

# The Sun King

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## 1 RETIREE BLUES

When Harry Lennox retires in May, his friends and neighbors on Mawa Lake say he will lose his mind within six months. They are wrong. Harry goes bonkers after sixty short days.

Not that he doesn't try to enjoy his golden years. He fills up his calendar. Golf. Remodeling the garage/man cave. Mulching the garden. Raking the bocce court. Volunteering for the Lake Mawa Recycling Committee. After a month of this, he is ready to tie a rock around his neck and jump off his dock.

A few words about Harry: His wife, Gladys, considers him the most predictable man she has ever known. The brass at Empire Light & Power, the plant where he toiled for forty-five years, judge him to be the most competent electrical engineer since Bob Fertag retired. Rusty, his fishing buddy, swears that Harry is the second greatest fisherman in Central New York. His grandchildren see him as a reliable source of two hundred dollars come birthdays or Christmas. But how does he see himself? More and more as a man without a mission, a yacht without a rudder.

Lately, he is also an insomniac. Night after night he wanders down the pebbled path that snakes its way to the dock and sits on the deck of his pontoon boat. Looking out over a dark Lake Mawa, the lighted homes are a string of pearls arranged on black satin. A forgotten feeling with no name works its way to the surface like a long buried splinter. His nightly wanderings are followed by late-night documentaries on the flat screen, and he rarely falls asleep until midnight.

When he does, his sleep is restless and his dreams are full of dread. In his nightmare, he wanders through a post-nuclear America where the only testament to the American experiment is the scorched remains of fast food signage. In the wake of this nightmare, Harry switches from the History to the Discovery Channel.

One night, barely a month into his retirement, Harry wakes up to what feels like an obese gorilla squatting on his chest. In trying to push the beast off, he crashes to the floor and when Gladys rips the heat pack from her eyes, she finds her husband on the floor, clutching the hand-woven area rug as if it were a life preserver. His eyes are bulging from their sockets and his face is the color of fresh tomato soup. It's a stroke, she thinks, and she waits for the telltale signs of the face frozen in mid-expression and the unintelligible sounds which are sure to follow. Harry, though, speaks with clarity and manages to convince his wife to hold off on the 911 call. Slowly, he re-enters the atmosphere and sits on the edge of the bed. His wife brings him a glass of warm skim milk. With a faraway

look in his eyes, Harry sips his milk and, with his free hand, he massages his chest.

"Do you ever feel like we've accomplished nothing in our lives?" Harry asks the woman who has shared his bed for almost fifty years.

"What are you talking about? We've raised a family. We own a house. We live on a beautiful lake in the Adirondacks with all our friends. We have no debt. We're living the American Dream."

"No one will remember me when I'm gone," Harry says, and Gladys is alarmed by the sadness in his voice.

"You're being silly. Your children will remember you. I'll remember you. And there's always the photo album for future generations. Plus, we have the digital backup archive just in case."

"That's not what I meant. I've done nothing of importance."

"Harry, this isn't like you. You've never had any grand ambitions."

"If I did, I've long forgotten them."

He drains his milk and lays his gray head on the pillow.

Two days later, squashing Harry's protests, Gladys drives him to the family doctor. Dr. Greenbaum examines Harry head to toe.

"Sounds like we've had ourselves quiet a scare," the doctor says as Harry buttons his shirt after the examination. Harry hates the way Dr. Greenbaum says "we," as if diseases were a collaboration between doctor and patient.

"Are you sure there's nothing wrong with me?"

Dr. Greenbaum closes Harry's file with a snap.

"Other than your cholesterol, which is a tad high, there's nothing the matter with you, Harry. Your mind is another animal altogether. Hardly surprising. A man works for fifty years, it gets to be his identity. He's liable to get the heebiejeebies when he leaves the stage."

Another thing Harry dislikes about Dr. Greenbaum: his lame attempt at being folksy.

"I want you to see a colleague of mine," Dr. Greenbaum says and clicks his pen shut as if putting a period at the end of a sentence.

"A specialist?"

"Yes."

"In sleep disorders?"

"In a way. He's a psychiatrist. He'll be able to recommend the best course of treatment."

"Treatment? Thank you, Dr. Greenbaum, but that won't be necessary," Harry says and speedwalks out of the examining room.

