

AJAR

by Constance McCutcheon

“She is mute, holds strange positions for hours, and is highly suggestible.”

2 CONTROLS

FOR 2 ~~B~~TAN
ELECTRIC TWIN
BED BLANKETS

S/A BEDROOM

PUT AWAY SAT 7.16.94.

The jar of pickles Sally held in her hand was the most perfect one of the right make of the large supply on the delicatessen shelf, and yet, even for being the most perfect one of the right make, it wasn't perfect enough. Its label was slightly scratched, not obvious but when held at an angle directly under the store's broad, low ceiling light, it was plain for those looking for a perfect jar of pickles to see. Sally was looking for a perfect jar of pickles. She wanted to replace a jar of pickles she had broken while house-sitting for her nephew and his wife. It had been their jar of pickles that had slipped off the kitchen counter a few days before and smashed on the floor into a thousand pieces. She had opened the jar without their permission and then broken it. She could have purchased her own jar of pickles had the sight of theirs stimulated such an appetite for pickles. But she had become victim of such a craving that she had rashly opened the jar, eaten an entire third of its contents at one standing, and then dropped the jar on the floor.

She wanted to find a perfect substitute to perfectly demonstrate how deeply she regretted her action, but she couldn't find the perfect substitute. She had the best candidate in her hand and its label was scratched. All the other jars were even worse. A wide strip of paste ran down one side of most of them, on others the price had been stamped directly onto the label which is not where the price had been stamped on the original jar; no portion of the price stamp could be found on its label whatsoever. Only one jar had no price markings on its label and no strip of paste running down its side. It was almost identical to the one to be replaced, except for the scratch. She could mention to Gene and Barbara that she had scratched the label herself, but that would immediately focus attention on the jar, and it would be a lie.

Maybe substituting the jar too perfectly would be a greater transgression than having smashed it in the first place. She would be willfully hiding the fact that their jar of pickles had been replaced. She would be hiding from them the fact that she had opened their jar without asking, eaten from it like a glutton, been unable to stop herself and finally hurled the jar to the floor—this she was beginning to suspect of herself—to keep herself from devouring its entire contents. That was the real reason she was searching for a perfect substitute. To hide from them what she had done. Not to perfectly express her regret. So her concern was a lie, too.

And had she fully considered the consequences if she did find the perfect replacement and they noticed the deception after all? All the worse for her. It would clearly expose her efforts to conceal her actions. That embarrassment would be more than she could bear. But couldn't she then explain that it had fallen and broken, yes, but that she had simply forgotten to mention it to them because it had happened before their dog disappeared, just after their departure for Italy? It would be quite natural for her to have forgotten something so trivial due to her frantic concern for their missing dog. But she couldn't say that. She had broken it afterwards, hadn't she?

Did all this mean, then, that she should get the jar *because* its label had a scratch in it, to signal, however subtly, to Gene and Barbara that the original jar had been replaced? She had to admit to being aware that carelessly getting a flawed jar would be quite clever, sinister even. It would proclaim to her relatives that she had nothing whatsoever to hide, that she was very, very willing for them to find out about her smashing their pickle jar because the whole thing had been a very innocent accident. But that would be a lie as well. She felt just dreadful about the matter. And there had been nothing, nothing whatsoever, innocent about it. She was painfully aware that opening someone else's provisions and compulsively gobbling them down could not be considered an innocent act. Opening them was obviously wrong, but the bizarre manner in which she had gorged herself ... she shuddered. Exposing that to the light of objective judgment would do her in. She wished she could wipe the knowledge of the act from her own mind. But it had seeped all through her spongy brain like the darkest ink, a stain never to be removed.

Of course, simple enough, she needn't mention she had opened the jar at all. She could simply imply the jar had fallen and broken without having been opened or in any other way tampered with. Which would be a lie by omission. Those were the lies Sally considered the most treacherous because they were so easy, so common. And they weren't really always what they seemed. Sally knew perfectly well that there were innumerable things that went on in the world about which no one ever found out, things no one could find out about because so many other things were going on at the same time. No one called them lies of any sort, certainly not lies of omission simply because they occurred but never got reported.

