Sympathetic

C. P. Boyko

HE DIDN'T RECOGNIZE her at first because she wasn't wearing her glasses; she didn't recognize him at first for the same reason.

"But it's you!" he cried.

They embraced, then pulled apart shyly, taking refuge in the scenery.

"Beautiful day, isn't it!" said Leora.

"Oh, very beautiful!," Alex agreed.

"Couldn't ask for better."

"Not this time of year."

"It *is* a bit windy, I suppose."

"That's true. A *bit* windy. But it's a good bright day at least."

"Oh, you can't fault its brightness."

"Although it *could* be clearer, I suppose."

"Yes. I like a few clouds, but this . . ."

"Yes. You might even call it overcast."

"I don't think that would be going too far."

"But at least it's nice and warm."

"No question about that. It's wonderfully warm."

"Though maybe there is just that slightest bit of a chill from time to time in the wind . . ."

"I wouldn't want to be out without a scarf and jacket, that's for sure."

"And yet," he sighed, "it *is* a day. There's no denying that."

"Oh indeed, it's a nice dayey day, if you know what I mean."

"We've that to be thankful for."

"Count your blessings."

They walked in happy silence for a while along the tar-black canal. The autumn's first rot was in the air, making the world smell almost fresh.

At last he said, “You’ve hardly changed at all, you know.”

She swung her arms girlishly, so that the wedding band was visible. “I hope that’s not true.”

“You hope you have changed? Why?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I don’t care much for who I was.”

After a pause he said, “I did.”

“Well and what about you? Have you changed or haven’t you?”

“*I* think so,” he said sadly.

“Well then. Perhaps the new you will like the new me.”

“As much as the old me liked the old you?”

“Isn’t it possible?”

⋆

IT WAS AT this point in her thoughts that the novelist June Cottan ran over a little old lady with her car.

A startled, shriveled face appeared for an instant above the hood, there was a horrible polyphonic thud, June stamped on the brakes, and the car came to a halt—a more abrupt halt than her braking could account for. It was as if something had jammed the inner workings of the machine. June sat frozen in horror at what she had done, what she would find when she got out. Finally, with a shudder of resolve she threw herself out of and away from the vehicle, then looked back.

The car had completely swallowed the old woman’s body; only her angry white head protruded from the gap between the front tire and the wheel well. June sank her fingernails into her mouth, cheeks, and eye sockets. She’d killed someone! She’d killed someone! She was a killer! She was—

When the old woman spoke, June fainted, briefly.

“Don’t just stand there gawping, dummy! Fetch me my walker!”

Years of being ignored and flouted (as the old woman saw it) had honed Reginalda Drax’s voice to a razor-edged implement for the extraction of compliance. June complied. All that remained of the walker, however, was a skein of metal projecting from the car’s grille.

"I think it's broken."

"Broken my eye! You just don't know how to use it. Give it here!"

June didn't know what to do. Her scalp tingled, colors seemed brighter; the very street was suffused with momentousness. This *mattered.* But she didn't know what to do. She felt criminally remiss—as if this exact situation were one for which she should have prepared. Why had she never taken a first-aid course, for example? She dithered, flapping her arms helplessly and prancing in place, till Reginalda growled, "Give it here!" This was something June could do. She blew on her hands, planted her foot on the fender, and tugged at one of the twisted bars. When it came loose she staggered backwards—not realizing for a moment that the car had lurched too. It began to roll away downhill, gathering speed. June screamed and chased after it, without any idea what she would do if she caught it. The old woman's head rotated with the tire, smacking the pavement with each revolution. Reginalda, slightly confused by recent events, had the impression that she was being jostled. Loudly she muttered that people nowadays had forgotten what manners were. Then the car rolled into an intersection, causing several noisy collisions and partaking in several more.

June, breathless and sick with remorse, followed the convoy of ambulances to the hospital in a taxi.