That night he sits on his boat and fingers the vial of tranquilizers Dr. Greenbaum had prescribed. Harry is not an introspective man by nature and rarely searches for answers to life's mysteries. But tonight, as he watches the moon reflect on the water, he feels an adolescent longing that makes his heart ache with an ambivalent desire. It is as if the absence of routine in his life had left a void, one so great that it could not be filled with the hundreds of routines that are usually a retiree's salvation. The void is so great that any invented activity meant to fill it just exaggerates its vastness the same way that a single armchair makes a large room even larger.

Seeing no answers in nature, he walks back to the house and flips on the flat

screen. He watches a segment about the mating habits of zebras, an infomercial about making a fortune from your spare bedroom, and one about a new telescoping mop guaranteed to clean those hard-to-reach corners. Harry reaches for the Off button on the remote when the bombastic trumpet of a "special report" startles him. It is a morning show rerun. An aggressively chipper woman announces that harnessing the sun is the wave of the future. Harry cannot help but be fascinated by her teeth, which are like perfectly manufactured Chiclets, and her frosted blonde hair, which is sculpted and sprayed into submission. According to her, solar energy will be a 25 billion dollar industry by 2020.

Harry sits up in his seat. Coal is a thing of the past. The electrical grid is hopelessly overburdened. Water power is cumbersome. But as long as the sun keeps shining, its rays can be converted into energy.

Energy is money. Energy is power.

Harry sleeps like a baby. The next morning, after eating his customary lowcholesterol breakfast, Harry does not suit up for his golf game but sequesters himself in his study and combs the Internet for information about solar power. His logical engineer's brain quickly grasps the essentials. Kilowatt-hours. Conversion metrics. Solar panel optimization. The proper way to convert the sun's direct current into usable alternating current while minimizing energy loss. Harry prints 200 pages and blows through an ink-jet cartridge.

On Saturday, instead of visiting his daughter and son-in-law, Harry drives his truck to Cold Springs, where Solaron, Inc. has its headquarters and warehouse. The warehouse is reminiscent of a small-scale Home Depot, with products organized and displayed in wide aisles. It is divided into a small section for industrial products and a considerably larger one for small-business and residential use. The latter features the photovoltaic systems with the mirrored gray solar panels Harry has seen when he and Gladys took a trip to California two summers ago.

The operation looks like the brainchild of a hippie with a scientific bent. Rows upon rows of solar panels of various sizes, some gray, some black, some displayed on roof mockups to show what they would look like once installed. Young men rollerblade over the polished concrete floor, squeaking to a stop to answer customers' questions. The place makes Harry giddy, as if he is poking around in an attic full of wonders. Harry inspects the wares and makes notations with a freshly sharpened pencil.

Mostly, his imagination is drawn to the inverters (organized in one long row), the devices which change sunlight's direct current into the alternating current necessary to power everyday appliances. Some are lone inverters individually tied to a solar panel and others are strung together in a gorgeous string to serve several panels. Harry scribbles product spec notes. A Solaron employee rolls past, makes an elegant U-turn and comes to a squeaky stop.

"May I help you with anything?" He is a young man in his early twenties, trim and, unlike his colleagues, clean shaven.

"Is there someone here who understands DC-AC conversion and minimizing power loss?"

"Try me," the young man says, sounding slightly offended.

"Are you an engineer?"

"Electrical Engineering student at Rensselaer."

This time, a hint of pride.

"No kidding? I studied electrical engineering there many moons ago. Why is it that, at best, most inverters can only convert 40 percent of the direct current they capture into usable electricity? It seems to me that we should be able to do better than that."

"It has less to do with the inverters and more with how the solar panels are set up. They are linked in a chain. Problem is, if one of the panels gets less sun, the conversion loss in that panel will affect all the other panels."