She was also uncomfortably aware that she was flawed by the compulsion of wanting to uncover all those things which, once aware of, she felt would become lies of omission if *she* at least did not report them. This was a serious fault she was helpless to correct, the result being that she tried to explain too much, all sorts of things everyone else took for granted. Then, worst of all, she got bogged down in her own explanation, trapped, often never coming to the end of it because, as she got deeper in, she became confused as to where the end was. It was at that point that a dreaded, familiar, heavy feeling would come over her, a feeling that she was being gassed by her own intelligence as she realized the explanation had no end, but went on and on, unfurling into the depths of a world of its own. It flashed before her, distended and blazing bright, a myriad of awful eyes staring her down, demanding focus, when at the start there had been just one. The dreaded peacock's tail, fanned out in terrific splendor, required what she could neither fulfill nor comprehend. But deny the fact of her befuddlement she would never do, and her most honest admission of reality at that moment was to do what she did do: falter and stop, defeated, aware that she was guilty, like all the others, of lying by omission. Only she was worse: she was aware she was not telling the whole truth, but too weak to do anything about it. An odd side-effect of the befuddlement which crumpled her time after time was the fury all this evoked in the people who knew her best, but she could not allow herself to be affected by that unpleasant, unlooked-for consequence.

Her own family had grown rude and things had become strangely uncomfortable for her as she had launched into her best effort a few weeks ago to explain to them why she was sitting completely flummoxed in the family room closet swamped by limp cardboard boxes. For twenty years those boxes had been stacked in the attic to which that closet provided access through an awkward trap door. She had gotten a ladder, climbed up into that cobwebby jungle of heat and dust, groped about along the unstable ribs of boards that afforded the only footing in the unfinished storage area, and pulled down, one by one, all those boxes, creating a jumble in the closet that nearly filled it back up to the trap door, with the overflow

spilling out onto the tiled family room floor. A desire to sort through the boxes had been the simple hypnotic beam which had drawn her into what had turned out to be a dispiriting task. After two weeks of enervating effort, she finally hit on a unique solution: she wouldn't sort the boxes at all but, without touching their contents—which she could not bring herself to do after days of lifting lids and staring down into heaps of old photographs, clumps of moldy doilies left by a great-aunt, crusty athletic gear discarded by her sons—would carefully print out an index card for each box with the date she had last looked into it, a detailed list of its untouched contents, her full name, her initials, and the time. The next easy action was to affix the index card to the box within a frame of wide red tape which she carefully rolled out along the card's edges and smoothed down. Lastly, the brilliant stroke, she sorted the boxes according to the date and time on their labels, so the sorting was done after all and she felt immensely relieved.

A member of her family discovered her in the closet all set up with shoebox desk working on another label. When Sally began to explain how, after ten bad nights, she had finally decided the best thing to do was leave the contents of the boxes as they were, but make detailed labels for each of them so that whoever was responsible for the contents could easily find his or her box and decide for himself or herself if he or she wanted to keep what was in it or throw it away without having to lift the lid, the son or husband or daughter had blown up at her, been abusive, lost control. But Sally was the wife and mother, and right was right. She was not one to be intimidated into denying logic as she saw it, and no one was going to bully her from her position. The impudent argument that Aunt Dorothy would never come back to find the box of doilies neatly labeled for *her* affected her not in the least. An act of grace it was that Sally did not live in times when martyrs were made to die brave, but horrible deaths.


