

Stegosaurus

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A white opaque sky. It is the tail-end of summer. The air conditioner in Charlene's minivan has conked out, so she inhales the hot wind coming in through the driver's window. Her index finger pushes a black plastic button. "Playing for keeps . . . in too deep," she croons, turning right off the main road, heading up the hill, through the woods, towards Stella's house. She recalls the tentative voice on the phone last night, and Charlene, roused from sleep had said, "He's left you again." And the reply, "Well, yes, but that's not it. There's something I want you to see."

Charlene's heart accelerates as she approaches the final turn-off. I hope she didn't try to slit her wrists, thinks Charlene. Stella always gets weird when Jack takes off. She carefully maneuvers the van through the dogwoods and parks it under a thick live oak, zaps the music crescendo, pushes the door open. There is Stella, slouched behind the screen door. Coming closer, Charlene sees the pale blue eyes, red-rimmed and anemic, the brassy waves now a good half inch dark at the roots.

"Come on in," says Stella, holding the door open. As Charlene passes close to Stella's face, she detects the spicy smell of juniper, arches her eyebrows at the half empty bottle of Tanqueray, lying open, on the kitchen counter. "Couldn't sleep last night," says Stella with a listless shrug. He's really gone and done it this time, thinks Charlene. Bastard.

She examines Stella as she stands, centered in front of a stained glass window, doves and red rosebuds emanating from her head, in her holy sadness, a study in modern female martyrdom. Charlene sees the Mona Lisa smile on the pale heart-shaped face, the sunken cheeks, the jawline beginning to sag, the small patch of crepey skin. He's sucked her dry, thinks Charlene. He's drained her of all life. Stella

seems to have shrunk, her small frame dwarfed by her robe, a free-flowing caftan with a repeating print of some Indonesian destroyer god, an ugly violent dress that Stella, for some reason, picked up in Djakarta.

"This is what I wanted you to see," says Stella, hooking her tiny hand onto Charlene's sturdy arm. She leads her down two carpeted steps toward a teak dining table which is covered with squares of paper, in brilliant turquoise, folded into triangles. They all rise from the table, uniformly at forty-five degree angles like a sea of scales. As Stella leads her around the table, Charlene sees a vague neck, a hump, a long tail.

"Stegosaurus?" she asks instinctively.

"Good, you see it, too." Stella smiles. A brief moment of color brightens her sallow cheeks. "I've been playing around with the turquoise." She reaches down into a large cardboard box, retrieves a handful of the bright fuzzy-edged squares, lets one drop. They watch it flutter, come to rest lightly on the shag carpet. Charlene wraps a protective arm around Stella's bony angles.

"He'll be back," she says, sighing. "He always comes back." Stella shakes her head and breaks away, dabs at the corner of a wide sleeve. "This time I think he really means it." Charlene looks into the blue eyes, filmy and unreadable. "Two weeks he's been gone," says Stella. "And a brunette, an older brunette." She sighs. "And a Chilean. That's a first, anyway."

"You need to get out of this house," says Charlene, stepping to face her. Stella's house seems a poor choice for an artist with its small dark rooms. Today it is hot and airless, like being buried alive. A new theory occurs to Charlene that Jack has run away, not from Stella, but from this house. Perhaps he woke up from a suffocating nightmare, and decided to make a run for it. Then Charlene looks at Stella, fiddling with her paper squares, looking like some aging Woodstock refugee.

"Come on," she says, grabbing Stella's arm. "Right now. Let's get in my car and drive to the coast. We can stay all day. Eat seafood. Drink beer."

Stella eyes her warily. "What about Danny and Melissa?" she asks. "What about Clayton?" Now it's Charlene's turn to shrug and look away.

"The kids are down at the point with Bud and Myra," she says, picking at an irregular cuticle. "And Clayton's chained to the computer." Lately, Charlene has come to believe that Clayton is more compatible with IBM than with her. She squeezes Stella's arm, presses for an answer.

"I don't know if I want to drive all the way down there," says Stella, pulling back. "It's so hot. I'd rather go somewhere cool."

"Well, sure," says Charlene. "We'll just bop out to the airport and catch the next plane to Vancouver." Stella pisses her off the way she's always coming up with different answers, always opening everything up.

"Well, I have to take a shower first anyway," says Stella, heading back toward the bedroom. "Let's just think about it. Make yourself at home."

