dropping open; then there was the long thinness of Carol's blue-shirted arm reaching out, all this in a flash, in the moment of shifting gears. Rachel had driven on up the street before she thought much of it.

Meantime over at the college another scenario involving the Browns was unfolding. Wally—an emotional man known for his wit and wisdom, a history Ph.D. from Notre Dame who was past president of the faculty senate, had had a couple of episodes. In one he'd yelled "get out of here" at a student so loud that Faculty Hall floors three through five had fallen silent in the various classrooms and offices, as teachers and students waited for the other foot to fall. In another incident Wally had shoved the registrar, a white haired old man who was largely defenseless—this latter episode was serious and extended, and had to be broken up by the campus police and, as a result, Wally was actually detained at the county jail (this detail was widely rumored but known by only a few people). Lowell Wagner—the chair in the Department of Psychology, well-loved and the psychological counselor for half the community—was seeing Wally professionally in addition to playing racquetball with him. Rachel was going to Wagner, too. From time to time, she would pass Wally in the hall near Lowell's office, one coming and the other going, both of them looking down in deference, like fellow citizens encountering one another in the vestibule at Saturday evening confession.

But life went on. Winter passed, and with it Hattie's colds and flus, real and imagined. Spring came and went and with it Rachel's annual spring blues. In May a feeling kept coming in on her, that she needed something, needed. She bought cognac and started dating a chiropractor from Arcola. She was looking forward to school being out and over the summer having the hottest affair she could muster.

In her last session with Wagner (they'd decided to give it a rest at the end of the academic year), she took the liberty of telling him about Carol and the crawlspace. It felt to her on the one hand like gossip, but on the other hand she seemed to need to say something.

"Do you know her fairly well?" she asked.

"Not too well, no," he said, ever guarded, retreating from the subject.

"She's an old friend," Rachel said. She offered that Carol was a lovely woman, a pianist and artistic sort, and politically active with the League of Women Voters. She was aware that at least Carol would have been described to Lowell by Wally in their sessions. She watched Lowell's eyes for some sign she was bringing him new information. "She's quite lovely, actually," Rachel said.

"Quite lovely, yes." Wagner asked if Rachel ever socialized with the Browns, and she said that since her own divorce from her husband Ken she'd not socialized with many couples at all and hadn't been asked much but in the

past, before Carol married Wally, she had gotten to know Carol very well. And Hattie still often played with Carol's kids, Stephen and Becky, and rode to and from school with them. Rachel offered that Wally and Carol as a couple were one of the handsomest pairs around and had been known to have great parties. It gave her a sense of warmth and expansive happiness to tell Wagner this.

And he answered with his usual measured nod that seemed to be the opening to close the subject unless she insisted on going on.

"But I've noticed something," Rachel said. "I feel bad telling you this, in a way. I mean, we both know you see Wally, right?, but after all you're MY shrink, too." She laughed, watching to see if he did. Unreinforced, she went on. "There is something kind of odd—Carol goes under her house sometimes. Crawls under. Mind you, I never see her working in the yard, in the garage, or doing anything outdoors with the house—yet there she is, on a nearly regular basis, crawling through this little window thing that goes underneath..."

Wagner seemed to be listening closely, curious. He thought for a while. "Probably some logical explanation we aren't seeing." He smiled. "What do you think? Part of this, you know, is about you—watching the movements of your neighbor and friend across the street."

This caused Rachel to retreat from the subject, of course, dutifully feeling chastised. For the moment. It was several weeks before she and Lowell Wagner talked again. But when they did, they revisited this matter with great curiosity and wonder . . .