It was odd, though, that right afterwards Sally would find that tube of toothpaste in the downstairs powder room, open it, and have black stuff ooze out all over her fingers. The toothpaste had gotten decayed, black and gummy, full of bacteria and disease, and it had gotten all over her. That same day, she ran across a portion of a dead animal on the *inside* kitchen mat, its intestine or heart, maybe part of the brain, something small, reddish-brown, and pillow-

shaped but partially squished. She found a similar portion on her shoe and realized she had stepped on the organ outside somewhere and had tracked it into the kitchen with her and who knows where else. She was in the middle of dragging everything out of the kitchen in preparation for sweeping and vacuuming and cleaning and reordering the hundred nearly-empty spice bottles when she found that horrible little speck of what seemed to be vomit on the toilet tank handle in the bathroom upstairs. Now where that could have come from she couldn't imagine. She wiped it off; it had been dried up by that time and rather innocuous except for the thought of what it might be and where in heaven it could have come from and the impression it would have made had someone besides herself run across it. And now the bathroom was the focus of attack, the kitchen disgorge but abandoned because the bathroom was smaller and could surely be put in order in no time, especially with the weight of the knowledge pressing down on her that she had to get back to that kitchen and those spice bottles. As she scrubbed the bathroom shower stall, whose upper portions she discovered to be coated with black mold—how long had it been like that? had it any relation whatsoever to the decayed toothpaste?—she was plucked mid-motion from her battle: the time had come for her to be taken to the airport for house-sitting duties and they had to leave NOW. She did not feel in the least up to it, leaving the bathroom in unholy chaos, the kitchen empty but for scores of spice bottles standing in clusters all over the counters, and the family room cluttered with kitchen effluvia: chairs, the breakfast table, the desk and broom and towel rack, piles of papers, and queues of canisters crowding the floor where cardboard boxes had made a mess of things just a few days before. She would never, never have left things that way and gone if she hadn't already given her word to Gene and Barbara that she would house-sit for them, their trip all planned and depending on having someone reliable and responsible there to take care of their garden and their dog, Checker.

As her husband drove her to the airport, she asked him to stop at a pharmacy so she could buy the few basic toiletries she lacked for her stay. After she had been in the store for what seemed to be a fearfully long time, her husband left the car to hurry in after her to hurry her up. He found her in an aisle full of rows of toothpaste.

“Oh, Graham!” she whispered, turning a strangely anxious face towards him. “I need some toothpaste.” “Well?” was his baffled reply. “I’m afraid whatever I pick something will be wrong with,” she explained, hesitated fearfully, then took the plunge: “Pick out some toothpaste for me. Any toothpaste.” Graham hesitated a moment, eyeing the long aisle, took a decisive step forward and picked out a long, narrow carton directly in front of him. “Is it okay?” she asked doubtfully. He looked at it, turned it end to end to inspect the packaging, flipped a flap back and looked inside, flicked the metallic tube out and briefly inspected it, clapped it back up inside the carton, and pronounced there was nothing wrong with the toothpaste as far as he could see. On hearing that, she held out her plastic hand basket, he dropped the toothpaste into it, and she asked him to come with her to get shampoo. The brief routine was repeated with each item she required. She told him what she needed, he made a choice, she asked if it was okay, he inspected it and said it was, she held out her plastic basket and he dropped it in. Within ten minutes the items had been collected, purchased, and the trip to the airport resumed.

6



Sally had always been punctilious, but lately it had begun to cause her anguish. The past few weeks had been worse than usual, or rather, not worse in degree but more unremitting than she had ever experienced and it had to do with those infernal flimsy cardboard boxes she had dragged down from the attic. The nights following the implementation of her inspired solution, just when she expected to sleep the sleep of the dead, she lay awake once again, bathed in sweat and ghastly moonlight, miserably preoccupied with that boxful of doilies no one would ever sort out, trying to decide what was right when there was no choice, really. They had to be thrown out. That’s what her mind thought, but only at night. During the day some other part of her brain thought differently: she couldn’t throw them out; she could more easily throw herself down from the attic trap door to smash out her brains than throw those doilies away. Then came the night and the other portion of her mind emerged from out of nowhere and said the doilies must be thrown away. Period. The nighttime portion never showed face during the day, the daytime portion didn’t make a peep at night. At night,

action was called for when no soul would get up out of bed to do the bidding. During the day, she was called to be inactive and stay that way. She thought she would go mad.

