

some difficulties with the children once they were grown. How does one ever explain the heart's values? How tell your son and two daughters that you are wife and lover first, that when one is called in this way there will never, ever be time enough for all things?

"Don't you kiss!" the children had shrieked when very young, and how fun it always was to defy them, so that they'd groan and fuss.

But always, too, Mildred had taken care to practice her attentions on the children. Never neglectful, no, she knew in her heart she'd honored the duties of motherhood. And if Dwight had been somewhat less than nurturing as a father, well, she'd taken pains to make up for that. Sundays in the park, visits to the soda shop, a dog for the children to share.

"They spent their lives together," said Dwight. "Long lives, and every day of them. They got old together. Time went so fast you hardly noticed."

He was crying as he talked, this lively firm-shouldered man who'd always known his own mind. He'd known it so well she'd been happy to surrender hers. He was noticing everything now, she saw, and it was the surprise of it that brought him to tears. His love for her, which had never been less than abundant, was becoming a kind of repentance in these last days, as they sat together and viewed their lives like a picture.

He'd taken no issue with her decision about the treatments. On some level, knowing he'd need her help, he knew he'd need her undrugged and lucid—but his assent was more than that: it was a small way to restore to her some freedom.

These last weeks, she'd shown him some things around the house, tutored him in cooking a few simple meals, written out the names of the places his shirts came from. And they talked of women, old friends whose husbands were gone, whose ways and manners might suit him for a little while before his own time came.

He'd begun to cook for her, and do the washing. He cleaned the floors, the bathroom, and changed the linens. And one night last week, telling her of the pains in his back and knees, he'd actually bent and begged her forgiveness.

"Whatever for, dear?"

"For all the years," he answered. "All the years."

Strong-minded man, he was becoming a servant now.

And Mildred permitted it, knowing it would help him after. They weren't running away anymore. He merely waited with her now, and the time was hers.

"Tell me about the girl," she said.

"She's high up," he said, "in the mountains. Higher than the clouds. And that's heaven behind her, see? See how free she is?"

She closed her eyes. Breathing, she listened to him cry.

"Oh, honey," she said, for not yet the last time.

M. Allen Cunningham's most recent novel, *Partisans*, was released this year. He is also the author of the novels *Lost Son* (about Rainer Maria Rilke) and *The Green Age of Asher Witherow* (a #1 Indie Next pick) as well as *The Honorable Obscurity Handbook*, a miscellany about the creative life. He is the founder and publisher of the literary small press Atelier26 Books. Visit MAllenCunningham.com.

NOAH BUCHANAN

A Night Entrance, 2011

Oil on linen, 26 x 15 in



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