⋆

JUNE COTTAN WAS a fundamentally cheerful person. That is, most days she felt happy, and when she did not, she felt it her duty to put on a happy face for the sake of others. When she took her dogs for walks, she waved at her neighbors and smiled kindly at strangers because she believed that other people were fundamentally cheerful too. When evidence to the contrary reached her in the form of a frown or a grumble, she chose to believe that these people were merely having a bad day—and her heart went out to them as she imagined in detail the sort of nasty rotten bad luck that could make you frown at someone who smiled at you. She smiled extra widely at these people, but with a wrinkle in her brow to show that she understood them.

For someone with as much capacity for sympathy as June, an emergency room is hell. It pained her to see so many nice people in such nasty condition. Few of them could or would return her smile; the wrinkle in her brow became a crease. One man had been waiting seven hours, and June's imagination saw him trudging through seven deserts in search of water. An old woman waited for her husband, and June's imagination flipped through the photo album of their happy years together, and she shared something of the woman's anxiety. One young man said to no one in particular that he didn't think he liked morphine, and June's bowels knotted in vicarious nausea. A pale girl with a band-aid on her thumb evoked in June's mind fountains of blood splashing a white kitchen. The sight of a healthy, cheerful-looking fat man caused her to shudder at the ant farm of decay that presumably riddled his interior, the depths of despair that his grin presumably concealed. Her heart went out to everyone. She beamed at them her most supportive smile—an anguished rictus, in fact, which so monstrously contorted her face that everyone in the room generously hoped that she would be first to see a doctor.

June knew how busy and tired and overworked and footsore the doctors and nurses must be (she imagined them coming home to their small but cozy apartments after sixteen-hour shifts, shouldering the door closed with a sigh, putting on their slippers, running a bath, making a nice pot of tea), and she did not want to be a bother. So she merely gazed at them plaintively as they came and went. None of them met her eye. She tried to guess from their posture, demeanor, and pace whether they had seen a little old woman die that day, or whether on the contrary they had seen a little old woman miraculously recover. When this proved inconclusive, June began to roam the halls and peer into rooms—while making herself appear as small and healthy and self-sufficient as possible.

She saw a man in a cast and thought how nasty it would be to have a broken leg. Then she thought how terrible it would be to have cancer. Then she thought how terrible it would be to be married to someone with cancer; then how terrible to have a child with cancer; then how terrible to be the doctor of a child with cancer and be unable to help . . . In one of the pa-

tient's rooms she glimpsed a bouquet of flowers and her optimism rebounded. How marvelous it would be to be that doctor, and be able to cure that child's cancer! And how wonderful it would be to be that child's mother; and how wonderful to be that child! Doctors and nurses, she mused, really were heroes . . . Perhaps she would write a novel about a child with cancer . . .

She turned a corner and heard a voice she recognized scream, "*I don't want to go in there!*"

The scream was so bloodcurdling that June could only picture a gang of thugs shoving poor Mrs. Drax down a manhole or stuffing her into a body bag. June ran down the hall to the old woman's rescue.

She paused in the doorway to reevaluate the situation. Reginalda Drax sat propped up by pillows in a hospital bed, the clean white sheets pulled snugly up to her chin. Several feet away, well beyond shoving or stuffing range, stood a short, sad, serious doctor or nurse (June could not tell them apart) with one hand on a wheelchair and the other holding a clipboard.

"I'm not getting anywhere near that infernal contraption and that's that!" cried Mrs. Drax. When her mouth flew open and her voice came roaring out, her head seemed disembodied, swaddled there in the bedclothes. To June she said, "Who are you? Get out of my room. I asked for a private room, not a room filled with smelly zombies!"

The doctor or nurse turned to June. He had a wide, unhappy mouth, which he opened minimally to ask if she was the family.

Mrs. Drax was aghast. She denied that she had ever seen this strange woman before, much less been related to her.

June twisted a toe into the linoleum, glanced left and right, and coughed into her fist. It occurred to her that perhaps the sight of the person who had run her over would not be a wholly welcome one to Mrs. Drax. Modulating the truth uneasily, June said, "I was at the scene of the accident. Is she—all right?"

"There's nothing wrong with me! What're you asking him for? He's as much a quack as all the others. I had sciatica for twelve years before they diagnosed it right. Don't talk about me like I'm not in the room. I *am* in the

room. This is my room! I asked for a private room!"