Sally knew better than to mention the matter of the doilies to anyone, but she couldn't resolve it on her own. In the past, on coming to an absolute impasse like this, she had occasionally broached her stalemated preoccupation to husband, son, or daughter, but had become very quickly and very unhappily familiar with the reaction: a face darkening then growing visibly sickened as she began; the expression growing impatient as she faltered, worried and distracted, on seeing their reaction; the eyes becoming dull with disappointment as her concern finally became clear—if they could wait that long—and then tempers erupted, not hers. The listener stamped about and called the matter not worth the time she had wasted to explain it, and a bad situation developed all round. So Sally kept matters to herself now and, after lengthy tussles about what to do, tussles during which she seemed to be somewhat blanked out to the world and people around her, what was right would simply descend to her from out of the blue, whereupon an indescribable relief would rush through her, her mind cleared, and the world slipped back into focus. Such as the inspiration to label the cardboard boxes. That had been a godsend. But it had also been revoked. Now there was the troublesome thought of Aunt Dorothy's doilies and no relief. The matter of the cardboard boxes seemed not to be resolved after all, the labeling not the solution. The relief that had descended out of the blue had ominously lifted, leaving her exposed to a chilling, persistent draft of self-doubt.

So, in any case, here was her opportunity to spare her nephew and his wife worry by not going into the details of this one particular incident. Would that be evil? Yes! the answer thundered back without equivocation. It would be evil. She could not spare loved ones the details of which she was aware that she considered significant. No matter how many details that happened to be. The fact that she was even considering sparing details gave evidence of evil inclinations on her part. She was deliberating *preparing* to tell a falsehood. Which was to be considered worse than all the other kinds of lies. Once again the transgressions of her rigorously

religious mind far outstripped the crude transgressions of spontaneous human nature. Down she went again.

And anyhow, instead of all this selfish preoccupation with whether she should expose herself or not, the scratch in the label should have long alerted her, as one sincerely concerned, to the fact that there was probably something else wrong with the jar. She didn't want to poison Gene and Barbara, did she? If she did go ahead and buy a jar with a scratch in the label, under no circumstances should she wait for them to notice the imperfection, but call their attention to it as soon as they walked in the front door and urge them to search for other imperfections before eating its contents, although she would have to add that she had not been able to find any, and could not have probed further without opening the jar and eating from its contents herself in order to be in the authoritative position to declare it all right—not poisoned. Yet with that act she would have contaminated the jar and been obliged to venture out again to begin another tedious search for a perfect jar of pickles. It exhausted her just thinking about it.

8

She had come to the point where her mind was growing drowsy, overwhelmed with details which could not possibly be resolved into a decision. Not by her anyway. The peacock's tail had fanned out again, magnificent and blinding. She grew confused and cowed. The jar she purchased had to be perfect or imperfect. There was no way of getting round that. But now she knew: buying a perfect jar of pickles meant she wished to hide her vicious act from them; buying an imperfect jar meant she wished on them something far worse, perhaps injury. Just as she realized she was not qualified, physically or morally, to make such a decision, relief descended from out of the blue. It became clear: someone else must pick out the jar of pickles.

By this time, the owner of the delicatessen had been summoned by Mick, the part-time counter boy, and the two of them were now observing the prune-faced, gray-haired woman in the gold-metallic sleuth's raincoat from behind the sausages and cut meats, discussing what that woman could be up to and what they should do about it. She looked harmless enough, jazzy even in that coat, but extremely

weird worrying over those jars, her face, so puckered and so pale, hovering so close to the shelves. Harmless she might be, but definitely not normal. But none of them were, really, up there in that backwater New Hampshire countryside. Delicatessen owners had to be careful. All those weirdoes were famous poets and musicians, theologians and mathematicians, geniuses of the arts and benefactors of the greatest magnitude. The two meat men continued to hesitate. After lengthy observation of which the woman remained oblivious and during which the owner grew increasingly doubtful, Mick muttered against his will:

“This isn’t something like the Tylenol thing, do you think?”

“We’re watching,” Mr. Snair replied calmly. “We’re watching.”

“She’s been over every jar.”

“Just the pickles.”

“Just *those* pickles.”

“Just *those* pickles.”

