

Thunder in Illinois

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Mr. Evans, who still loves Mrs. Evans, has thought up a dozen ways to leave her. Some literal: lifting off in a stealth helicopter from their tar-spun roof in Champaign-Urbana. Some figurative: disappearing into the pages of a John le Carré novel, exhaling honeyed tobacco on the cruel sands of a British beach. On this June morning, however, Mr. Evans, robust at sixty-five, sits on his back porch across from a field of corn and has a revelation. Every year, the fallow field shoots up like a battalion of medieval knights resplendent in their golden tassels only to lie strafed each winter. Death, he realizes, is his only way out. He has no means to accomplish this, certainly not the courage to take his own life. Still, he is able to picture himself happily buried at the intersection of Church and Bloomingfield, free, finally, of corrupt financial schemes, ill-fated Southeast Asian infrastructure projects, airplane food, and, most importantly, love and the manic duplicity of it.

But not until he wins the game with Mrs. Evans.

Mrs. Evans, who is a fourth grade teacher, thrives on games, and on winning them. One might say it is her métier. For instance, if the black numbers at the gas pump aren't an even \$40.00 when she releases the trigger, she tries again for exactly \$41.00. Sometimes gas leaks onto her shoes.

The true contest though, the one Mrs. Evans has come to enjoy the most, is playing the word game she unearthed on a liquidation table at Sears against Mr. Evans, a contest that ramped up considerably when the couple entered their fifties in the '70s and the children were gone.

Back then, their gay daughter was in Taos reading Nietzsche in her teepee and downing Johnny Walker Red from the bottle, a pack of wolves howling seductively at her heterosexual dog. Their son, the only one, was on his third vision quest somewhere in the Rocky Mountains, eating tansy mustard and the brown seeds of pennycress and writing holy spirit songs to bald eagles and Orion. The eldest, first to leave and ivy-league, was driving her clunker through narrow San Francisco streets at midnight looking for the whimsical poet she hoped would fuck her on his weedy couch.

All of which was a relief. Because Mr. and Mrs. Evans could be alone to play the game, which they did almost every

Saturday night – or Friday if they had a party to go to or a bridge game set up for Saturday.

The years went by. Five. Ten. Twenty. Including birthdays and anniversaries. Mr. Evans' widowed father, a cattle-rancher, died in a senior home in Nebraska. Mrs. Evans' immigrant parents, haberdasher and housewife, were fleshless by now in their Forest Lawn graves. The children never married.

Mrs. Evans was in the lead, although there were times when they were neck and neck for weeks at a time. Then Mrs. Evans would do *quixotic* or *xenophobia*, which, due to their length and high point letters, were game stoppers. By the early '90s, their scores – cumulative over the years – had surpassed the million mark.

Tonight, the stakes could not be higher. While Mrs. Evans clears the supper dishes, Mr. Evans sets up the game on the same teak table they've had since 1948. The last few Saturdays he has won. He is catching up.

He picks the letter *b* from the deck. Mrs. Evans picks a *g*. A good sign. He will be the dealer. He will go first.

"I can die," he says. He's not a gambler but he's made his own secret bet. If he wins, he won't need to go back to Bangkok. If he loses, well, his bag is still packed.

"What did you say, Lenny?"

"I said I can die as soon as I get more points than you, dear. And I'm a hair's breadth away from that moment." He feels like a scoundrel, which feels good. Perhaps he doesn't need to win the game. Perhaps, by this simple proposition, he has already won.

"That's absurd," she says, pushing her thick curls off her forehead. He feels it, too, the heat, even in shorts and open shirt, leftover from the day. Her face looks grim. He notices a slight crookedness in her once-starlet looks and an unusual softness in her jowl.

"You're not going to die, Lenny," she says.

Mr. Evans focuses on the fourteen cards, each with a letter on it, laid out on the table, seven in her row and seven in his. He feels heady. He quickly sees a dozen words he can make. The fluffy Persian brushes his calf, gently turning her uppity behind in his direction, apparently desiring a rub. He pats her

softly on the head. Like rockets, her claws shoot out and she whacks at his leg, drawing two faint lines of blood.

“Do something,” Mrs. Evans says, growing impatient.