The nurse or doctor took June aside, and with sober candor, showed her the X-rays. The bones, he explained, showed white; the breaks in the bones were black. June gasped: Mrs. Drax's skeleton looked like something that had been uncovered by archeologists—or rather, something that had been baked in an oven, methodically shattered with a hammer, then uncovered thousands of years later by archeologists.

"Frankly," said the nurse or doctor, underscoring his frankness by gazing into June's eyes before continuing, "frankly, it's amazing she's even alive."

June winced. Mrs. Drax said that if they thought she couldn't hear what they were whispering over there they were crazy; she could hear a pin hit carpet at fifty yards; and if they thought she was going to let them stick a pink chunk of foreign plastic in her ear they had another thing coming. "I'm not getting in no wheelchair neither. There's nothing wrong with my legs. Just give me my walker and get out of my way!"

The doctor or nurse looked sadly at the old woman. "Mrs. Drax," he said, "you have been in a very serious accident."

Reginalda Drax denied that this was so.

"You've just come from four hours of intensive reconstructive surgery."

Reginalda Drax said that she had not authorized it and would not pay for it.

"The surgeons did everything in their power, but it is, frankly, unlikely, given the extent of the injuries, that you will ever be able to walk again."

Mrs. Drax said that if they would give her her walker she would walk on their graves.

"Mrs. Drax, I— Your walker, it's—" A sob of guilt escaped June. "It's completely broken!"

"There's nothing wrong with my walker that a drop of oil won't fix. People these days! A little squeak in the wheel and they throw it on the trash heap. A little wear in the soles and they're out buying a new pair of shoes. They're down there at the landfill burning up piles of tires with perfectly good treads on them as we speak. How much tread do you need on the

roads around here? You'd think they were at the North Pole or someplace. Snow chains in July! I've seen it!" She peered distrustfully at June. "What're you, chunkalunk, some kind of wandering sales rep for the walker makers? Get out of my room, and take these stinky geezers with you!"

June's mouth fell moistly open. "The poor dear," she reasoned, "she must be in terrible pain."

The nurse or doctor shrugged. "She won't let us give her anything."

"When can she go home?"

"When I was a girl," Mrs. Drax was saying, "they made things to last. And we knew how to darn a sock, let me tell you. When our building was put on the boiler my mother'd save the lukewarm water that came out before it ran hot. We knew how to stretch a penny, by God! Not like this bunch of charlatans! You know how much they charged my George for a sprained finger—his *little* finger?"

"Frankly," said the doctor or nurse, "the sooner the better."

⋆

AT EIGHT, REGINALDA discovered books. At twelve, she discovered boys. Boys seemed not to like smart girls, so she resolved to give up books and to expunge from her vocabulary all incriminatingly clever words—starting with "expunge" and "incriminatingly." After several unsatisfactory dalliances, she decided instead, at age fourteen, to give up boys. From then on, whenever she was introduced to a boy, she hit at him with large words and literary non sequiturs until he went away. Over time this policy became, as all our policies become, a stereotyped habit. Borrowing a sentence from the heroine of one of her favorite books, she took to saying, on meeting anyone new, "What is your name, and how did you come here, and what are these wet things in this great bag?" It became part of her idiolect. No one understood what it meant; she forgot its origin herself. Then one day, when she was eighteen, a young man quoted back to her the subsequent line: "You had better let them alone; they are loaches for my mother." It was as if a key had turned deep inside her. They married, and lived happily and unhappily to-

gether for thirty years. When George died suddenly, the key turned back and fell out of the lock. She expected daily to die from grief—an expectation that eventually outlived her grief. Twenty years of tomorrows had been unable to shake the conviction that she was going to die soon—tomorrow, probably. Meanwhile the anger she had felt at George's dying lost precision and became anger at him. She came to believe that she had married badly, that he had been cruel to her, that they had never been happy. She'd made a mistake: she'd been tricked by a silly coincidence and a half-submerged memory. A children's book had made a fool of her. Never again. From now on she would assume that others were selfish and cruel and would hurt her if given the chance. She would not give them the chance; she would not give them an opening. And so at seventy she went through the world as if with eyes closed, that no one might poke them.

