A man came by our road carrying an enormous bolt of white cloth on his back. Said he was from the East. Said whoever partook of this cloth could come to know true happiness. Innocence without heartbreak, he said, if that person proved worthy. My wife fingered his cloth, having in mind something for new curtains. It was good quality, she said. Beautifully woven, of a fine, light texture, and you certainly couldn’t argue with the color.

“How much is it?” she asked.

“Before I tell you that,” the man said, “you must tell me truthfully if you’ve ever suffered.”

“Oh, I’ve suffered,” she said. “I’ve known suffering of some description every day of my natural life.”

I was standing over by the toolshed, with a big smile. My wife is a real joker, who likes nothing better than pulling a person’s leg. She’s known hardships, this and that upheaval, but nothing I would call down-and-out suffering. Mind you, I don’t speak for her. I wouldn’t pretend to speak for another person.

This man with the bolt of cloth, however, he clearly had no sense of my wife’s brand of humor. She didn’t get an itch of a smile out of him. He kept the cloth neatly balanced on his shoulder, wincing a little from the weight and from however far he’d had to carry it, staring hard and straight at my wife the whole time she fooled him with, as if he hoped to peer clear through to her soul. His eyes were dark and brooding and hollowed out some. He was like no person either my wife or me had ever seen before.

“Yes,” he said, “but suffering of what kind?”

“Worse than I hope forever to carry. I’ll tell you that,” my wife said. “But why are you asking me these questions? I like your cloth and if the price is right I mean to buy it.”

“You can only buy my cloth with love,” he said.

We began right then to understand that he was some kind of oddity. He was not like anybody we’d ever seen and he didn’t come from around here. He’d come from a place we’d never heard of, and if that was the East, or wherever, then he was welcome to it.

“Love?” she said. “Love? There’s love and there’s love, mister. What kind are you talking about?” She hitched a head my way, rolling her eyes, as if to indicate that if it was passionate love he was talking about then he’d first have to do something with me. He’d have to get me off my simmer and onto full boil. That’s what she was telling him, with this mischief in her eyes.

I put down my pitchfork about here, and strolled nearer. I liked seeing my wife dealing with difficult situations. I didn’t want to miss anything. My life with that woman has been packed with the unusual. Unusual circumstances, she calls them. Any time she’s ever gone out anywhere without me, whether for a day or an hour or for five minutes, she’s come back with whopping good stories about what she’s seen and heard and what’s happened to her. She’s come back with reports on these unusual circumstances, these little adventures in which so many people have done so many extraordinary things or behaved in such fabulous or foolish ways. So
what was rare this time, I thought, was that it had come visiting. She hadn't had to go out and
find it.

"Hold these," my wife told me. And she put this washtub of clothes in my hands, and went
back to hanging wet pieces on the line, which is what she'd been doing when this man with the
bolt of cloth ventured up into our yard.

"Love," she told him. "You tell me what kind I need, if I'm to buy that cloth. I got good ears
and I'm listening."

The man watched her stick clothespins in her mouth, slap out a good wide sheet, and string
it up. He watched her hang two of these, plus a mess of towels, and get her mouth full again
before he spoke. He looked about the unhappiest I've ever seen any man look. He didn't have
any joy in him. I wondered why he didn't put down that heavy bolt of cloth, and why he didn't
step around into a spot of shade. The sun was lick-killing bright in that yard. I was worried
he'd faint.

"The ordinary kind," he said. "Your ordinary kind of love will buy this cloth."

My wife flapped her wash and laughed. He was really tickling her. She was having
herself a wonderful time.

"What's ordinary?" she said. "I've never known no ordinary love."

He jumped right in. He got excited just for a second.

"The kind such as might exist between the closest friends," he said. "The kind such as
might exist between a man and his wife or between parents and children or for that matter the
love a boy might have for his dog. That kind of love."

"I've got that," she said. "I've had all three. Last year this time I had me a fourth, but it
got run over. Up on the road there, by the tall trees, by a man in a car who didn't even stop."

"That would have been your cat," he said. "I don't know much about cats."