For the next twenty minutes, Harry and the kid (as Harry refers to him in his mind, even though his name tag clearly says "Brian") banter and trade in electrical terms, touching on parallel circuits, inverters and power optimization in a way that reminds Harry of his young engineer days. Back then, when happy hour rolled around on Fridays, the managers of the power plant would trade their swivel chairs at the plant for the bar stools at the "Cuckoo's Nest" and talk shop over dollar Schlitz draft. They were engineers, still young enough to be passionate, and sooner or later the conversation would drift toward energy efficiency and ways to improve the grid. Some of those ideas were harebrained for sure. Bob Fertag, who was ten years older than Harry and already living on Lake Mawa, suggested they tie a backup system to the plant whereby excess energy would be used to drive water into a reservoir. When the water is released, its power could be converted into electricity. He went so far as to buy property by Lake Mawa and had construction plans drawn up. When Bill Thomson pointed out that building a reservoir big enough would cost millions of dollars, Bob called him a buzz kill and refused to pay for the next round.

Harry hates himself for thinking those were the good old days, but they were. He was younger for one, and it was easier to think that he could still make something of himself. After three beers, especially during the spring and summer months, when Wally, the bartender, propped the door open and let the Adirondack breeze cut the stale air, it was easy to fool yourself into thinking that your life at the plant was just a way station to bigger and better things.

What had happened? Thirty years had passed, Schlitz had gone out of business and draft beer cost five dollars, even at happy hour. At least, it would have cost five dollars at the Cuckoo's Nest if the place had not been driven into the ground by Wally's incompetent nephew. The space stood vacant for a while, then was taken over by a Dunkin Donuts almost ten years ago. The march of progress in small-town America.

And what happened to the boys? Bob Fertag is senile, Lance, Harry's best friend from high school, is dead, and it is anyone's guess in whose footsteps Harry will soon follow.

"You make a reliable one and it will win you some kind of prize," the kid says with a smile.

His remark jolts Harry back to the moment.

"A reliable one?"

"A good parallel circuit inverter," the kid says helpfully. "Stable and cheap and you'll be rich and famous."

"I'm sure the best and the brightest are working on the problem as we speak," Harry says.

"Not fast enough," the kid says and reaches inside his lab coat, pulling out a product line brochure for solar panels.

“Stand-alone, or grid-tied?”

“Excuse me?”

“Are you going to feed into the existing electrical grid or are you building an independent system? You strike me as an off-the-grid kind of guy,” the kid says, and this time he breaks into a wide grin.

“You got that right.”

“In that case,” the kid says handing Harry another brochure, “battery backup power will be key. Especially here in the Adirondacks, unpredictable weather patterns and all.”

Harry scrutinizes the pictures in the brochure. Large and squat batteries, each one uglier than the next.

“Not the sexy part of solar power, I know,” the kid says, reading his mind. Driving home, Harry ponders what he has learned at Solaron. He plays the good news/bad news game he used to use when he was a project manager. The good news is that he thinks he can figure a way around the energy conversion problem. Almost twenty years ago he had played around with a parallel system meant to make the plant’s electrical grid more efficient. Many nights of tinkering in his garage had led to an ugly but effective prototype. He had given it, along with the proposal, to the chief engineer, who promptly ignored it.

Harry also sent his idea to Albany, the state capitol, where it sat for two months on the desk of the head of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority before being tossed, untested, into the recycling bin. Harry, of course, had no way of knowing this and believed that his idea had at least been evaluated before being dismissed.

Still, a parallel system for an electrical grid is one thing, building one to function as part of a solar panel system is quite another. But Harry thinks he can make it work. The fundamental concept is the same. In the words of an old engineering professor, “If you can stabilize the voltage fluctuations, anything is possible.” Those words should be etched in stone on the side of a building somewhere.

Harry almost crushes a bicyclist who is dangerously far from the road’s edge. He forces himself to focus on the present. He can make it work. Yes. That is the good news. The bad news? The cheapest, no-frills solar panel system package, once the inverter, stabilizers and installation hardware have been thrown in, would run close to twenty thousand dollars. Not an insurmountable problem because he has much more than that in his savings account. It’s a joint account, however, and therein lies the problem. He had opened it with Gladys more than thirty years ago for the purpose of covering short-term emergencies. Putting money into it had been a monthly habit, and what had started out as an emergency fund had grown to almost a hundred thousand dollars thanks to the invisible hand of compound interest. That’s the upside of having time on your side, Harry thinks, and this thought is followed by the bitter recognition that time is, in fact, no longer on his side.

He forces his brain back into its accustomed problem-solving groove. If he dips into the account, he has to tell Gladys, otherwise she would get the crazy idea that he dares to do things without consulting her.