Mr. Evans puts a word down on the table, a sweet word, a good word, *lethargy*, 64 points, not bad considering he only had two vowel cards to work with. But seconds after he deals replacement cards for the ones he’s just used, Mrs. Evans slaps down *sarcophagus*, 77 points, keeping her lead. Mr. Evans’ calf is burning in the place the claw went deep. He thinks of Vilai, bent over the sewing machine in the shop he pays for in Bangkok, speaking to her in his head. If you were only here, he says, your expert hands would apply cotton. You would kneel down and graze my wound with your lips.

Mr. Evans, who has recently returned from another business trip to Southeast Asia, studies the cards absent-mindedly, glancing at Mrs. Evans to see if she has noticed his departure into reverie. She is toying with her wedding band, calculating her next play. Mr. Evans sees the word *rent*, a lousy 12 points. He forages in his brain for a better choice, but encounters Vilai instead.

Mr. Matsuda had introduced Mr. Evans to the young bargirl nearly twenty years ago at the Cosmos Club. It was 1973, the year the Thai government purchased Nong Ngo Hao, Cobra Swamp, and Mr. Evans instigated his first infrastructure scheme in an Asian metropolis. Suvarabhumi Airport was to make Bangkok an international hub.

“The beautiful Vilai,” Mr. Matsuda had said with a bow. Mr. Matsuda, dubbed ‘Prince of Patpong’ by the Americans because of his clout in the red-light district, was Mr. Evans’ Japanese counterpart at their international firm. Vilai stepped out from the cluster of Chengmai girls with her sullen eyes and her tight yellow dress. She leaned in close as if she knew Mr. Evans, her gold bracelets jangling, her skin sallow under the neon lights. She was twenty-two, the age of Mr. Evans’ eldest.

Vilai slid her hand in his and let him lead her into the busy street. Outside in the dusk, two children, probably brothers, came up for air after a dive into the filthy klong from a bridge. The scent of sun-drenched fruit lingered after a sweltering day of sellers bargaining from their boats. It was Loy Krathong, Vilai told Mr. Evans, and in her broken English explained that he was lucky to be in Thailand for the annual full moon celebration in honor of the Mother of Water. Hundreds of small banana leaf boats sailed up and down the klong, each one lit with a candle. Mr. Evans laughed with uncustomary ease but all at once Vilai stopped talking. The last boats floated along the klong’s borders, some invisible current pushing them against its walls, until they skittered like maniacal water bugs. One by one, their flames went out.

Mr. Evans lays down *rental*, hesitantly, pausing on the *n* – the points are so low – to count the score in his mind and see if he hasn’t missed something obvious that his wife sees, her steel blue eyes intent on the letters, her black hair, barely a strand of gray, cropped short and stylish around her face. He puts down the *t-a-l* and leans back in his chair with an air of triumph, false, he knows, even foolish.

“You take too long,” Mrs. Evans says. She takes five cards

from the top of the pile and places them face up in the empty spaces he has created to make his word.

“I’m the dealer,” says Mr. Evans.

“Not anymore,” she says.

Mr. Evans gets up to dish chocolate ice cream into bowls. He can feel his wife’s eyes on him.

“Don’t leave the freezer door open, Lenny,” she says.

The ice cream is hard, but Mr. Evans is strong. He recalls the carp that first time. Large schools of them slipped through the water in front of the Royal Siam, their neon orange darkening when a cloud passed the sun. The hotel employees annoyed him, inordinately happy, chirping behind their desks. Emblazoned on the red carpet trail along the corridor, Thai lettering extolled the King. Mr. Evans’ large Western shoes pressed into its weave as he looked for his room on the twenty-third floor, his jacket slung over his shoulder, perspiration spreading under his arms.

“The freezer, Lenny.”

Once in his hotel room, the heat stripped him of every thought of Mrs. Evans correcting long division in another hemisphere. Shirtless, he sat on the corner of the perfectly made bed and let gravity call him down onto the silken spread, still in his shoes. He could feel his heart move slowly inside his chest, aimlessly, like the fat carp in the lava pond.

Mr. Evans treated Mr. Evans diplomatically when the doctor first told him about his pre-leukemia four years ago, bestowing on him a tenderness he’d forgotten she was capable of. On the shoulder or forehead, an unexpected kiss. You will get bruises, the doctor explained. They will come and go. You could live a long time.