Mick groaned at the patience life required of him. As he settled his chin onto his raised fist, he involuntarily pressed down on his nose with his forefinger. But his eyes brightened almost immediately to see the woman turn towards them. She sidled forward uncertainly, emerging slowly from the aisle to cautiously approach the meat counter, over which the two men now unconsciously leaned, anticipating her query, but floored by its substance:

“Could you please tell me if,” the woman held up a tiny jar of pickles. “... if there is anything wrong with this jar?”

“What might be wrong with it, ma’am?” the delicatessen owner asked politely, fingertips spread and tautly poised on the smooth wood of the counter.

“I ... I believe,” she wrinkled her small pale nose as if she smelled something horrendous and peered up at the jar held aloft in her hand. Then in a sudden whoosh! the jar slipped out of her weak grip, plummeted to the floor, and smashed into a thousand pieces.

A lengthy, astonished silence followed. “There is now, at any rate,” Mr. Snair remarked. At a flick of his hand, Mick pivoted neatly about and scooted off for mop and bucket.

“That smell again!” the woman wailed piteously. Indeed, the strong smell of vinegar and dill flushed through the room with its piquant complexities.

“What did you think might be wrong with the jar, ma’am, if I might ask?” Mr. Snair inquired.

The woman stood very still surrounded by a skirt of sharp glass fragments, pools of pickling liquid, and scattered bodies of small green pickles. “I ... I have the feeling that ... all their labels are *wrong*, somehow.”

“How so, wrong, ma’am?”

“They have ... paste on them. And that one ... here, down there, its label was ... it was scratched.”

Mr. Snair raised his eyebrows and looked down towards his poised, spraddled fingers.

“I can’t get a jar with a label that’s scratched unless I know it’s all right otherwise. That the contents aren’t damaged or ... or poisoned.”

“Poisoned?” The shop owner’s eyes shot up to her as he drew himself up and back. “Perhaps other stores in the area have what you’re looking for. Mick, careful of her shoes. I’m sure——”

“No,” she murmured. “This is where they got them. I know that. And I should get them where they got them. That much is clear to me.”

Mr. Snair looked aside with a frown, unable to agree or disagree, not knowing who *they* were or what their relationship was to either the woman or to the jar of pickles. And while the woman’s logic seemed sound enough, it was, well, ... it was ridiculous.

“Now that the jar is already open, I could try one.” She stooped and swooped out a hand for one of the pickles when a stentorian cry of “Don’t let her touch anything!” sent Mick shooting down and forward like a champion to mash his mop down over the woman’s hand which toppled the woman forward and she fell kneeling into the pickling juices, supported by both hands full in the mess the shop owner had wanted to keep her out of. The outcome could not have been worse for a shop owner with a phobia of lawsuits from weirdo customers injured on his premises for whatever reason. He

knew the reason didn't matter. So now he would not have a lawsuit for internal bleeding facing him, perhaps, but only have to pay off the medical bills for the woman's knee injuries, which would probably put him out of business.

"Mick oh Mick oh Mick."

"I goofed! I goofed! I goofed!" Mick howled.

Mr. Snair waddled out from behind the counter and rapidly approached the woman, who was fussing and clucking and assuring them both in a confused but sincere torrent of speech that she was just fine. She startled Mr. Snair with her spryness as, on his bending down to her, she sprang to her feet. Her good-natured reaction to her fall was genuine. She continued protesting she was all right and apologizing for causing them so much trouble as she stroked the liquid off her shiny gold raincoat with an enormous wad of tissue she pulled out of her raincoat pocket.

When she had quieted down and Mr. Snair saw she really was all right and really had no design to sue him, he led her gingerly over to the counter to give Mick a free hand to clean up thoroughly and as quickly as possible. "Now how do you know they made their purchase here?" he asked.