I put down the washtub. My wife let her arms drop. We looked at him, wondering how he
knew about that cat. Then I laughed, for I figured someone down the road must have told him of
my wife's mourning over that cat. She'd dug it a grave under the grapevine and said sweet
words over it. She sorely missed that cat.

"What's wrong with loving cats?" she asked him. "Or beasts of the fields? I'm surprised at
you."

The man shifted his burden and worked one shoe into the ground. He stared off at the
horizon. He looked like he knew he'd said something he shouldn't.

She pushed me out of the way. She wanted to get nearer to him. She had something more to
say.

"Now listen to me," she said. "I've loved lots of things in my life. Lots and lots. Him!" she
said (pointing to me), "them!" (pointing to the flower beds), "that!" (pointing at the sky),
"these" (pointing to the woods), "this" (pointing to the ground)—"practically everything!
There isn't any of it I've hated, and not much I've been indifferent to. Including cats. So put that
in your pipe and smoke it."

Then swooping up her arms and laughing hard, making it plain she bore no grudge but
wasn't just fooling.

Funny thing was, hearing her say it, I felt the same way. It, them, that, those—they were
all beautiful. I couldn't deny it was love I was feeling.

The man with the cloth had turned each way she'd pointed. He'd staggered a time or two
but he'd kept up. In fact, it struck me that he'd got a little ahead of her. That he knew where
her arm was next going. Some trickle of pleasure was showing in his face. And something else
was happening, something I'd never seen. He had his face lifted up to this burning sun. It was
big and orange, that sun, and scorching-hot, but he was staring smack into it. He wasn't blinking
or squinting. His eyes were wide open.

Madness or miracle, I couldn't tell which.

He strode over to a parcel of good grass.
"I believe you mean it," he said. "How much could you use?"

He placed the bolt of white cloth down on the grass and pulled out shiny scissors from his back pocket.

"I bet he's blind," I whispered to my wife. "I bet he's got false eyes."

My wife shushed me. She wasn't listening. She had her excitement had on; her unusual circumstances look. He was offering free cloth for love, ordinary love, and she figured she'd go along with the gag.

How much?

"Oh," she said, "maybe eight yards. Maybe ten. It depends on how many windows I end up doing, plus what hang I want, plus the pleating I'm after."

"You mean to make these curtains yourself?" he asked. He was already down on his knees, smoothing the bolt. Getting set to roll it out.

"Why sure," she said. "I don't know who else would do it for me. I don't know who else I would ask."

He nodded soberly, not thinking about it. "That's so," he said casually. "Mend your own fences first." He was perspiring in the sun, and disheveled, as though he'd been on the road a long time. His shoes had big holes in them and you could see the blistered soles of his feet, but he had an air of exhilaration now. His hair fell down over his eyes and he shoved the dark locks back. I got the impression that some days he went a long time between customers; that he didn't find cause to give away this cloth every day.

He got a fair bit unrolled. It certainly did look like prime goods, once you saw it spread out on the grass in that long expanse.

"It's so pretty!" My wife said. "Heaven help me, but I think it is prettier than the grass!"

"It's pretty all right," he said. "It's a wing-dinger. Just tell me when to stop," he said. "Just shout yoo-hoo."

"Hold up a minute," she said. "I don't want to get greedy. I don't want you rolling off more than we can afford."

"You can afford it," he said.

He kept unrolling. He was up past the well house by now, whipping it off fast, thought the bolt didn't appear to be getting any smaller. My wife had both hands up over her mouth. Half of her wanted to run into the house and get her purse so she could pay; the other half wanted to stay and watch this man unfurl his beautiful cloth. She whipped around to me, all agitated.

"I believe he means it," she said. "He means us to have this cloth. What do I do?"

I shook my head. This was her territory. It was the kind of adventure constant to our nature and necessary to her well-being.

"Honey," I said, "you deal with it."

The sun was bright over everything. It was whipping-hot. There wasn't much wind but I could hear the clothes flapping on the line. A woodpecker had himself a pole somewhere and I could hear him pecking. The sky was wavy blue. The trees seemed to be swaying.