The Evanses decided to tell no one. Not even the children. Any bruises would be hidden beneath his clothes. But Mrs. Evans saw them, blue islands floating on her husband’s skin. She monitored the marks. She drew a map showing eleven discolorations. As they disappeared, she crossed them out. After each blood test, she graphed the numbers. Meanwhile, she coddled him, even letting him win the game a few times by not stealing, for example, his word *front* to make *confront*. He knew she had seen it. But the years went by and he didn’t die, though the feeling of uncertainty was there in Mr. Evans’ stomach most of the time.

“You probably don’t care what happened at school today,” he hears Mrs. Evans say. Teaching social studies to fourth graders for more than a quarter century has never completely satisfied her, a sentiment she frequently shares with him. She plans to retire at the end of the year. I could solve every world problem, she likes to say, if only the Secretary-General would ask me. She has taken over the ice cream scooping now, exactly two scoops each, their tradition, and Mr. Evans has returned to the table. He turns his chair 180 degrees so he can face her. He tries to forget Vilai. He wants to be attentive to Mrs. Evans, especially tonight.

“It was just after recess. Not yet time for lunch,” she says, shoving the ice cream container into the freezer. From the back, with her compact figure and shapely legs, Mrs. Evans

could be in her twenties. She turns and faces Mr. Evans. “‘Look at your shoes,’ I told my kids. ‘The oil used to make the soles came from Saudi Arabia.’ I got my tallest student to pull down the map. I used my pointer to show them the huge pink shape abutting the Persian Gulf on the west and on the east, the Red Sea. ‘Why do they call it red?’ ‘How come Sardi-rabia is pink?’ ‘Shush,’ I said, ‘that isn’t the point.’”

Mrs. Evans sets the bowls on the table, the ice cream already melting, and leans dramatically over their game. Mr. Evans swivels his chair around and puts his arms out as if to catch her. He enjoys her stories.

“‘Everyone put one foot up on your desk,’ I said to my kids. There was a spate of clunks, shrieks of laughter. ‘Good job,’ I said. ‘Where do you think the material used to make the top of your shoes comes from?’ ‘Japan,’ everyone said. They were so certain. ‘China?’ someone wondered. ‘Pakistan,’ I said. ‘And the laces are made from cotton grown in India. The shoes were assembled in Mexico. This is the point.’ There was utter silence. No rolling pencils. No spitballs. All sixty-four eyes were on me. I could feel their brains expanding, every one of them born and raised in that blighted neighborhood. Then I said the magic words. The ones that keep me slicing the half a banana you leave for me every morning onto my cereal and driving in bumper-to-bumper traffic down Highway 57 to teach. ‘Children,’ I said, ‘if you remember nothing else, please remember this: we are all connected.’”

Mr. Evans rubs his hand over the scratches on his leg. They are already scabbing. He knows exactly what Mrs. Evans is thinking. Doing her small part to stem what she calls “the tide of ignorance and national narcissism” has never been enough for her. Education is a game she can never win. But this doesn’t stop her from trying. Mr. Evans admires her for this.

“Ideas become obsolete,” she says, settling back down in her chair. “People lie.” She glances down at the columns of cards. “Letters and numbers, on the other hand, do not.” She uses the wild card – one of two in the deck and worth 5 points – adding it, together with an *e*, to pluralize sarcophagus, giving her 156 points.

Mr. Evans is leaning so far back in his chair that it is balancing on two legs. “You’re going to fall, Lenny,” Mrs. Evans says without looking up. Then she rests her chin on her hand and looks at Mr. Evans, frowning like a child.

“Did you see her this time?” she asks, refusing to say Vilai’s name. On every shelf, tucked away in every niche, are the miniature ceramic pots Mrs. Evans has collected when Mr. Evans allows her to accompany him to Manila or Bangkok. The relics stand, a crowd of onlookers, as if waiting for Mr. Evans to pound a tabletop or get a divorce or in some other way defy his wife’s commanding lead.

Mr. Evans doesn’t answer. Instead he pushes away what is left of his ice cream and pours himself a scotch on the rocks. He had promised he wouldn’t see Vilai. He always promised it would never happen again, and Mrs. Evans always took him back. But this last time, for the first time, the promise was to himself.

“The flap of a moth in Bangkok,” Mrs. Evans says.

“Makes thunder in Illinois,” Mr. Evans says. “I know.”

All those years ago, gonorrhea had tipped her off, the itching and burning she never let him forget.

“I’m sorry,” he says. He tries to remember a joke, but the punch line escapes him.

“Things lead to other things,” she says. She lays her hand face up on the table as if she wants him to cover it with his.

