

At first, Lavinia thought Mel was joking. Mel was never *not* joking. Good old Mel! Such a prankster! The rubber snake in the freezer last Christmas, during their annual open house. Chip knew he'd put it there. He also knew how Lavinia felt about snakes. She didn't scream or even gasp when she discovered it, flaked with ice, lounging on a bag of frozen peas. She wanted to take it into the living room and toss it into Mel's lap. That would have served the smartass right.

But she didn't. She would never stoop to that level.

She might have understood what the hell Mel was trying to tell her on the telephone if his words hadn't been punctuated by sobs. She'd never known him to be a drinker, ~~but~~ supposed he could have started out of the blue. Some men wept when they hit the bottle, right? Potter, her ex, surely had. That was later, though, near the end of things. Back when he thought he was still secure in her affection, he'd been affable when drunk, sometimes singing as he hauled her to her feet for a quick spin around the kitchen, always when she was paying bills or going over the children's homework. He just couldn't stand to see her working, which was funny because she worked all the time, back then, at least.

She quickly decided that Mel was sober, that the sobs were a put-on to enhance the joke.

"You can cut the crap now, Mel. I'm hooked. I'm just standing here waiting for the punchline," she said.

She'd taken the call in Chip's study. The enormous windows were crystal clear because they'd just been washed. Lavinia insisted on clean windows when the weather warmed. The winter had been brutal even for upstate New York, full of lake-effect snow, and spring came late and gloriously. ~~Then~~ all of a sudden, the trees made a wall of green. There seemed to be no glass separating her from the yard, as if she could simply put down the telephone and step over the low wooden sill and escape. But the sky was angry that day, and thunder boomed in the

distance. There had been flashes of light, and Lavinia found herself wondering vaguely if Chip ~~was~~ enjoying his golf game despite the threat of rain.

She then understood that Mel was talking about the weather, too, and the storms rolling through. He wasn't making a joke. He was trying to pull himself together in order to deliver his news plainly, so that Lavinia would understand.

Chip was dead. Struck by lightning on the ninth green.

Lavinia sat down in the chair by the heavy, solid desk, the chair he'd sat in himself only that morning.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

The police were on their way to her now, Mel said. He called to prepare her, to spare her the shock. He was on his way, too. She needed him. She needed friends and family around her. Would she call her children? Did she want Mel to call them?

"No," she said, and hung up.

She thought of Chip's beautiful son, Ethan, out in Berkeley. And of the two other sons in Texas, whom she'd never met. They would have to be told. Would they come to the funeral? What kind of funeral did Chip want? They'd never talked about it. Chip was—had been—eighteen years older than she. Seventy-one was a good age to think about your final arrangements. Cremation or burial? She wondered how much of him was left after the lightning got him.

"Zap!" Lavinia shouted.

She was alone in the house. Alma, the housekeeper, had gone out. Lavinia was troubled that she didn't remember exactly where. Alma had said. She always said.

Of course, Lavinia's eye fell immediately on the photograph of Chip, just inches from her elbow. It was an old one, taken when he still had most of his hair, when he wasn't jowly, before the bifocals that were always perched on the top of his head. She supposed he kept the picture to remind himself that he'd once had a bit of dash, though it always struck her as odd. Not vain, necessarily, just sort of desperate? She couldn't imagine wanting to see how she used to look. The past was the past. Nothing to cling to, or wish to have back.

She put the photograph face down on the desk.

"You and your goddamn golf," she said.

He'd been obsessive about the game, yet was always over par. They'd talked once about aging, fading passions—his way of apologizing for losing interest in sex—but his love of golf never waned. ~~And n~~Now it had killed him.

**Commented [HS1]:** I love this; it says so much about her, and it immediately brings my mind back to Potter.