He was up by the front porch now, still unrolling. It surprised us both that he could move so fast.

"Yoo-hoo," my wife said. It was no more than a peep, the sound you might make if a butterfly lands on your hand.

"Wait," he said. "One thing. One question I mean to ask. All this talk of love, your it, your those and them, it slipped my mind."

"Let's hear it," my wife said. "Ask away." It seemed to me that she spoke out of a trance. That she was as dazzled as I was.

"You got no children," he said. "That is that? You're out here on this nice farm, and no children to your name. Why is that?"

We hadn't expected this query from him. It did something to the light in the yard and how we saw it. It was as if some giant dark bird had fluttered between us and the sun. Without
knowing it, we sidled closer to each other. We fumbled for the other's hand. We stared off every which way. No one on our road had asked that question in a long, long time; they hadn't asked it in some years.

"We're not able," we said. We both spoke at the same time. It seemed to me that it was my wife's voice which carried; mine was some place down in my chest, and dropping, as if it meant to crawl on the ground.

"We're not able," we said. That time it came out pure, without any grief to bind it. It came out the way we long ago learned how to say it.

"Oh," he said. "I see." He mumbled something else. He kicked the ground and took a little walk back and forth. He seemed angry, though not at us. "Wouldn't you know it?" he said. "Wouldn't you know it?"

He swore a time or two. He kicked the ground. He surely didn't like it.

"We're over that now," my wife said. "We're past that caring."

"I bet you are," he said. "You're past that little misfortune."

He took to unravelling the bolt again, working with his back to the sun. Down on his knees, scrambling, smoothing the material. Sweating and huffing. He was past the front porch now, and still going, getting on toward that edge where the high weeds grew.

"About here, do you think?" he asked.

He'd rolled off about fifty yards.

My wife and I slowly shook our heads, not knowing what to think.

"Say the word," he told us. "I can give you more if more is what you want."

"I'd say you were giving us too much," my wife said. "I'd say we don't need nearly that much."

"Never mind that," he said. "I'm feeling generous today."

He nudged the cloth with his fingers and rolled off a few yards more. He would have gone on unwinding his cloth had the weeds not stopped him. He stood and looked back over the great length he had unwound.

"Looks like a long white road, don't it?" he said. "You could walk that road and your feet never get dirty."

My wife clenched my hand; it was what we'd both been thinking.

Snip Snip Snip. He began snipping. His scissors raced over the material. Snip Snip Snip. The cloth was sheared clear and clean of its bolt, yet is seemed to me the size of that bolt hadn't lessened any. My wife saw it too.

"He's got cloth for all eternity," she said. "He could unroll that cloth till doomsday."

The man laughed. We were whispering this, but way up by the weeds he heard us. "There's doom and there's doom," he said. "Which doomsday?"

I had the notion he'd gone through more than one. That he knew the picture from both sides.

"It's smart as grass," he said. "Smarter. It never needs watering." He chuckled at that, spinning both arms. Dancing a little. "You could make nighties out of this," he said. "New bedsheets. Transform your whole bedroom."

My wife made a face. She wasn't too pleased, talking nighties with another man. Innocence without heartbreak, I thought. That's what we're coming to.

He nicely rolled up the cloth he'd sheared off and presented it to my wife. "I hope you like it," he said. "No complaints yet. Maybe you can make yourself a nice dress as well. Maybe two or three. Make him some shirts. I think you'll find there's plenty here."

"Goodness, it's light," she said.

