

At three A.M. on a windy late-November night, Jenny Walker woke in her historic house in an historic New England town, and sensed from the slope of the mattress and the chill of the flowered percale sheets that Wilkie Walker, the world-famous writer and naturalist, was not in bed beside her.

Often now Jenny woke to this absence. The first time, after lying half awake for twenty minutes, she tiptoed downstairs and found her husband sitting in the kitchen with a mug of tea. Wilkie smiled briefly and replied to her questions that of course he was all right, that everything was all right. "Go back to bed, darling," he told her, and Jenny followed his instructions, just as she had done for a quarter century.

After that night she didn't go to look for him, but now and then she would mention his absence the next morning. Wilkie would say that he'd had a little indigestion and needed a glass of soda water, or wanted to write down an idea. There was no reason to be concerned about him, his tone implied. Indeed her concern was unwelcome, possibly even irritating.

But since the day they met, Jenny had been more concerned about Wilkie Walker than anyone or anything in the world. He had come into the University Housing Office at UCLA where she was working after graduation while she waited to see what would happen next in her life. It was a misty, hot summer morning when Wilkie appeared: the most interesting-looking older man Jenny had ever seen, with his broad height, his full explorer's mustache; his shock of blond-brown hair, steel-blue eyes, and

sudden dazzling smile. Dazzled, she heard him ask about sabbatical sublets for the fall. He wanted somewhere quiet with a garden – he liked to work out of doors if he could, he explained – but he also hoped to be within a half-hour’s walk of the university. Which no doubt wasn’t possible, he added with another radiant smile.

But Jenny was able to assure him that she knew just the place. And two days later, while she was still dreaming of Wilkie’s visit and wondering if she could get leave to audit his lectures, he reappeared to thank her and ask her to have lunch with him.

It was only later that Jenny realized how unusual that had been, because at the time Wilkie Walker was extremely wary of all women. He had been married twice, both times briefly and disastrously (“I get on well with most mammals, but I seem to have difficulty with our species”). First to a sweet and graceful but totally impractical girl whom he compared to a highbred Persian cat (“all cashmere fur and huge sky-blue eyes and special diet, but she always had a slight cold, couldn’t hike more than a mile without collapsing, and was terrified of most other animals”).

Then, on the rebound, he had married a young woman who was equally good-looking and much more competent and robust (“strong and healthy as an Alaskan husky”), but who turned out to be deeply hostile to men and especially to Wilkie. For example, when at a time of crisis he asked her to retype one of his articles, the husky not only growled at him but dropped his manuscript into the kitchen wastebasket, among eggshells and wet grapefruit rinds and crusts of rye toast.

At that first lunch Jenny knew that Wilkie Walker was someone she could, even should, devote her life to. And as she came to know him better she was almost shocked to discover how badly he needed this devotion; how much of his own life was wasted on inessentials. How often he had to set his work aside for tasks someone else (Jenny, for instance) could do for him much faster and more easily, for Wilkie had no natural aptitude for shopping or household repairs or balancing a checkbook.

And after they were married she did all these things and much more: happily, gratefully. Soon she became able to help Wilkie in many other ways: not only typing and proofreading his books and articles, but accompanying him on field trips, making notes, and taking photographs. At home she helped with library research, copying and faxing, finding illustrations (often her own photos), and creating tables and graphs. As Wilkie became ever busier and more famous, she kept his schedule of lectures and interviews and meetings, arranged airline tickets and hotel reservations, took phone and E-mail messages, and corresponded in his name with agents and editors and fans.

Usually now, when Jenny woke at night and found herself alone, she sighed, turned over, and slid back into oblivion. But tonight sleep didn't come. She lay in the antique four-poster bed listening to the windy scrape of bare twigs against glass, thinking that everything was not all right and neither was Wilkie. For months – since he retired last spring, really – his nights had been wakeful, and more and more often he seemed restless or weary during the day. Moreover, none of the things that he used to enjoy so fully seemed to please him now. For the first time since she'd known him, Wilkie had to be urged to attend concerts, lectures, or films. He didn't read most of the books and articles on nature and the environment that crowded into the mailbox, often accompanied by letters of gratitude and appreciation. More and more often he declined to serve on committees and boards, and he delayed returning telephone calls, even after Jenny had gently reminded him several times.