“Look at your beloved Thailand,” she says. “Imperial dreams lead to exploitation. Exploitation to coups. Coups to death.” Mrs. Evans has recently become the Membership Chair of the local United Nations Association. “They needed peace in Thailand, not airports,” she says. “Not loans they could never pay back.”

Mr. Evans lays the feet of the chair on the white carpet and looks away from Mrs. Evans. Through the window he sees an oriole in the bird feeder she has hung in the dogwood. A throng of full-throated peonies seems to float against the weather-beaten fence. Beyond their splendid pink, the sea of corn spreads out endlessly like a veil ripped here and there by a tractor or a silo on fire, reflecting the sun. Thailand has had eighteen new constitutions in the last fifty years. It is impossible for Mrs. Evans to imagine that level of uncertainty.

The Prince of Patpong was the only person in the world Mr. Evans could talk to. “Why do you live like this, plunged in sorrows?” Mr. Matsuda asked him two years ago when Mr. Evans confided that Mrs. Evans had found Vilai’s fragrance on his clothes for the third time and kicked him out of the house. “You let yourself get carried along,” Mrs. Evans had shouted, sobbing, as she threw things into his bags. “When will you ever tack into the goddamn wind?” Mr. Evans had bumped into the hanging lantern in the foyer, having forgotten to duck his head as he exited the front door of their house. He heard Mrs. Evans yelling behind him, or was she crying, her fit of longing too distant now for him to be precise about the words. His black bags sat on the front step like sleeping Labradors. Mrs. Evans had flung them there.

He walked to the garage, suddenly embarrassed by the garbage truck rolling up and the congenial face of its driver. “Good morning,” the man said, jumping down to haul away their trash. The clunk of the empty metal can against the driveway frightened Mr. Evans, who was now a refugee. He could fly to Bangkok or get a hotel room downtown. He threw his bags – had he remembered the Don Muang projections? – into the backseat of his VW bug, pushed the driver’s seat back and worked his long legs in. Mrs. Evans has refused to sell their 1967 twin convertibles, which are currently worth nine times their original value, until they’re worth ten times what they bought them for, so for three decades he has forced his giant frame into this bug without air-conditioning in 100-degree summer heat, hunched and fetal, the tiny hard steering wheel pressing into his chest.

The familiar engine turned over fast. He wondered if Mrs. Evans would come to the door as she always did (he rolled down the little window, its encasement sticky from years of

humidity) to remind him to get some milk on the way home or tell him his collar was sticking up. The custom was irritating and yet its absence would be unpleasant.

She did come out, her eyes red-rimmed, her fists held like broken dolls at her sides. "Don't come back!" she yelled. Then the front door to his home slammed shut.

Mrs. Evans, who has lost the first game of the evening, is reshuffling for another round. Mr. Evans pours himself another scotch. He hadn't checked into a local hotel that third time. He had driven to O'Hare and flown to Bangkok.

Everyone was drunk at the Cosmos. They were always drunk, ordering more beers, the *farang* in their business suits with one or two Thai women on their laps. Mr. Matsuda toasted Mr. Evans in front of the crowd as if he had won something important, which he had not. The airport scheme, after years of malignancy and remission, had failed miserably. A new scheme was in the works. Outside, throngs of people had poured into the town square: fruit vendors, lottery vendors, noodle vendors, prostitutes, the youth, all decrying the King, who was in cahoots with the prime minister, who was in cahoots with foreign businessmen. The monks had been there, too, in their saffron robes, their dark, bald heads forming a long line of protest. Tuk tuks parked, cluttering the roads. Samlors silenced their bells. In just three days, seventy students, chanting and wearing yellow bands, had been killed.

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Mr. Evans sipped his cocktail without heart. He wanted to go back to the hotel and write a postcard to Mrs. Evans: not just witty anecdotes about airplane meals in business class and the headache of lost luggage but what his company had forced the military to do, the things he was strictly forbidden to tell her. He wanted to write *I love you* in his tiny print. At home the words caught in his throat. But Mr. Matsuda managed to get him to sing, they all cried out for it: Leonard Evans, Leonard Evans, they called, which embarrassed him, tone deaf as he was, something Mrs. Evans reminded him each Christmas Eve as he sang *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. Which is what he sang now at the Cosmos, everyone laughing, trying to sing along, even Vilai.