"The price marking you use." She nodded woodenly for some time as if preoccupied, then a deep line appeared in her brow as her eyes focused again and Mr. Snair regretted the very day he decided to specialize in delicacies. *I must get rid of her*, he thought. "Yes," she resumed her explanation. "The prices. Of that I am sure. These pieces are pretty much intact." She drew out of another capacious raincoat pocket a second wad of tissue, this one taped together into a bundle. Laboriously she unpacked it and at the end of the unnerving process—during which Mick finished mopping up and was on hand to watch—handed to Mr. Snair four shards of glass which, it was true, once placed together on the counter, clearly showed, odd how recognizable it was, his price label. The sensation he experienced on recognizing it was decidedly unpleasant. Why had it been necessary for her to mention the word 'poison'? Why would such a thing even occur to her? And why would she try to eat pickles scattered across a shop floor? The whole afternoon had become distinctly unpleasant. It was not a feeling he expected to be

able to wash away with a glass of fine dry sherry or two that evening. This lady had killed the day.

“If I could only find a perfect jar or rather a good jar ... maybe, you could help me—then it would be all right. Pick one out that’s right and just give it to me. I’ll pay for the broken one, I insist on that.”

Sally refused to look at the jar of pickles Mr. Snair picked out—she didn’t want the counter boy to pick it out, she wanted the owner to pick it out. When Mr. Snair held up the chosen jar, a fine specimen of Murry’s Special Fancy Dilled Pickles, she looked away horrified and requested that it be packed and inserted into her pocketbook without her touching it.

Sally had worked for three full days at the impossible task of ridding the kitchen of the smell of vinegar and dill. She had worked as long and as vigorously as she could scrubbing the cabinets and floor so as to leave no tell-tale trace of sticky residue, going along the baseboard with tweezers to get all the slivers of glass. The sixty-seven-year-old woman’s efforts had been frenzied because she knew: the more perfectly she wiped out the traces of her negligence, the worse the danger for Gene and Barbara when they returned home, because in truth the actual thing could not be wiped out. In removing the most obvious stains, puddles, and shards, all signals of latent danger would be gone. In the familiar surroundings of their own home, Gene and Barbara would never suspect that something ugly might happen to them at any moment: an invisible glass sliver slipping into a bowl of soup or getting rubbed unwittingly against the clear, shining, delicate surface of an eye, and it would be Sally’s fault, premeditated practically, because she had worked as hard as she could to wipe out the signs of a danger she had been fully aware would persist after her best efforts were exhausted. And if a danger still existed for Gene and Barbara in their kitchen, how could she possibly manage the garden? She knew she was to eat all those cucumbers out there—Barbara had begged her not to let them go to waste. They were out there rotting in heaps. Was she still supposed to eat them? And if she started on the cucumbers, she would get to the dog. Sally’s head sunk down between her shoulders. The cords in her neck sprang out. Her eyes grew dark. Her entire face glowed



smooth and satiny. The thought arrested all animation. She couldn't stand the pressure. But she was there all alone in that big strange house *to* stand it. She reapplied herself, lunging to slap into the porch corners with her soggy rag, working her way ever so slowly towards the back yard and the sizeable garden beyond.

Then it occurred to her—relief descended out of the blue—however worrisome it might be, however trying for Gene and Barbara, she would tell them the truth, not as someone else might see it but as she saw it. She would tell the story, not as someone else might prefer to have it told, fast and cheap and false, but as she understood it, which meant sparing no details.

She would explain to them first that, until all immediate danger had been removed from the kitchen, she could not possibly get to the garden. She had been concerned about the dog, too—she had been. She had been oh so aware. She had been out there counting the cucumbers. A leg had appeared among them, then a blunt, curly-furred muzzle, an inert eye embedded in the wet fur, the flap of an ear. The dog. Half-buried in the cucumbers. Poisoned. She knew they would want to know why, if her concern for Checker had been so great—which it had been—she had left it back there to rot with the cucumbers while she went off to find the replacement pickle jar. But the incident with the pickles had happened after the dog's disappearance and her subsequent discovery of it in the cucumber bed. She was sure of that now. And in order to attend to the matters of the dog and the cucumbers, she required undivided attention. That's how it was. Her concern had first been focused on the dog, naturally, but that terrible thing with the pickles had happened. And then danger had been present for Gene and Barbara. In all conscience, she never felt that the danger in the kitchen had been wiped out.