Charlene shakes out her white cotton slacks, eases herself onto the scratchy herringbone sofa. What am I doing here, she wonders. She hadn't meant to say she could spend the whole day with Stella, but, she realizes, she *does* have the whole day to spend. Lately, she seems to find herself with unexpectedly large chunks of free time. Now, in fact, there seems to be too much time, too much energy left over at the end of the day. Emotions burble up and spill out at inconvenient times and places, as she watches old ladies cross the street, as she stands in the checkout line at the Winn Dixie. Charlene's mother has noticed this. "You need a hobby," she told Charlene just last week.

Charlene scans the panelled walls, Stella's little gallery. Stella *lives* her hobby, she thinks enviously. Stella's weavings, and paper creations testify to her skill, and some of them, thinks Charlene, to her artistry. She wonders why Stella always seems to create the art when Jack takes off. Charlene hones in on an unfamiliar piece, pastel green paper, in three thick vertical rectangles, each embossed with a different bold pattern, matted on black, framed in silver. Condo in Boca, thinks Charlene. Miami Vice. Her eyes float back to the embryonic Stegosaurus. The trendy color, the campy theme, smell like success to Charlene. Maybe Stella could hit the big time with this one, actually sell something. All she needs is time, time to develop without her head being messed up. Charlene wants Stella to make good and break free. She thinks it would serve him right.

Charlene does not like Stella's Jack. Short, thick-lipped and stocky, with his paunch and pate and his anachronistic little wire rims, Charlene does not understand the source of his appeal, of his power over his female victims. Several things about him disturb and confuse her. Why doesn't he flirt with *her* at cocktail parties? And why does he make more money than Clayton, even though they both have tenure in the same department? And why has Stella put up with his crap all these years? she wonders, picking at her cuticle until she draws blood.

Lately, Charlene has become aware of the presence of a powerful idea, lurking around the walls of her subconscious, prowling, testing,

looking for an unguarded doorway. It has, so far, manifested in an avalanche of cliches, which swim around in her head, like floating pieces of a jigsaw puzzle every night as she lies in bed, searching relentlessly for a fit. *It takes two to tango. There's more than one side to every story, more to this than meets the eye. One woman's pain is another woman's pleasure. Everything is relative. You get what you give Karma.*

Charlene gets up, goes into the kitchen, fixes a tumbler of ice water and then another. The bedroom door opens and Stella emerges, mopping her wet curls with a maroon bath towel. "Jesus, it's hot in here," snaps Charlene. "Don't you ever turn on the AC?"

"Never before noon," says Stella, smiling. "Jack's rule." She drops the towel on a chair, ties her sarong in a tighter knot around her neck. Huge copper triangles dangle from her ears. Charlene shudders. She is afraid of maniacs who might pull on earrings. *What has Stella just said?*

"Whose rule?" she asks, moving toward Stella. "What's with the long-distance obedience? What about you? You want to turn it on? Turn it on!" Charlene moves closer. "Go on, turn it down to 72. I'll back you up." Stella rolls her eyes.

"Just let me get my shoes," she says, and disappears into the bedroom. Charlene massages her temples to quell the throbbing. Now Stella's back, gripping a leather purse. "Where to?" she asks.

Charlene stretches, looks out the window. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know anymore. Where do you want to go?"

"How about the cathedral of tomorrow?" says Stella, smiling. "It's cool in there, and I need to get some more reeds at the arts and crafts store." Charlene smiles. Stella has started calling the mall the "cathedral of tomorrow," ever since she saw some show on PBS, a thin articulate Brit, making his case for the shopping mall as new age cathedral, dedicated to the worship of Mammon. Late Saturday in August, thinks Charlene. Filled with frenzied back-to-school shoppers. But then she sees Stella's face, expectant, like a small child's. "Okay," she says, "but no video games this time."

Outside, Stella carefully locks the bolt and doorknob, and they plod slowly toward Charlene's car, fighting heat with every step, their mouths open like landed fish.

"Can we stop at the nursery first?" asks Stella in a little girl voice. "I need to get some plant food."

"Sure, no prob," says Charlene. She knows that Stella's plants and flowers are her pets. "Your seat belt," she says to Stella who nods and straps herself in. Charlene starts the car, maneuvers back through the maze of dogwoods, and turns left onto the road, toward civiliza-

tion. She accelerates, feels the car's lagging response. "Needs a tune-up," she says apologetically, but Stella, fiddling with the strap of her waist thong, does not respond. They drive through the bleached-out day, under a colorless sky, through a tunnel of tired foliage.