More worrying still, Wilkie hadn't finished his important new book, *The Copper Beech*. This, perhaps the culminating work of his life, was the portrait in depth of a great tree on the Converse College campus; it would bring together all his interests: botany, climatology, ecology, entomology, geology, history, soil science, and zoology. Wilkie's agent and editor were excited about *The Copper Beech*, and it had already been announced in his publisher's catalogue. Every day Jenny expected her husband to give her the final chapter to type into the computer, and every day she was disappointed.

Besides this, and almost worst of all, Wilkie seemed to be losing interest in his friends and family. For over a month he hadn't been to the faculty club, and he wouldn't let her ask anyone to dinner. Last week when the children were home for Thanksgiving he had had little to say to them. He had less and less to say to Jenny too; also, for nearly a month he had not suggested making love.

Clearly something was wrong. And that being so, it was Jenny's responsibility to correct it. Perhaps, she had thought at first, her husband was ill but didn't realize this, because he had hardly been sick a day in his life. He had always refused, for instance, to acknowledge colds: when one showed signs of wanting to attach itself to him he ignored it until, defeated, it slunk away.

A month ago Jenny had persuaded Wilkie to have a medical checkup – first on general principles, then resorting at last to her usual last resort: the claim that it would make her feel better. Grumbling about the waste of time, reiterating his belief that people who weren't ill should stay away from doctors, Wilkie accompanied her to Dr Felch's office and was pronounced to be in excellent health for a man of his age. Prompted by Jenny, he admitted that he occasionally got up at night, but declared that he saw nothing wrong with this; he refused to accept the term "insomnia".

Like almost everyone in Convers, Dr Felch was somewhat in awe of Wilkie Walker, the town's most famous citizen. More for Jenny's sake than his patient's, perhaps, he wrote a prescription for what he called a "muscle relaxant", which Wilkie afterward refused to take. The trouble with most people today, he told his wife, was that their muscles were too relaxed, not to say atrophied.

Though Wilkie seemed to have forgotten the whole episode, one phrase Dr Felch had used kept running through Jenny's head: "a man of his age". Wilkie's age was now seventy. Not for the first time, she recalled the uncomfortable conversation she had had when she first brought him home to meet her parents. Wilkie clearly hadn't noticed the slight hesitation in their welcome, and would have been surprised to hear what was said when his wife-to-be confronted her mother later in the kitchen.

“Darling, I do like him,” Jenny’s mother had insisted. “And of course I realize he’s brilliant. He was wonderfully interesting about those South American bats. And I can see he really loves you. But—” She turned on the water in the sink, sloshing away the rest of the sentence, if any.

“But what?”

“Well. He has been married twice before, that always . . .” Under Jenny’s hurt, resentful stare, her voice faltered. “And then . . . the age difference. You’re barely twenty-one, and Wilkie Walker is forty-six, almost my age. I always think of what my mother said once: If you marry someone much older, you don’t ever quite grow up. And when you’re forty-six, Wilkie will be seventy. An old man.”

Jenny refused to listen. Wilkie Walker was not like other people, she declared. He had more energy and endurance and enthusiasm than most of her college friends.

Her mother, for whom tact was almost a religion, never brought up the subject again. But her comments continued to swim in the weedy depths of Jenny’s mind, occasionally surfacing in a sharklike manner. “You see, you were quite wrong,” she had felt like telling her mother on several occasions, the latest being her own forty-sixth birthday last spring. “Wilkie hasn’t become an old man at all. When we were on that walking tour in Greece last month nobody could keep up with him except the tour guide.” She did not say this only because, though her mother was still in excellent health, her father was now, after two heart attacks, all too evidently an old man at seventy-four: stoop-shouldered and short of breath, slow speaking and slow-moving.

Remembering all this, Jenny lay listening to the wind scratch at the glass, recalling recent conversations with her two grown children over Thanksgiving vacation.

“I tell you what it is, Mom,” Ellen had said as they were washing the dishes. “I think Dad has got a clinical depression.” Since her daughter was now a medical student, and like many such students given to scattershot diagnoses, Jenny both believed her and did not believe her. “Oh, darling,” she temporized. “I don’t know.”

“That’s what I think,” Ellen repeated. “I’m surprised his doctor isn’t more concerned.”