⋆

REGINALDA WAS ON her way to see her sons. She went to see them every day, as she did everything she did every day—because she was not long for this world.

She was not afraid of death; in fact she found it useful. Because her time was so limited, she was obliged to avoid irritants and bores, and other people were obliged to treat her kindly, or indulgently. Her sons, who treated her neither kindly nor indulgently, had at least to make time for her every day if they did not want to find themselves left out of her will. They protested that they didn't care a damn about any will, but she knew better. After all, they made time for her every day.

Reginalda waited to cross the street to the taxi stand. It was a busy street; she had been waiting a long time. As soon as she saw an opening (that is, as soon as the street was quite empty), another car would burst onto the scene—several blocks away perhaps, but bearing down fast. People nowadays never stopped for pedestrians; in fact, they sped up when they saw you, either to beat you to the crosswalk or to frighten you back to the sidewalk. She considered the satisfaction that throwing herself under one of

these hot rods would give her, and the lesson it would teach these drivers. But this was a daydream: she was no longer capable of throwing herself under anything, or anywhere. She wasn't as spry as she'd once been. Indeed, Reginalda shuffled along behind her walker so slowly that onlookers were overwhelmed by what they took to be this little old lady's superhuman tenacity. In fact, she just moved slow.

She was moving in this way when the accident happened. Suddenly she found herself lying in the street. This sort of thing was occurring more often lately. She blamed it on bad pavement. No one walked anymore these days, so no one cared if the sidewalks were a deadly obstacle course. Possibly someone had knocked her down—she remembered being jostled. She didn't need anyone to help her up; she just needed someone to put her walker in arm's reach. But no one wanted to get involved nowadays. They were all scared of lawsuits. They'd sooner watch you drown than toss you a lifesaver they weren't accredited and authorized to toss. Passersby passed by, bystanders stood by, people stepped over and around her until finally a doctor was dragged in. But doctors were no better than mechanics: if they got their claws into you, they didn't let go till they'd extracted something expensive. Suddenly she found herself in a hospital. All this fuss over a little spill!

She enjoyed the wheelchair more than she thought she would. Obviously the doctors were in cahoots with the wheelchair crowd, but Reginalda hadn't signed anything and she figured she might as well make the saleslady earn her commission. So they went for a little test drive. It was almost as comfortable as her rocking chair at home, but had the great advantage over that seat of being completely and effortlessly mobile. All she had to do was screech "Left!" or "Right!" or "Straight!" or "Step on it!" or "Slow down!" or "Hold on!" and the wheelchair instantly complied. (And because it complied instantly Reginalda took care to screech her commands at the last possible moment.) She took a ride around the park, up and down the lanes of the shopping district, and even in and out of an elevator in the courthouse downtown, just to prove that it could be done. People got out of your way when you were in a moving vehicle, by God! Then she remembered that she had been going to see her sons. To test the chair's batteries, as it were, she

pointed the saleslady east on Harper Street, told her to keep an eye peeled for Garland Road (several miles distant), and took a little nap.

⋆

JUNE COULD ENDURE such treatment for just as long as she still believed that Mrs. Drax was suffering. But when Bobby Drax assured her that his mother was always cranky like this (he used a different word, but June preferred "cranky"), her sympathy for the old woman evaporated. She gave Bobby Drax her phone number, address, and email, and then—

"Hey, where you going, chubalub?"

—June went home.

That night, however, she couldn't sleep. Her dogs sensed it, and couldn't sleep either. So she put a pot of milk on the stove and they all sat up, thinking. She could not guess what weighed on their little minds; but occasionally, when her own thoughts bubbled over into speech—"That terrible woman!"—the dogs lifted their ears and gazed at her quizzically and compassionately. Then she felt obliged to explain herself and minimize her outburst in a reassuring tone. But as the night wore on, her outbursts became more frequent and her tone less and less reassuring.