Mr. Matsuda called out to his driver, who chauffeured the two men from the Cosmos to Mr. Evans' hotel, Vilai between them, a little giddy, even clumsy in her designer swath of silk. As soon as Mr. Matsuda left the room, she unfurled the scarves

she wore over her blouse and watched him, her third *farang* of the day, awkwardly disengage his belt. A muted honking outside the window seemed to turn in on itself. She put her familiar hands on his broad shoulders, the bruises shocking her with their gem-like blue. Mr. Evans turned to her. She prodded him gently down and slipped off her dress. She didn't speak. Her pink slippers lay like a child's next to his wing tips at the foot of the bed.

Mr. Evans glances at Mrs. Evans, pushes his chair back and gets up from the table. He wants to play some Chet Baker, whose voice, sexier than a sax, says everything Mr. Evans has never said. His wife is concentrating on the letters. In the cabinet are all the records, the ones they bought together and kept, the ones he bought alone to savor after work, at dusk, lying on the couch or in the chair swing on the porch, the ones the children danced to in the living room when they were young, Petroushka and Swan Lake in elementary school, then Lonely Heart's Club Band and Let it Bleed; finally Pink Floyd and The Who before they left for good. Mr. Evans fits the vinyl onto the slip of black rubber and lays the arm on the outer edge. Chet croons. Mr. Evans swoons, outside now on the porch, swaying beneath the dappled sky.

"I can't think," Mrs. Evans says, "with all that noise." She doesn't look up. She has taken a couple of cards from his column, which the game permits her to do, and is holding them over one of her columns not quite ready to place them down on the table, calculating points in her head. She is losing.

Last summer, Mr. and Mrs. Evans visited their eldest daughter in California. On the second day, they left her reading Beckett in a bikini on the roof of her apartment and drove north to the Russian River. On its bank, Mr. Evans lay with his head on his wife's lap shading his eyes from the sun and thinking of Vilai lying diagonally on her monsoon bed beneath the lacy mosquito net, a sarong draped across her breasts. In a harsh and competitive field, Vilai had been one of the most skilled at the game she'd played, a game of hazard and good luck. He knew that she lay awake now, breathing in the scent of dragon fruit and oil, lemongrass and dust; that the rickshaw wheels were creaking against the street and the honking of overstuffed commercial trucks reverberated against the thin walls of her apartment. A sheen of ducks flew overhead migrating south along the Russian River where he rested with Mrs. Evans. He imagined Vilai's practiced hands, like blue silver, tracing the bruises on his legs and back, the texts by which she had come to know him; then stroking his shoulders, deliberate and constant like the paddles of market vendors dipping and pulling through the klong's dark waters.

"You're frowning," Mrs. Evans told him as she pushed at the furrows on his forehead, forcing them smooth.

Now he dances to Chet as the living room darkens, colliding with the rocking chair in his exuberance. It rocks then rights itself. He dances toward his wife, stretching out his hand. The sky is purple now. She seizes on a word.

"Hexagonal," she says. It is amazing. How does she do it? She is wearing a sleeveless blouse and her freckled arms look

delicious in the afterglow of sunset. She points at the 90-point word that puts her in the lead and smiles up at him but doesn't budge. But I fall in love too easily. I fall in love too fast, Chet sings before discharging his melancholy wordlessly through his trumpet.

"Hexagonal or obtuse, the world is a magnificent place," Mr. Evans says, standing in front of his wife. She leans back in her chair and switches on the light. He clicks it off just as the streetlight clicks on beyond the driveway and he lifts her from the old teak chair, lifts her to her feet and gathers her in his boogie-woogie swing. She is so small and light on her feet, even now. She lays her head against his chest and they turn in the dark.

Later, Mr. Evans is drunk – the Rutherford from supper, the Johnny Walker Black – and they are still playing game two. It's 1,232,957 to 1,232,896. Mr. Evans has rallied.

Back in their college days, the Evanses – she in her plaid skirt, saddle shoes, and Susan Hayward do; he, sandy hair slicked back, straight out of naval officer school – met on a scavenger hunt she had organized for her sorority and his fraternity, the two scrubbed youngsters knocking on doors and asking for clothespins (8), rubber bands (5), a clean diaper (1), golf balls (2), bobby pins (4), and a fresh made pie. They had run through the meadow behind campus and fallen on their backs among quiescent cows. Together, they had won.