“Dr Felch is concerned. He admires Wilkie very much.” “Everyone admires him very much,” Ellen said. “That’s not the point.”

Billy (Wilkie Walker Jr.) was as usual less definite, but no more reassuring. “Yeah, I sort of agree with Ellen,” he admitted the next day in answer to his mother’s question. “Something’s wrong. Dad seems to be moving around less, you know? Like he wouldn’t come for a walk yesterday because it was too cold? I never heard that before; he was always dragging us out in the goddamnedest freezing snowstorms. Maybe you should go somewhere warmer this winter.”

“Somewhere warmer?”

“Like, I don’t know. Florida, for instance.”

“Oh, darling. Your father would hate Florida.” A glaring panorama of pink beach hotels and condominiums trimmed in neon and surrounded by artificial neon-green turf rose in Jenny’s mind.

“I know, Mom. But you could try Key West. It’s different from the rest of Florida. Sort of like Cape Cod with palms, that’s what my roommate said when we were there on spring break last year. And there’s supposed to be lots of writers and artists around that Dad could talk to.”

Jenny lay in bed rehearsing these voices, wondering if she ought to go downstairs, fearing that if she did Wilkie would not be pleased to see her. For a while she distracted herself from this anxiety with familiar, less pressing anxieties about her two beautiful and brilliant children. She pictured Ellen, who so much resembled Wilkie: tall, ruddy, and broad-shouldered – and also, since early childhood, always so sure of herself. Sometimes lately Jenny was almost frightened of her daughter. I wouldn’t like to be Ellen’s patient when she becomes a doctor, she thought: she’d be so sure she knew what was wrong with me. Then in the dark she blushed, ashamed of this disloyalty.

She imagined Billy, who had been such a beautiful, affectionate little boy, and now seemed somehow subdued and uncertain. Both

of them were doing well professionally, but Jenny sometimes worried that Billy, isolated in the nearly all-male world of computer hardware, would never meet a nice young woman, and that Ellen would scare nice young men off. Then they would never marry and have children Jenny could love.

Jenny marveled at people who desired expensive manufactured objects like an indoor swimming pool or a Mercedes. She already had too many such objects to take care of. What she longed for no money could buy: at least one grandchild. And now, for Wilkie to be himself again.

Downstairs a thin, icy wind rattled the antique bubbled panes of the windows and sliced its way into the family room, but Wilkie Walker did not adjust the thermostat. He remained huddled in his forest-green L. L. Bean bathrobe in a corner of the sofa, watching the weather channel with the sound turned off and thinking about death.

Death was what Wilkie thought about most of the time these days. The death, over the past few years, of his three closest friends and colleagues; the slow, lingering death of the natural environment. The progressive destruction of the ozone layer, the slashing and burning of tropical forests, the poisoning of oceans, wars and assassinations in Africa and Asia, terrorist bombings, drug wars in great cities, the scummy sulfurous yellow-gray foam on Baird Creek behind his house, the raccoon he saw smashed on the road as he was driving home yesterday afternoon, and his own regress toward extinction.

If they could have heard his thoughts, Wilkie's thousands of fans and many of his remaining friends and colleagues would no doubt have shared his shock and sorrow, except for the last item. What was he complaining about, for God's sake? they might have said. For a seventy-year-old man he was in good shape. He was also a famous, perhaps the most famous popular naturalist of his generation: the most eloquent among those who had called public attention to our

wanton destruction of the earth and its flora and fauna. His best-known and best-loved book, *The Last Salt Marsh Mouse*, had never been out of print, and there was hardly a schoolchild in America who had not read its famous first paragraph:

It is the year 2000. In the Zoological Gardens of a great city, a small furry pale-brown, bright-eyed creature clings to a dry stalk in a clump of artificial reeds and stares at the passing humans. A sign stapled to the other side of the wire identifies him as

Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse,
Reithrodontomys raviventris
“SALTY”

Salty is alone in his cage, though once he shared it with his parents and four older siblings. As far as anyone knows, he is the last of his family, the last of his race: the sole surviving salt marsh mouse on this earth.