Her first instinct was to turn Mrs. Drax into fiction, to make her a character in a novel. For June's defense against anything unpleasant was that of the holiday traveller's: "Oh well—it'll make a good story when we get home!" (It is this belief, that all nastiness can be transmuted usefully into anecdote or art, that misleads some writers to the converse belief: that all art has its origins in nastiness—that we learn in suffering what we teach in song. This is flattering to the artist, for everyone likes to think he has suffered more than most. But June, who suffered little, did not fall prey to this fallacy. She knew that she wrote best when she was most cheerful.)

The problem was that Mrs. Drax would not make a good character. She was too unlikeable, too unsympathetic, to be believed. June's readers would object that no one so selfish, so cranky, so rude had ever existed or could ever exist. And June felt that they would be right. And yet, neverthe-

less, the woman did exist. It was a problem.

Perhaps there were some things—some people—who simply did not belong in fiction. But this contradicted June's faith in the comprehensive inclusiveness of fiction, and of her own fiction in particular. Though she was too modest to put it into words, she felt that one of her great qualities as a novelist was that she featured every kind of person in her novels—or would eventually, or could. As it happened, she did not have to put this thought into words: someone had done it for her. On every edition of every book that she had published since 1990 there appeared the testimony of *The Philadelphia Enquirer* that June Cottan had a "keenly wide-ranging sympathy." She did not understand exactly how width of range could be keen, but never mind—the point was that her sympathy was wide-ranging. But now, for the first time, she had begun to doubt her own blurbs. It was a dark night of the soul indeed.

She was brutal with herself: Had she *ever* written an unsympathetic character? It seemed to her that she had not. When her characters acted meanly or cruelly they always had a good reason or a good excuse. When they suffered they suffered only from misunderstandings or momentary weaknesses, never from malice or hatred. Where, in all her works, was Evil? For surely Evil existed in the world. How else did one explain war? How did one account for the Holocaust? But then where was June Cottan's war novel, her Holocaust novel? For a time (because it is easier to write ten books than to change the way we act towards even one little old lady) June lost herself in daydreams of the Holocaust novel she would write. In her vision, all the Nazis had different faces, but they all sneered and screeched like Mrs. Drax.

At last she recollected herself. She was already working on a novel; where were the villains in *it*? Leora's parents were not villains, though they forced her to marry rich, old, ugly Mr. Man der Lynn. Poor themselves, they wanted to save their only daughter from poverty; having married for love themselves, they wanted to save her from the disappointments that drudgery and routine bring, as they believed, to all lovers. But they meant well. And Mr. Man der Lynn was not a villain, though he forbade her to see

her beloved Alex. He was merely old-fashioned and terrified of scandal; he tried but failed to share her youthful enthusiasms—but he *tried*; and in the end, when he was made to see her true heart's desires, he dissolved their marriage readily enough. For he too meant well, and wanted only to do what was right.

Why? Why did all her characters mean well and do right? Why did none of them mean ill or do wrong? Why, oh why, were all her characters so damn spineless?

Because they were sympathetic. But what did that mean? It meant that they were someone you could sympathize with. But shouldn't a nice person be able to sympathize with anyone, no matter how nasty? Wasn't that the whole *point* of literature—that it gave you, the reader, practice in feeling sympathy for people who were different from you? Practice in adopting other people's points of view?

But if that were so—and June had never questioned it—then it was almost a moral imperative to make one's characters as different, as alien, as *un*-sympathetic as possible. Otherwise the reader had no gap to cross. June's characters, it now seemed to her, were wickedly easy to sympathize with; nothing whatsoever prevented the reader from identifying with them. They were generic and inoffensive. They were normal; they were bland. They liked nice things and disliked nasty things. They had only mild quirks and were driven by only the most common motives and desires. They were in fact hollow shells—mere costumes that the reader could comfortably wear, masks through which the reader could comfortably peer. That was what sympathizing with, identifying with, or rooting for a character really was: *becoming* them! Or rather, making them become you. It was not a way of getting inside another person's head; it was a way of getting your own head inside another body, and, through that body, of experiencing another world, living another life. Perhaps, after all, literature was not bettering or broadening, but just another means of escape. Perhaps fiction in fact only gave you practice at being yourself in exotic situations. Perhaps, by inviting you to cheer for the good guys and despise the bad guys, fiction only taught you how to better cheer for yourself and despise everyone else. By reinforcing

the niceness of nice things and the nastiness of nasty things, perhaps fiction only entrenched you more firmly and inescapably in your own limited self. Perhaps novels were, after all, immoral.