"Not if you've been carrying it long as I have," he said. He pulled a blue bandanna from his pocket and wiped his face and neck. He ran his hand through his hair and slicked it back. He looked up at the sky. His dark eyes seemed to have cleared up some. They looked less broody now. "Guts hot," he said, "working in this sun. But a nice day. I'm glad I found you folks home."
“Oh, we’re most always home,” my wife said.
I had to laugh at that. My wife almost never is home. She’s forever gallivanting over the countryside, checking up on this person and that, taking them her soups and jams and breads.
“We’re homebodies, us two.”
She kept fingering the cloth and sighing over it. She held it up against her cheek and with her eyes closed rested herself on it. The man hoisted his own bolt back on his shoulder; he seemed ready to be going. I looked at my wife’s closed lids, at the soft look she had.
I got trembly, fearful of what might happen if that cloth didn’t work out.
“Now look,” I said to him, “what’s wrong with this cloth? Is it going to rot inside a week? Tomorrow is some other stranger going to knock on our door saying we owe him a hundred or five hundred dollars for this cloth? Mister, I don’t understand you,” I said.
He hadn’t bothered with me before; now he looked me dead in the eye. “I can’t help being a stranger,” he said. “If you never set eyes on me before, I guess that’s what I would have to be. Don’t you like strangers? Don’t you trust them?”
My wife jumped in. Her face was fiery, like she thought I had wounded him. “We like strangers just fine,” she said. “We’ve helped out many a-one. No, I can’t say our door has ever been closed to whoever it is comes by. Strangers can sit in our kitchen just the same as our friends.”
He smiled at her but kept his stern look for me. “As to your questions,” he said, “You’re worried about the golden goose, I can see that. Fair enough. No, your cloth will not rot. It will not shred, fade, or tear. Nor will it ever need cleaning, either. This cloth requires no upkeep whatsoever. Though a sound heart helps. A sweet disposition, too. Innocence without heartbreak, as I told you. And your wife, if it’s her making the curtains or making herself a dress, she will find it to be an amazingly easy cloth to work with. It will practically do the job itself. No, I don’t believe you will you ever find you have any reason to complain of the quality of that cloth.”
My wife had it up to her face again. She had her face sunk in it.
“Goodness,” she said, “it’s soft! It smells so fresh. It’s like someone singing a song to me.”
The man laughed. “It is soft,” he said. “But it can’t sing a note, or has never been known to.”
It was my wife singing. She had this little hum under her breath.
“This is the most wonderful cloth in the world,” she said.
He nodded. “I can’t argue with you on that score,” he said. Then he turned again to me. “I believe your wife is satisfied,” he said. “But if you have any doubts, if you’re worried someone is going to knock on your door tomorrow asking you for a hundred or five hundred dollars, I suppose I could write you up a guarantee. I could give you a PAID IN FULL.”
He was making me feel ashamed of myself. They both were. “No, no,” I said, “if she’s satisfied, then I am. And I can see she’s tickled pink. No, I beg your pardon. I meant no offense.”
“No offense taken,” he said.
But his eyes clouded a token. He gazed off at our road and up along the stand of trees and his eyes roaming until they snagged the sun. He kept his eyes there, unblinking, open, staring at the sun. I could see the red orbs reflected in his eyes.
“There is one thing,” he said.
I caught my breath and felt my wife catch hers. The hitch? A hitch, after all? Coming so late?
We waited.
He shuffled his feet. He brought out his bandanna and wiped his face again. He stared at the ground.
“Should you ever stop loving,” he said, “you shall lose this cloth and all else. You shall wake up one morning and it and all else will no longer be where you left it. It will all be gone and you will not know where you are. You will not know what to do with yourself. You will wish you’d never been born.”
My wife's eyes went saucer-size.
He had us in some kind of spell.
Hocus-pocus, I thought. He is telling us some kind of hocus-pocus. Yet I felt my skin shudder;
I felt goose bumps rise.
"That's it?" my wife said. "That's the only catch?"
He shrugged. "That's it," he said. "Not much, is it? Not a whisper of menace for a pair such as yourselves."
My wife's eyes were gauzed over; there was a wetness in them.
"Hold on," she said. "Don't you be leaving yet. Hold this, honey."
She put the cloth in my arms. Then she hastened over to the well, pitched the bucket down, and drew it up running over with fresh water.
"Here," she said, coming back with a good dipperful. "Here's a nice drink of cool water. You need it on a day like this."
The man drank. He held the dipper in both hands, with the tips of his fingers, and drained the dipper dry, then wiped his chin with the back of a hand.
"I did indeed," he said. "That's very tasty water. I thank you."
"That's good water," she said. "That well has been here 100 a hundred years. You could stay on for supper," she said. "It's getting on toward that time and I have a fine stew on the stove, with plenty to spare."
"That's kind of you," he said back. "and I'm grateful. But I'd best pass on your road while there's still daylight left, and see who else might have need of this cloth."
My wife is not normally a demonstrative woman, not in public. Certainly not with strangers. You could have knocked me over with a feather when she up and kissed him full on the mouth, with a nice hug to boot.
"There's payment," she said, "if our money's no good."
He blushed, trying to hide his pleasure. It seemed to me she had him wrapped around her little finger... or the other way around.
"You kiss like a woman," he said. "Like one who knows what kissing is for, and can't hardly stop herself."
It was my wife's turn to blush.
I took hold of her hand and held her down to the grass, because it seemed to me another kiss or two and she'd fly right away with him.
He walked across the yard and up by the well house, leaving by the same route he had come. Heading for the road. At the turn, he spun around and waved.
"You could try the Hopkins place!" my wife called. "There's a fat woman down that road got a sea of troubles. She could surely use some of that cloth."
He smiled and again waved. Then we saw his head and his bolt of white cloth bobbing along the weeds as he took the dips and the rises in the road. Then he went on out of sight.
"There's that man with some horses down that road!" my wife called. "You be careful of him!"
It seemed we heard some sound come back, but whether it was his we couldn't say.
My wife and I stood a long time in the yard, me holding the dipper and watching her, while she held her own bolt of cloth in her arms, staring off to where he'd last been.
Then she sighed dreamily and went inside.