Harry sighs and pulls a U-turn on the two-lane black top. Driving the two miles back to Sam’s Mini Mart, he prays that the store has not run out of Gladys’s favorite flavor of ice cream.

That night, after they finish what Gladys calls tuna casserole, Harry serves her two scoops of Butternut Cherry Pecan ice-cream. Topped with oozing hot fudge, the dessert looks like a small, but very active volcano. Harry has declined a second helping of the casserole, which Gladys interprets as self-control but which Harry sees as preservation of his intestinal tract. If Harry has a cardinal virtue, it is this: he loves his wife so completely that he never criticizes her, and over the years she has grown into a benevolent despot who rules every aspect of his life.

"Did you break one of my dishes again?" Gladys asks when Harry hands her the bowl of ice cream, searching his eyes for signs of guilt.

"No."

Gladys eyes the ice cream bowl she and Harry had bought at an antique shop by Caroga Lake last summer. Or was it two summers ago? It was so hard to tell the years apart.

"You know how we talked about building a sunroom?"

"Yes. You said you're going to start construction in April." Gladys looks forward to the sunroom as the designated place for her to do her crocheting and hold book club meetings. Next to the garage, in front of the bocce court, is a patch of faded grass that is perfect for a moderately-sized room. Gladys has even picked out the faded red brick which will adorn the path that will lead from the sunroom to the house.

"Well, I was thinking of something better."

"Better? What's better than a sunroom? We've already ordered the materials. And you told Rusty's cousin that he had the job."

"Just hear me out."

With that, Harry lays out his idea to equip the house with solar panels. Gladys is far from convinced.

"We cannot afford any frivolous expenses, not with our anniversary cruise to the Bahamas coming up."

"It's far from frivolous. In fact, it's a wise investment. We could cut our electricity use in half. We could cut out even more if my idea for the parallel system works. Not to mention we would no longer be beholden to Empire Light & Power."

"You talk about EL&P like it's the government. You worked for them for forty-five years for Pete's sake."

"Exactly. And I know how inefficient they are. We could generate our own power. Cleaner and cheaper."

"Except that the system costs twenty thousand dollars, Harry. Let's not forget that. Every time I put a dress on the credit card you get an ulcer, but now you want to spend twenty thousand on solar panels?"

Harry ignores this last comment. He fires up his graphing calculator and walks his doubting wife through a return on investment scenario. According to his conservative calculations (the only type Harry believes in up until this point), the solar panel system will put them in the black in less than five years.

"What about winter? Where's the sunlight coming from then?"

Gladys has a point. The Adirondack region in the wintertime is not known for its generous sunlight. In fact, from November to April the sky usually takes

on the coloring of a dried-up puddle with just enough intermittent sunlight to remind you of what you are missing but not enough to actually enjoy.

"Common misconception," Harry replies and takes the empty ice cream bowl from Gladys. She nods, a gesture which means she wants a second helping. "It's true that energy capture drops during the winter months. But the system is able to store energy in case an extreme overcast lasts for more than a week. And an overcast which lasts longer than a week is a statistical outlier."

"I don't know what any of that means."

"It is unlikely that an overcast lasts longer than a week. The last time that happened was in 1844."

Gladys knows only this: looking at the waning summer light spilling over Harry's iron-gray hair, she feels a kind of love for him she hasn't in years. It would come at the most unexpected moments, when she watched him be engrossed in a task whose intricacies she could scarcely comprehend. Bent over a broken vacuum cleaner, or the mystical schematics of the house's circuit breakers, he would be unaware of her gaze. Unaware that her feeling for him, though steeped in the deepest kind of love, was accompanied by a jealousy of all things mechanical.

"The panels can capture and store enough energy to power our house through five days of darkness. And unless there's a nuclear winter, it will never come to that."

Gladys tries to remember if The Book of Revelation includes a warning about perpetual darkness as one of God's wraths, but nothing comes to mind.

"I don't know, Harry." Gladys says and Harry sees his opening. Like most people, when Gladys doesn't understand something, she prefers to cut the discussion short.

"You said yourself that I need something to occupy my mind. Well, here it is. I can't just lounge around, and I can play golf only so long before I go postal."

"Why can't you find a cheaper hobby? Like collecting stamps, or building model trains."

Gladys refuses to agree and, on the grounds that she is tired, orders Harry to bed.