The only reason Sally abruptly stopped her work cleaning the kitchen was because she needed time to get that replacement jar. Once that was done, she could finish cleaning the kitchen and then turn her attention to the matter of the dog, which required utmost concern and, as she had already stated, undivided attention. But her attention never was undivided. She couldn't figure out what to do about the pickle jar—get a perfect one or an imperfect one—especially since the matter of the dog so brutally cleaved her attention. But she had thought of a solution, hadn't she? Someone



else had picked out a jar of pickles for her. Unfortunately, she had only thought of that in the very last hour before their return and by that time there was no more time. That's exactly how it was and that's exactly what she would say, because that's really exactly how it was.

She would tell them as soon as they arrived, regardless of the unpleasant welcome it might cause them after their lovely trip to Italy. She would present them with the essence of the matter: a large jar with the gruesome contents of all the shards and liquid and pickles she had been able to sop up, sweep up, glean in those three dreadful days. That was Sally's decision as she entered the chilly visiting room and moved to the divan. She sat down and twisted herself supplely around, resting her chin on her shoulder, reptilian eyes blinking watchfully, ready to explain, but requiring time, patience, undivided attention. They came soon. They never kept her waiting.

14

“Aunt Sally? Hello, Aunt Sally? I've come to visit you. I've brought you some of those pickles you keep asking about.” Barbara was alone. Gene was usually with her, but the visits took a heavy toll on him. Sally lifted her chin, raising her sleepless eyes to her aged niece in the same movement. Oddly, Sally had not seemed to age since the time she had house-sat for them and gone bonkers over a jar of pickles. Barbara and Gene, on the other hand, felt they had both begun to age rapidly at just that time. That had been eight years ago. Finding the body of their dog in the garden had deepened their horror for Aunt Sally's condition. How the two were related they never discovered. By that time, poor Aunt Sally was inaccessible.

Seeing the jar of pickles in Barbara's hand, Sally's single movement—the only reaction she ever had and in which Barbara read recognition, stimulation, joy, life—was a violent twitching of her face and quick movements of the leaden eyes. But the signs of life and joy stopped within seconds and Aunt Sally's face transformed into the familiar, heavy mask with remote eyes. Her chin sank back down onto her shoulder. Her dark eyes traced the lines of the beige tiles of the visiting room floor. She had to reconsider. Barbara had the jar, had spotted it right away. Sally

wasn't sure she hadn't broken the jar on purpose. But she hadn't put the old pickles into the imperfect jar she had purchased to replace the broken one, of that she was sure. She knew they might have glass slivers in them. She never even touched the imperfect replacement jar. She had that funny man put it on the counter for her with a note taped to it giving date of purchase, name of the store from which it had come, and the name of the funny man himself along with his phone number. She had even asked him to sign the note, and after much protesting and argument, he had. He had. She had had him do all that for her to make absolutely sure that she contaminated nothing after her initial inexplicable transgression. It was the truth. She was sure it was. She truly believed she was sure.

At this point, even the flickering of Sally's eyes along the fine lines between the floor tiles stopped. She retreated further to consider more carefully. She would have to go over it once again. She could not let herself be distracted for even a moment with the thought of that dog. Not until this matter was cleared up.

The attendants smoking out in the hallway nodded to Barbara as she left, then stared up over their cigarettes at each other, their heads bowed confidentially.

One spoke quietly: "You better go in there now if—"

A violent crash and the sound of splintering glass came from the visiting room.

"Never mind, Stan," the second one murmured, heaving himself into slow motion. "I'm a creature of routine. It's the only way to git by. Rooo-teen."

This, in fact, was their Marlon Brando routine. They were both actors who auditioned in the afternoons and worked evenings in the nut house, which was the only reason either one of them had taken jobs in the nut house, the one having tipped off the other about it. Sometimes they slipped into their Marlon Brando routine, sometimes into a James Dean routine, sometimes, on a rare evening, into a Marlene Dietrich routine. Whichever routine it was, both felt their twilight hours in the psychiatric ward a little richer for

the embellishment and the tired dialog a little richer for the ambience.