I went on down to the barn and looked after the animals. Getting my feeding done. I talked a spell with them. Talking to animals is soothing to me, and they like it too. They pretend to stare at the walls or the floor as they're munching their feed down, but I know they listen to me. We had us an unusual circumstances chat. "That man with the cloth," I said. "Maybe you can tell me what you make of him."
Thirty minutes later I heard my wife excitedly calling me. She was standing out on the back doorstep, with this incredulous look.

"I've finished," she said. "I've finished the windows. Nine windows. It beats me how."

I started up to the house. Her voice was all shaky. Her face flushed, flinging her arms about. Then she got this new look on.

"Wait!" she said. "Stay there! Give me ten minutes!"

And she flung herself back inside, banging the door. I laughed. It always gave me a kick how she ordered me around.

I got the milk pail down under the cow. Before I'd touched and drained all four teats she was calling again.

"Come look, come look, oh come look!"

She was standing in the open doorway, with the kitchen to her back. Behind her, through the windows, I could see the streak of a red sunset and how it lit up the swing of trees. But I wasn't looking there. I was looking at her. Looking and swallowing hard and trying to remember how a body produced human speech. I had never thought of white as a color she could wear. White, it pales her some. It leaves her undefined and washes out what parts I like best. But she looked beautiful now. In her new dress she struck me down to my bootstraps. She made my chest break.

"Do you like it?" she said.

I went running up to her. I was up against her, hugging her and lifting her before she'd even had a chance to get set. I'd never held on so tightly or been so tightly held back.

Truth is, it was the strangest thing. Like we were both so innocent we hadn't yet shot up out of new ground.

"Come see the curtains," she whispered. "Come see the new sheets. Come see what else I've made. You'll see it all. You'll see how our home has been transformed."

I crept inside. There was something holy about it. About it and about us and about those rooms and the whole wide world. Something radiant. Like you had to put your foot down easy and hold it down or you'd float on up.

"That's it," she said. "That's how I feel too."

That night in bed, trying to figure it out, we wondered how Ella Mae down the road had done. How all the people all along our road had made out.

"No worry," my wife said. "He'll have found a bonanza around here. There's heaps of decent people in this neck of the woods."

"Wonder where he is now?" we said.

"Wonder where he goes next?"

"Where he gets that cloth?"

"Who he is?"

We couldn't get to sleep, wondering about that.