But sleep is the farthest thing from Harry's mind. He retires to his garage, where no car has been parked in twenty years and where amidst frankensteined pieces of machinery he makes notes in a ledger book. He pores over the technical specifications of the Icarus 5000, the solar panel system he has his eye on and whose gorgeous technical specifications are laid out in color in one of the brochures the kid at Solaron had given him. Then he studies the brochures which have the different inverters laid out. He digs through his battered filing cabinet and pulls out the copy of the parallel system he had designed almost twenty years ago. He lays it out on his workbench and, going over it, is pleased at how detailed it is. He had forgotten how much work he put into it.

Would it work in a solar power system?

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Harry puts down his Michelob Ultra Lite, and his train of thought derails. He sees a moment as clearly as if he were gazing at a color photo in the family album. He is standing at the lectern of the spacious Thomas Edison auditorium at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, demonstrating his revolutionary parallel system to a packed house. Engineers and amazed laypersons make for three



hundred pairs of attentive eyes. The gorgeous undergrad in the front row adjusts her glasses and leans forward ever so slightly, making Harry think of a stalk of corn swaying in the summer breeze. The wide windows of the auditorium are open, and the scent of honeysuckle streaming through the window triumphs over the stale smell of dust.

When Gladys comes home the next day from her book club meeting at the Holloway Cabin, she finds the house empty and without power, which she discovers when she opens the freezer to store Francine's leftover key lime pie. The light doesn't turn on, but even in the half light, she can see that the ice cream is leaking onto the sweet peas. She puts the latest literary gem from the Oprah Book Club on the counter and goes looking for Harry. He is not to be found in his study or on the porch. Standing in the back yard that slopes gently down to the lake, she calls out his name.

"I'm up here!" Harry's voice echoes over the lake. "Up here" is on the roof, where Harry is wrestling into place what looks like a giant piece of gray Teflon, but which is really a photo-voltaic cell built to capture sunlight.

Gladys is a reasonable woman. She waits until Harry is safely on the ground before giving him a thorough dressing down. She reminds him about safety. His vertigo. And the newly finished roof which cost them a fortune and which the rough soles of his work boots are liable to damage. "And I never said you could buy the system in the first place."

"I thought we agreed it's for the best. These beautiful panels are going to save us a bundle in no time at all."

Gladys takes a few steps away from the house so as to get a better look at the sloped roof. She gives the defeated sigh of the mother who is stuck raising a problem child.

"Couldn't you at least have gotten maroon-colored panels to match the roof?"

Harry's calculations prove correct. He installed the panels in early June and by the time July rolled around, the Lennox's electricity bill had dropped to under a hundred dollars a month. A very attractive sum for a house of its size. And this without his modified inverter, which he is still tinkering with in the garage.

On the Friday before the 4th of July weekend, the Lennoxes receive a call from a concerned Empire Light & Power representative. Are Mr. and Mrs. Lennox still living in their house? Why did they discontinue their service? Did they find another provider who gives them better service? If so, are they aware of EL&P's policy to match any competitor's price, especially when the customer in question has been with them for twenty years and is in the platinum category?

"No, it's nothing like that," Gladys says and is surprised at feeling guilty, as if she had somehow let down the establishment by not using power from the electrical grid like a normal citizen. "My husband is experimenting with solar power. We'll probably go back to you guys in a few months."

"Oh. I see," the honey-voiced EL&P representative says, trying to mask his disappointment. "Then I must let you know about our Sunrise Program, which allows solar power users to tie into our network in times of infrequent sunshine. The way it works..."

Gladys assures him that she will consider the Sunrise Program and hangs up. We will be back in a few months, that's what she had told the account rep. Which implies that Harry's experiment will fail. She hadn't even thought about it. The sentence had slipped out as easily as a "Good morning" or a "Take care." Does she have such little faith in her husband?

No, of course not, a voice inside her says. Except that this is the voice that maintains the façade, the voice that laughs at jokes that are not funny and smiles at people whom she is not happy to see. The other voice, the voice of truth, says something different. Yes, you have put Harry down and probably have been for years. It's been going on for so long that you no longer notice it.