As they approach the four lane road into town, Charlene looks left, then right, then left again (a 16-year-old girl was killed at this intersection, she recalls) then eases out into the road and accelerates. Several miles later, she sees the small white sign. She signals, brakes, turns right onto a narrow dirt road, expertly dodges several large potholes, and pulls up in front of a mildewed greenhouse.

To Charlene, the nursery in late summer looks like unfulfilled promises. Thousands of leggy bedding plants, strangled by their own white roots, their blossoms pinched and faded. "Think fall," says a cheery sign. Right, thinks Charlene. What's done is done.

Nursery employees in identical blue polos move systematically from quadrant to quadrant, guiding aluminum wands to produce artificial useless showers. Their cheerless efficiency depresses Charlene. She is seized by the urge to get back in the van and drive away from everything forlorn, from Stella and these blue robots. She will drive west on I-10, at the new speed limit, across the pine barrens, past the tempting sugar beaches, take in the craziness of New Orleans, conquer the concrete jungle of Houston and break free onto the red plains of west Texas. Then the final push across the desert to the end of the line in L.A. And then what? Hop a Pacific freighter? Join the Navy? North, thinks Charlene. North to Alaska.

A frail bitchy man in a sweat-soaked polo wordlessly snatches Stella's VISA card, rams it through the machine. "Sign here," he commands. Charlene watches Stella's hand shake, wonders how many green bottles Stella has gone through since Jack left. "Have a nice day," hisses the man. Charlene arches her eyebrows and gives him the look, but he has grabbed his aluminum wand and has moved off to wave it over another section of dying flowers.

She cannot remember why they are here. The point of the outing seems to have disappeared, evaporated in the heat. Back in the van, Stella says, "On to the cathedral, then," but Charlene doesn't laugh or smile this time. Something has happened. All of her energy seems to have been transferred, somehow, to Stella. She drives now, grim and determined, toward their destination, but as they approach the mall parking lot, Charlene see the acres of asphalt covered by a sea of cars and feels briefly that gagging reflex that she used to feel every morning for a month before she quit her job.

"God, it's jammed," she says. "We'll have to park way out here and walk."

"That's okay," says Stella. "I need the exercise." Charlene aims for a space between a white camper with an identifying wheel cover (The Papagiorges: Barbara and Minous) and a red Firebird with a crumpled fender and bumper sticker that says *Shit Happens*.

"You know, it's weird," says Stella as they trudge across the blacktop. "There's nobody at all out here. I mean, they're all in *there*, trying on shoes, sniffing sampler colognes—"

"Shoplifting," interrupts Charlene. "Going into debt. Eating greasy food. Whacking their kids."

"We didn't have to come here," says Stella, looking hurt. "You could have said something."

"It's okay, I'm okay. Anyway we're here now."

Inside the dark cavernous room, it is cool, cold, leafy green. Charlene sees streams of people who cross paths but somehow never collide. People with a mission. People who know where they are going. She feels like a stray in some foreign ant colony. She does not know where to go. She does not know what to do.

"Look, they're turning it on," says Stella, moving quickly toward a geyser, rising higher and higher in the center of the room. Charlene follows and stands with Stella, admiring the slender fluid column, inhaling chlorine vapors.

"Let's have lunch," says Stella, grabbing *her* arm now, taking charge. "Go get that table over there, and I'll get us something, my treat. What do you want?"

"Pita pocket vegetarian," says Charlene automatically, though what she'd really want is a Wendy's double cheese with large fries. Yesterday, the bathroom scales hit an all-time high of 135, and last week she read some article about the connection between the giant burger chains and the destruction of the rain forest. Take a stand, said the article. It's all up to people like you and me.

Charlene watches the pattern of Stella's sarong melt into the crowd. She stakes out the small white table and plops down, feeling the wire grid on her back. At the adjacent table, an obese blond, constricted by tight blue jeans and red cowboy boots, is working on three chili dogs and a bucket of Pepsi. Charlene stares as the woman finishes the first one in four grim bites, stopping only to take a drink from her paper bucket before reaching for the second. Stella returns, waving a pita pocket. "Where's yours?" asks Charlene.

"Oh, I'm having a steak hoagie," says Stella, depositing the sandwich on the table. "Back in a flash." Stella disappears again. Being friends with Stella is like being friends with a butterfly, thinks Charlene. Stella *flutters*. Stella can be colorful. And now, maybe if Jack is gone for good, maybe Stella can be free, too.