Mr. Evans feels bruises in places nothing has touched, coming up to the surface like stains. *Taxonomy*. He sees it but can't believe it. He uses his x and her lips are soft and set. He can't remember when she first said he was the cause of her loneliness. He holds tight to the blame. He doesn't mean to, but at night when he and Mrs. Evans turn on the fan and lie back against the coolness of the sheet on either edge of their king-size bed, he can feel it in his blood and smell its rotten scent.

Mr. Evans and Mrs. Evans play no more than two games in one evening. But Mr. Evans insists on a third, determined to win again. It's midnight, Mrs. Evans' bewitching hour, when her armor comes off and she hangs her javelins at the door. She looks worried and she should be. She is close to losing her lifetime lead. She asks if they can play this last game on the back porch in candlelight so she can share with him her enthusiasm for the starry heavens, something she has done with her students all these years.

Outside, the air is warm and faintly sweet with the scent of corn pollen. Mr. Evans watches Mrs. Evans pull the cards from their box, shuffle them expertly, and deal him seven cards face-up in a line with the large black letters showing, and then seven for herself. She looks beautiful in the semi-dark. She quickly puts down a word. Tonight, there is a meteor shower and the meteors crash and burn in broad arcs from different quadrants of the sky. She is counting them. Three. Eight. Thirteen.

"Lenny! Fifteen!" She reaches for his hand, but he is concentrating on the game, carefully selecting letters from her column.

"Yep," he says. "They're falling." He recalls confiding to Mr. Matsuda over Manhattans at the Cosmos that his wife was

the kind of woman who collects coupons with the perspicuity of a colonel inspecting the gun hold of his troops, realizing at the time that if he could possibly remember *perspicuity* it might give him a decent amount of points.

The moon appears over the fence. There are no high-point letters on the table. Mrs. Evans doesn't rush him. He suddenly sees it. He uses his word *den* and the *sch* he'd put down hoping for *schism* or *schema* and lays down his cards.

"That's a foreign word," Mrs. Evans says. "You're not allowed to use foreign words."

Mr. Evans jumps up and jogs inside to get the dictionary, hitting the transom of the sliding door with his head.

"Crap," he says.

But there it is plain as day in the dictionary. SCHADEN-FREUDE. 118 points.

When he returns, Mrs. Evans comes to his side of the table and sits on his lap as if the more he closes the gap between their scores, the more she esteems him for his pluck. "Sixteen," she calls out looking up at the sky. Then she steals his *easy* to make *queasy*. With only two cards left to draw from, she deals the wild card. Mr. Evans uses it now as a *y* to make *zephyr* and wins the game, surpassing his wife's cumulative points for the first time since their courtship. He can't believe it.

"Congratulations," Mrs. Evans says, surprising him, and asks him to join her on their chaise longue beneath the stars.

Mr. Evans recalls the knights in their golden tassels. Perhaps he won't have to lift off in a stealth helicopter or disappear in a best-selling book. He has the advantage. He wants to stay.

"Seventeen!" Mrs. Evans cries. Her game is to see twenty falling stars. "They're like tears," she says. "Or fears," she laughs, glancing at Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans *did* see Vilai again this last time. She sent her three employees out and lay next to him in her boudoir opening her hair clips with her teeth. The Suriwong Sewing Shop had a CLOSED sign in the window for the hour he was there. Her brother was sick like dog, she told him as she stroked his bruises with her familiar hands. For her favor, could he give her money for hospital bill? She told a joke. But it wasn't funny. "You not *farang* anymore," she said, "you *si ka*." Meaning dark blue. Mr. Evans turns to his wife. He wants to tell her: it's all over.

But he doesn't. Out on the back porch, the axis of the earth seems to shift. Mr. Evans can feel it but he doesn't understand it. Is it the sudden scent of dogwood flung forward on a late night breeze? Or perhaps Mrs. Evans' exclamation: the nineteenth star? She tilts her head back beneath the rambling sky. Mr. Evans will die in a month and Mrs. Evans will fly to the *Land of Smiles* to meet the bargirl for herself. She feels deeply satisfied upon sighting the twentieth falling star. She dishes new bowls of ice cream, two scoops each, and brings them out to the porch. Next Saturday, she will play the game with him again. She is certain she will pull ahead. He will not die. If she doesn't win, she will play another round and another. She gathers the cards from the table, hitting them softly against its surface, dividing them into two decks and fitting them neatly side by side.