For a long time June stood rigidly over the stove, stirring and staring into the pot of milk as though trying to make it boil by willpower alone.

She saw in her mind the startled, shriveled face, and heard again the terrible thud.

"No!" she cried, and threw down the spoon; the dogs started. "Fiction is not immoral," she muttered. "*I* am."

And she resolved to revisit Mrs. Drax—poor, lonely, hurting Mrs. Drax—just as soon as she'd finished the chapter she was working on.

⋆

THEY SOON DEVELOPED a routine. June was permitted to write for two hours in the morning, then she would report to the nursing home to take Mrs. Drax on her daily rounds. Their first stop was the Salvation Army, where Mrs. Drax bought up all the second-hand sweaters, which she unraveled and made into sweaters; she believed this was cheaper than buying yarn. (It was not.) Then they visited the library, where Mrs. Drax traded one Shakespeare for another hopefully less boring one. (She would not let June read to her from anything but Shakespeare, because Shakespeare was the best there was, and he was bad enough.) Next was the bulk department of the grocery store, where Mrs. Drax bought her day's supply of caraway seeds, which she liked to chew when she was not doing anything else with her mouth. (Fifteen seeds cost her $0.03.) Then came lunch, or rather the argument over where to go for lunch. Mrs. Drax's method was to insist that she did not care where they went, then to find fault with every one of June's suggestions until she hit upon the place that Mrs. Drax had had in mind all along. The afternoon was dedicated to Mrs. Drax's solicitor, whose job it was to amend her will and to subtract from her estate the cost of his services. Surprisingly, Mrs. Drax's will was only symbolically vindictive. If one of her sons had treated her badly the day before, she lowered his share of the

inheritance to forty-eight percent and boosted the other's to fifty-two; if they had both treated her badly, they split it down the middle. She occasionally lamented that she could not give the whole amount away to a charity or church; but charities nowadays were nothing but a tax dodge for sleazy corporations, and religion was for dopes. Sometimes she looked pointedly at June and asked the lawyer leading questions which revealed that no one but her sons would ever get any of her money. The bulk of her amendments were not legally significant, but more in the nature of appeals or advice to the living. She asked the management of Green Oaks to commemorate her by removing the meat loaf from their menu; she urged Mrs. McGillicuddy to finish the blue sweater she was knitting, but, NB, to use a garter stitch where the pattern recommended a stockinette; she didn't care who did it, but would someone please check her Sunday crossword answers—she wasn't too sure about 32 Down being "shotput." After the solicitor came visits to Mrs. Drax's sons, one of whom usually gave them supper, if Mrs. Drax denied stridently enough that they were hungry. Then Mrs. Drax was taken to the first thirty minutes of some movie, which, as she explained loudly and patiently to the audience at large, was about all she could handle, movies these days being too fast, too silly, too violent, or too raunchy for her taste. Then June rolled her back to the nursing home for bridge, knitting, Shakespeare, and, ostensibly, death. It was usually ten o'clock by the time June got home to her poor neglected dogs, who had not been out for a walk since dawn.

This regimen was hard on the dogs; but it was hard on June too. For one thing, she was not used to walking twenty-odd miles a day. (Mrs. Drax could not explain why the sight of June's crumpled car filled her with revulsion and panic, and June did not press her.) She could not take the dogs along, either, because Mrs. Drax did not like dogs, and dogs did not like her. When she and June's dogs were in the same room together the dogs stood on one side and barked at Mrs. Drax while she sat on the other side and yelled right back at them, as though they were all debating some controversial new traffic law in town hall. And though June normally liked walking, since it gave her the opportunity to wave at her neighbors and smile kindly

at strangers, she found that no one smiled back when she was with Mrs. Drax, who scowled at everyone: postmen, children, and panhandlers—especially panhandlers, whom she called "dirty bums" or "lazy beggars," advised to seek employment, and sometimes spat at. June, who was flustered by panhandlers (she found that they made her feel awkward, privileged, and ungenerous whether she gave them spare change or not), was positively mortified by Mrs. Drax's behavior. She apologized profusely and gave them all ten-dollar bills—so that, in time, the bums on their downtown route came to relish Mrs. Drax's maltreatment, and even to like her a little; while June, they felt, was a "dumb cluck" and a "three-minute egg."