Gladys flashes back to Harry's retirement party. Standing with Daisy Fertag on top of the Lennox's front lawn, where they could take in the Japanese lanterns and the tiki torches in all their glory, Daisy had suggested that Harry become a freelance consultant at EL&P. Her husband, Bob, consulted until his mind was no longer able to keep up.

Gladys had laughed at that suggestion and only now does she realize what that laugh had meant.

That laugh had said, who wants to pay Harry for advice?

Despite the cool day (unusual for July), Gladys breaks into a sweat. She had forgotten all about Harry's solar power mania once he had installed his panels (out of sight, out of mind) and is stunned that Harry's tinkering is paying off. This is because until now his gadgetry has been harmless and of a distinctly noncommercial bend. For instance, two winters ago, he had bought a Cub Cadet, a small vintage tractor, on eBay and modified its engine so that it was more powerful, and he had made the garbage disposal capable of grinding up more leftovers in less time. Those are the typical modifications one expects from a bored engineer. Now, however, his creativity has had a measurable impact on the monthly budget. Harry is exhibiting an eerie business savvy. If so, he must have discovered it recently. He must have, because if he had had it all along, she would have noticed it. How could she not?

With unsteady hands, Gladys pours Beefeater's gin into a cocktail shaker, adds a dash of vermouth and a few ice cubes and takes special solace in shaking it all together. It is as though the rattling of the ice cubes is lessening the doubt, just as surely as the alcohol will dissolve her fears. She pours the drink into two martini glasses and goes looking for Harry in his garage. But Harry is not there, surrounded by machine parts, cables and connectors, but in his den, boxed in by spreadsheets and running a calculator with a whirring tape roll. The window is open and the cool lake breeze ruffles his strong, gray hair. He does not look up when Gladys enters the room, and she has to call his name twice before he notices her.

"I made you a drink." She puts a glass on the corner of his cluttered desk.

"I was right about the parallel system. It works even better than I expected. I can stabilize voltage fluctuation better than anyone. I bet those clowns in Albany never even tested my prototype. It's my fault for not following up. I'm too trusting sometimes. I will show them this time, though."

For a second, Gladys thinks that Harry has had a stroke after all and that his spewing business jargon is a sign of corroding brain cells. Instead of Dr. Greenbaum, she should have taken him to see a brain specialist.

"That's nice, Harry." She takes a few steps closer to Harry and puts her hand

on his temple. It feels cool. He looks healthy, but what worries her is the strange gleam in his eyes. She had seen the same look in his eyes when, for the first and last time, she had gone fishing with Harry in the channel. He had caught a trophy-sized largemouth bass and, as he pulled the hapless fish out of the shimmering lake, his face had had that gold rush look he had now, only more so.

"It's your retirement. You're feeling a bit adrift, but it's natural."

A habit Gladys had developed over the course of a forty-five year marriage was to ask Harry questions which she would then answer. Usually Harry doesn't mind, but this time he is interrupted in the middle of the creative process and is thrown off course.

"It's not the retirement."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. It's just that I think I'm onto something big." And with that, Harry buries his head in his numbers. Gladys is surprised at the abruptness with which he dismisses her, and she feels a tinge of jealousy toward his "work," whatever that is.

Gladys finishes her drink, mixes another and dials her best friend, Pauline, on the faux antique phone that stands on her nightstand.

"What was your husband like when he retired?"

"Which one?" Pauline asks matter-of-factly. Pauline is twice widowed, but Gladys never remembers that fact because Pauline rarely talks about either husband. The first was a college professor at Cortland State University. He was a morose and deeply unhappy man who believed that he had made no impact on the field of phonology. As if to prove his point, he died midway through the book that was supposed to cement his name in linguistics: *The Counterintuitive Sound System of the Zimbu Tribe*.

Tired of the baggage which intellectual men seem to carry with them, Pauline then married Steve, a jovial tractor salesman. Steve didn't have a care in the world and believed that every day he spent above ground was a good one. Unfortunately, a late October day four years ago proved to be a bad one and he suffered a fatal heart attack on the golf course.

"I'm just grateful that Steve died doing what he loved," Pauline says.

"But what was he like before he died?" Gladys wants to know. She can hear Pauline shuffle cards, a sure sign that she is laying out Tarot cards. A practicing, if not devout Catholic, Gladys is afraid of Tarot cards. It's not quite trafficking with the Devil, but it seems a little like sticking your nose in a spiritual realm where it doesn't belong.