A gaggle of teenage girls passes by, reeking of bubblegum and imitation Giorgio. Charlene's daughter will be one of them soon, though at eleven, she is still content with her pageboy and clothes from J.C. Penney. Stella has no daughter. Stella, in fact, has no one. She is an orphan from California, raised by some long-deceased aunt. She is rootless, childless, now manless, even catless. Stella answers to no one.

Charlene feels that she answers to everyone. There are so many people in her life that she cannot count, much less escape, them all. There are Clayton, Danny, and Melissa. There are Clayton's parents, Bud and Myra, and Clayton's brother, Lou, and his wife, Maverine. There is Clayton's sister, Laura, and her husband, Jason. There is Charlene's mother, and her stepfather, Carl. There are Carl's kids, Butch, and his wife, Suzanne, Debbie and her husband, Bill. There are all their kids. There is Duffy the dalmatian, Spooky the one-eyed Persian, and a wiry tom cat who has taken up at Charlene's house and refuses to leave. Family has become a dirty word to Charlene.

There ought to be some balance, she thinks, watching Stella juggle two paper cups and a large tubular sandwich. Some kind of cosmic scale. The fat cowgirl pounds her chest to release a loud belch, then crushes her chili dog wrappers into neat little balls, tossing them, one by one, into the empty bucket. She rises slowly and lumbers off, leaving her trash on the table.

"Jesus," whispers Stella. "If I looked like that."

"They ought to put up signs like they do in offices," says Charlene. "Thank you for not being a walking obscenity." They laugh. Stella unwraps her sandwich. Charlene's mouth begins to water. Her own lunch tastes like garlic-flavored cardboard, a stupid pointless gesture, she thinks now.

"Tell me about 'Stegosaurus,'" she says. Stella nods, swallows a mouthful of steak.

"It's gonna be big," she says, "about five by six, I guess. I'll put it in eighth inch plexiglass."

"No," says Charlene, "you know what I mean. Tell me how you got the *idea* for it." Charlene is fascinated by Stella's ability to snatch an idea out of thin air and turn it into color, form, *art*.

She envies her.

"What do you mean?" asks Stella shyly, taking a small bite of hoagie. "It's just one idea, like all the others." She looks at Charlene and smiles. "You shouldn't try to nail everything down."

"I'm just trying to understand it, that's all," says Charlene, staring at her uneaten sandwich. "Don't tell me if you don't want to."

"Okay," says Stella, moving her chair closer to Charlene's. "A couple of nights ago, I realized that Jack has been gone so long . . . well,

I thought maybe he's not coming back." Stella pauses, takes a drink. "And I just made myself *face* my fear, stare it down." Charlene nods uneasily. "And that's when I looked down at a magazine ad and saw a picture of a stegosaurus. So I picked it up and started looking at all those bony spikes and plates along its back. They're there to protect, you know, to *defend*. And what good did all of it do? We'll never see the likes of him again." Stella sighs. "Anyway, then I looked down and saw all those turquoise squares that I'd made, but didn't know what to do with, and it all just sort of came together. I stayed up all night playing around with it." Charlene stares, unblinking, at Stella, pondering Stella's private symbolism here in this public place. She feels the uncomfortable opening of ducts and pores. Stella pushes her empty cup away, folds her arms on the table, looks straight into Charlene's timid eyes. "Jack's gone," she says, "that's reality. And now I'm going to get on with it. I've wasted enough time on that bastard."

Charlene's eyes widen. She reaches out, touches Stella's hand, now cool and steady. Sitting next to her, in the cathedral of tomorrow, she forgets all about the manic consumers, the screaming babies, the insistent Muzak. All that matters now is that Stella is free.

11:56 p.m. A hard merciless rain. The season's first hurricane sits offshore, flirting with the coast. Charlene's eyes are wide open, and although she can see nothing in the blackened bedroom, she feels no panic, only a vague unease. For some reason, Clayton, who usually respects her sleeping space, has her pinned tightly to the mattress, his beefy arm tucked neatly around her torso. He is breathing, snoring into her ear.