Life with Mrs. Drax was not always so terrible. One day, while they rolled down Harper Street, Mrs. Drax napped in her chair, her head lolling back, and the sight of her puckered face, petulant even in sleep, gave June sentimental daydreams about a daughter who moves back home to nurse her dying mother . . .

June no longer wondered why Mrs. Drax was such a nasty person. When Mrs. Drax was awake, the question did not grip the imagination. When Mrs. Drax went rigid with frustration at some perceived wrong, thrusting out her pelvis and kicking her legs, or crumpled into a seething, trembling bomb of resentment, or exploded in a fulminating tantrum, it didn't seem to matter much whether she acted this way because she had been spoiled as a child or deprived as an adolescent, or because her parents had been disgracefully poor or disgracefully rich, or because she had been forced to marry a man she did not love or had lost the one she did. Anything was possible; and probably at least one explanation was correct. But because Mrs. Drax was not a character in a novel, June could never know the real reasons. The thing to remember, she felt, was that there *was* some explanation. Nasty people were not born nasty, and did not choose to be nasty just for the fun of it. Something turned them that way; it was not their fault—so one could have sympathy for them. Or so at least June felt while Mrs. Drax slept.

When Reginalda awoke, she caught June looking at her tenderly.

She understood by this time that June was no saleslady for a wheelchair

manufacturer, but rather some kind of novelist—in other words, a filthy liar. The woman was obviously a con artist; why else would she be nice? Besides, no one cheerful could be for real. She was so cheerful she was skittish. She spoke in a chipper telemarketer's voice, as if afraid you'd hang up on her before she could get her hooks in. And Reginalda did not like the way she peered out at you over her fat cheeks, like some cagey woodland rodent peering out of a hollow tree. The kinder and more considerate June was, the more Reginalda distrusted and disliked her.

"What are *you* looking at? Eyes on the road, short stack! You trying to break my legs on a telephone pole?"

June's sympathetic daydreams fled; she bit her lip and sighed; her exasperation overflowed into speech before she could catch herself. "We're not even moving, Reginalda. It's a stop light."

Reginalda believed that only weak, fickle people corrected themselves. "I know what a stop light is!" she screeched. Bystanders turned to look censoriously at June. What was she doing to that poor old lady?

The light changed, but June did not move.

"What's the hold up? Get a move on, slowpoke!"

June gazed sadly into Mrs. Drax's face. She tried to explain how unnecessary all this nastiness was. "Don't you— It isn't— We don't have to—" She gasped in frustration. If only she could write Mrs. Drax a nice long letter! "Darnit, Reginalda, I'm on your side. You don't have to be so,"—she shook her arms and stamped her feet to illustrate Mrs. Drax's character —"all the time, anymore. You know? Okay?"

A breathless gust of fear passed through Reginalda. She confused it for anger; then it became anger. She could no more identify the cause of this anger than she could have identified the genus of tree burning in a fireplace. Nor was she inclined to introspection. All she knew was that this tubby, meddlesome sneak was lecturing her. She lost her temper.

She swore and snorted and spat and flailed till the unmended bones in her arms and legs broke again. She bucked the wheelchair into the street and it began to roll downhill. June screamed and ran after it.

Late that night, after many hours at the hospital, June brought Mrs.

Drax home. She put her in her own bedroom and made her as comfortable as possible in her new wheelchair; Mrs. Drax told her to keep her dirty sausage fingers to herself and to mind her own business. Then June went upstairs and locked herself in the attic, so that the dogs would not hear her cry.