“You’re ain’t no good for her. Not for any of ‘em.”

“We git along fine. Gives us a chance to communicate. Just me and her, ya know? She communicates when I’m in there cleaning up those pickles, letting me know where all the little pieces of glass are. It’s a quiet time. We contemplate together.”

“Find ‘em all?”

“God, do we,” his companion growled grudgingly, slipping out of his routine. “That’s what she does best. ‘Course, we practice a lot. We’ve gotten so we work very well together now. You’d be hopeless with her.”

The blond ruminator slipped out of his routine. “Why don’t we just request that they be told not to bring any more of those god-damned pickles? I really can’t take that smell anymore. I used to like pickles.”

His dark, pale counterpart responded thoughtfully: “To tell you the honest truth, I think she’d be a lot worse off than she is now. She really comes alive when I’m crawling around on the floor looking for all those pieces of glass. They’re small, sharp, practically invisible, and she knows where every single frigg’in’ one is. She twists back up around that invisible scepter of hers and stares across at me with those eyes as soon as I tell her we’ve got ‘em all. Disappointed. Doesn’t believe me. Starts hunting around with her nose sort of, the only part of her that moves at that point. Except for those Frankenstein eyes, that is.”

“Well, just don’t ever get sick on visiting day. Cause, man, I don’t want to have to clean up that mess.”

“Ah, that’s the easy part.”

“Like hell.”

“Once they’re all up, she wants to eat them. Then it gets bad.”

“Eat the pickles?”

“Nah, the little pieces of glass. As soon as I say we’re done. That’s when it gets hairy. She stays real still till I start to go, then her arm whips out and she grabs something and pokes it in her mouth. Then I got to go in there—into her mouth, that is—to make sure she’s

not in imminent danger of suffocating or bleeding to death. That would not go well on our record, Stan. And of course I can't see anything. Except the inside of her mouth and ... those teeth. That's hairy. Picking the glass up off the floor I don't mind. I try to make that last as long as possible, give her the impression I'm being real thorough. Try picking it out of her mouth sometime." He shrugged, strolled slowly into the next room, and called out softly to Sally. Her eyes flickered darkly up to him in anticipation.

He strolled back to his comrade in madness. "But, even weirder, she doesn't start any of this till I get there. I mean she could reach down and get all the glass she wanted right now. But she doesn't. She waits for me. I'm telling you she likes telling me where all the pieces are."

He shrugged. "You know as well as I do, there's nothing anyone can do for ol' Sally. The only thing I can do for her is clean up after her. But I think Sally may be having a positive effect on my persona. Listen. Last night our neighbor started playing his music real loud. No, listen to me. I've got my point. I'm getting weird, too, but I think it's healthy. Just hear me out. I like music, but not too loud and not three-o'clock-in-the-morning loud. The guy came home from a club, no doubt, feeling all jazzed up and good, not ready for bed, full of fun, sort of lonely maybe too and wanted that music loud, boy, loud. And that's how he played it, and kept playing it. Loud. Until I showed up *livid* as the holy ghost. Sally's getting to me. Listen to what I did: I climbed up a cement wall and along the ledge to get to this guy's window, which was open—all this in my underwear, mind you—crawled in and before he could have a heart attack, stomped over to his stereo system and bashed it in with his handy standing lamp. The music stopped immediately. He won't be playing anything on that set again. Won't be using that lamp anymore either. 'Mad? Destructive? Me? Hell, no,' I told the guy. (He hadn't said anything.) 'I just love the *sound*. The sound of electrical equipment getting trashed. It's a fantastic *sound*, man.' Then I crawled back out the window like Batman, along the ledge of that cement wall, jumped down into my backyard and sauntered into the porch feeling like Superman. Didn't sleep for the rest of the night. Look at my eyes. You're looking into the pupils of a madman. What I said was true, Stan. I loved the sound of smashing his

system to friggin' hell. So does that mean I should quit, or do I finally qualify for Sally?"

The End