"You know Steve. He lived for today. It's surprising he was as successful as he was, because he never planned anything."

"Did he become withdrawn when he retired?"

"Not at all. Quite the opposite, actually. He used to call his friends who were still working and brag that he could play golf anytime he wanted to and that he didn't have to wait until happy hour to start drinking. Steve was special. He found enjoyment in anything he did and he could adapt to anything."

"Harry worries me. He often seems lost in his own world. Sometimes I tell him a story and at the end I realize that he hasn't listened to a word I said."

"Could it be Alzheimer's? That's how Bob Fertag's started."

"No. He's just spaced out."

"Well, you know how those engineers are. They can make a hydrogen bomb but have trouble tying their own shoe laces."

"That's true, but Harry was never a genius. That's why I married him. He worked for the power plant, for Pete's sake. I don't think he could have survived in the private sector."

"Maybe you've been underestimating him."

Pauline's concluding remark stings Gladys, and she wanders around the house trying to calm down. She inspects the corner of the den where Harry's plaques and trophies are displayed. Most of them are for integrity — bringing in projects on time and under budget. Another one is the Most Valuable Player Award, which is what you give a worker who has a perfect attendance record but no creative spark. They speak of a man who would get the job done. Still, what if Pauline is right? What if all his life Harry has had the pilot light of genius which Gladys has ignored in her quest for the perfect house and garden? What if instead of bringing out the best in Harry, she is holding him back and has been for the past forty-five years? What if it's true that behind every great man is a great woman. What if Harry is great but she isn't?

The thought is too horrible to contemplate.

That night, Gladys tries reading the next fifty pages of her book club selection *Shambles: A Memoir of Loss* but keeps skimming the same paragraph over and over. When Harry finally climbs into bed, Gladys notices that he seems tired in a satisfied sort of way.

"How is your work coming?"

"Good. I have a meeting with the Mastersons tomorrow and will lease them a system. Gene always complains about his electricity bill. He says the only difference between Empire Light & Power and the mob is that EL&P is a legally recognized entity."

"Harry, that makes absolutely no sense."

"Good night."

Harry pulls the covers over his shoulders and turns away from his wife. It occurs to Gladys that she has not had sex with her husband in almost two years. Their sex life had not been robust for a while, and Gladys had taken Harry's diminishing libido as a natural sign of aging. But what if it was just an excuse? She reaches out to massage Harry's shoulders.

"What's missing from your life, dear? I mean right now?"

A not-so-gentle creak of the mattress tells her that Harry is shifting into thinking mode.

"Have I ever kept you from achieving something you always wanted to do?" Gladys pushes on.

"I didn't realize I was supposed to want more."

"What's that supposed to mean? What more could you possibly want?"

"I want to make a lot of money."

"But Harry, we don't need the money. What's come over you? The house is paid for and the dividends from your 401(k) are more than enough to live on. We don't even have to touch the principal."

Gladys is right. With her pension from the Herkimer School District, where she put in forty years as a social studies teacher, Harry's 401(k), and their

combined social security benefits, they can lead a comfortable life until the sunset permanently on their retirement.

"It's not about money for us," Harry says. "When I'm really rich, I can have schools named after me."

Gladys laughs, because Harry was never a natural student and his best day of college was the day it ended. She falls silent when she realizes he is not laughing along.

"What on Earth for?"

"I want to be remembered as the greatest distributor of solar power in the United States," Harry says finally.

"Harry, you're seventy years old. This is an impossible dream."

"That's what they told Henry Ford when he wanted to make the model T."

Harry removes Gladys's hand from his shoulder.

Gladys wipes away tears. She has the horrifying thought that she is not talking to her husband, but an impostor in a B-movie, who has copied the voice and mannerisms of the only man (other than her father) whom she has completely trusted.

"Why did you have to find ambition after you retired? Why can't you be like other retired men and play golf and take me to the Bahamas and drink Scotch before dinner and go to your favorite restaurants?"

"I've had my whole life to be like other people. I'm ready for a change."

"I think you should talk to the specialist Dr. Greenbaum recommended,"

Gladys says.

"There's nothing wrong with me," Harry says and snaps off the bedside lamp, indicating that he is finished with the conversation.