Gently, she unlocks Clayton's grip, eases out from under, gropes her way cautiously around the edge of the bed, feels for the doorknob, closes it behind her. She pads down the hall into the kitchen. Charlene switches on the overhead fluorescent, shuffles over to the refrigerator, opens it and stares. Several seconds later, armed with a mug of milk and an unopened bag of *Chips Ahoy!*, she ambles into the den, eases back into the La-Z-Boy. She picks up the remote and presses a button. "The beaver is one of nature's most industrious animals," says a forthright male voice. She presses again. Errol Flynn, in an oddly frilly pirate costume, swings from a rope and drops onto a ship's deck, rattling his saber, exhorting similarly dressed men to do battle. "You tell 'em, Errol," she says, unfastening the clasps, digging into the cookie bag.

The past week has been a bitch. Clayton's mother, Myra, slipped and fell in the bathtub, fractured her hip and had to be hospitalized.

Bud, Charlene's father-in-law, has been at her house for dinner every night since, and while Charlene is glad to have him, it really ticks her off when he keeps on saying "nigger" even after she and Clayton have told him not to. Her own mother is scheduled for a hysterectomy next week, and yesterday, the vet excised a suspicious growth from the dalmatian's thigh, and has sent it to the lab for a biopsy. Charlene is becoming expert in dealing with everyone else's broken down biological systems. My new hobby, she thinks, reaching for another cookie.

She listens to the wind outside, hears it picking up speed as it rips through the pencil pines outside the house. She, herself, is not afraid of hurricanes (she once flew through Hurricane Camille). She's thinking about Stella, all alone out there in that dark little bungalow, underneath all those ancient, creaky live oaks. She closes her eyes and sees Stella's house, bisected by that particular live oak which, Charlene has always thought, is much too close to the house and may be infested with termites. She envisions Stella's precious art, mutilated, waterlogged, ruined beyond repair by violent natural forces.

Charlene has not seen or talked with Stella since that day at the mall, and now her premonition has startled her, like the buzz of her oven timer, into an overdue awareness of Stella's probable pain and loneliness. She looks at the digital tv clock, 12:32, much too late to call anyone, she tells herself. She returns the La-Z-Boy to its upright position, switches off the tv, carries her empty mug and the wrinkled cookie bag back into the kitchen, and stops, staring, at the wall phone. I could say I was worried about her, she thinks, listening to the rain for the sound of a freight train which would mean the approach of a deadly tornado. I can always apologize, she thinks, her fingers reaching out to press a memorized sequence. She listens to the long slow rings, waiting nervously. A garbled sleepy voice answers, a confusing, disorienting voice, a voice out of context, and, therefore, unrecognizable at first. It is the voice of someone who is not supposed to be there.

"You're back," she says, feeling the pulse in the thin membranes of her temples. "You came back." She can think of nothing else to say.

"Who's this?" The sleepy voice becomes mildly combative.

"It's me, Charlene," she says, rubbing her forehead, hard, with her fingertips.

"Charlene." The hostility is still there. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really," she says, playing for time. "I just called to see if Stella was okay." She cannot resist adding, "There's a hurricane on the way, you know." She hears the heavy sigh. Message received.

"Yeah," says the voice in a monotone. "I know all about it. Are you okay?"

"Oh yeah, sure," she says. No, you son of a bitch, she thinks. I am not okay. The wrong voice has answered the phone and now Charlene is rapidly reinterpreting the events of that day at the mall. Is Stella okay, she wonders. Or has she given up again? "Jack," she says quickly, before he can hang up, "did Stella finish 'Stegosaurus'?" She hears another yawn.

"Hmm? What's 'Stegosaurus'?"

"'Stegosaurus.' On the dining room table." There is a long pause.

"Oh yeah. All those triangles. Yeah. I don't know where she is on that one. She put them back in the box."

Charlene feels her heart thumping against her ribs. "Back in the box?" she says dully.

"Yeah, for now anyway. Look, you wanna call back tomorrow? It's pretty late."

"Sure. I'll call her tomorrow," she says, surprised at the ease of her lie. She hears the click, replaces the receiver, stares out of the open miniblinds at the churning blackness: *a dark and stormy night*. She places the bag of cookies into the pantry, rinses the milk film from the mug and puts it in the dishwasher. Switching off the light, she plods down the dark hallway to the bedroom, darker still. Through the open door, she can see that Clayton has not moved. He lies, in peaceful deep sleep, a whitish immobile lump, in the middle of the bed. Groping her way carefully back around to her side, she eases back under the wrinkled sheets, slides back under Clayton's arm. Green triangles float through her mind, searching still. She closes her eyes, and with the noise of the approaching storm strong in her head, takes a deep breath, and waits. □