More than anything else, it was this book and this passage that had made Wilkie Walker famous. *The Last Salt Marsh Mouse*, unlike its namesake, had thrived and reproduced profusely over the last quarter century; it had given birth to paperback editions, translations into sixteen foreign languages, innumerable excerpts in anthologies and condensations and simplifications for the juvenile market. There had been documentary film, television, and cartoon versions, sometimes with a tacked-on happy ending. “Salty” posters and T-shirts were available in science museums everywhere, and toy salt marsh mice, some moderately authentic as to size, color, and shape, and others distorted in a Disney manner, were widely sold. “Salty” had become a cuddly shorthand symbol for the threatened extinction of North American mammalian species. He had made Wilkie’s fortune, and his name a household word.

But now, whenever Wilkie recalled this endangered rodent, he felt a shudder of self-hatred and despair. In spite of the hundreds of

thousands of copies they had sold, his books had in some ways done more harm than good. Many salt marsh mice had been illegally kidnapped for sale as pets; others had been acquired by zoos that wanted to display this now-famous mammal. As a result, just as in Wilkie's worse-case scenario, Salty was now nearing extinction in the wild, and the world was going to hell in a nonbiodegradable plastic handbasket.

Last week, against his better judgment, he had given yet another interview to a student from the local high school newspaper.

"How many species do you figure you have helped to preserve, Professor Walker?" the child, a pimply girl, had inquired.

Wearily, Wilkie gave his standard reply, displaying his famous modesty, declaring that he had been only one of several working in the field. But other words screamed for utterance. I preserved the species Wilkie Walker, that's what I preserved, he had wanted to tell her. And not only this one specimen of the species, but hundreds, thousands of imitation Wilkie Walkers: noisy, posturing, sentimental amateur naturalists. He visualized them as half-human Yahoos: packs of ugly, hairy, ungainly two-legged goats in cheap outdoor jackets and boots, tramping heavy-hooved over the fields and woodlands of North America, crushing flora underfoot and frightening fauna, baaing, nibbling, preening.

It was clear to Wilkie now that if he had stayed with serious science he might have made some significant discovery. Instead, horrified by what was happening to the world around him, he had become a popularizer. A propagandist. He had brought upon himself the fate of all successful popularizers: he had made his point so well that it had become banal. Once his name had been used to describe and recommend the works of writers like Ed Hoagland and Annie Dillard; now their names were used to recommend his work. His books, at first popular with adults, were now read mainly by children and teenagers, and it was now mostly high school and college students who asked to interview him. If you're over seventy, he had realized belatedly, nobody important in the media wants to hear from you anymore. Their attitude is, Wilkie Walker? Is he still alive?

Once Wilkie had dined at the White House and been the featured speaker at important conferences, earning very large fees (often donated to good causes afterward). Now his typical honorarium had shrunk. He had been reminded of this a while ago by the brash young man with sideburns who had taken over the business of his former lecture agent, now retired. "Let's face it," this disagreeable youth had said, leaning confidently toward Wilkie across a table in a pretentious Italian restaurant and breathing garlic on him. "You're an established name, sure, but you're no longer the flavor of the month."

Wilkie's left hip, which he had injured five years ago climbing a cliff in New Mexico to observe jackrabbits, ached tonight: no position on the sofa was comfortable. He could picture how the bones must look, lumped with calcium deposits that grated against the adjoining muscles, tendons, and nerves. That hip would never totally heal now; probably it would get worse and worse, until he was permanently stiffened and crippled, permanently in pain.

Except he probably wasn't going to live that long. For six months he had been aware of an intermittent ache in his lower gut, and in October, in a graffiti-scrawled toilet stall at the college library, he had seen blood. He knew what that meant: cancer of the colon. He couldn't feel it yet, but somewhere in his bowels his life was diseased and bleeding away. When that fool Dr Felch asked him if there were ever blood in his stool, Wilkie hadn't volunteered the information. He knew the odds; he had looked them up. He was determined never to be the weak, exhausted victim of a colostomy, weakened further by chemotherapy and radiation, dragging through what was left of his life with a plastic bag of his own shit strapped to his body. No. He would say nothing until treatment became impossible.

The trouble was, he couldn't put the fear and the pain and the fear of coming greater pain out of his mind. And this failure of courage and detachment pained and terrified him further. He was sick with self-disgust to think that when this planet and the animals that lived on it were in such desperate straits, he should be obsessed