Mealtime approaches and Ray Carver, a big, quick-witted man, is anxious to eat. He sets the table in a hurry and opens cartons of leftover carryout Chinese. We sit down, and as we begin, Ray's lover, an impish, dark-haired woman, tells a story: "Last fall I found a great Irish place called Coleman's, and I wanted to take Ray. So we set out one night for dinner, but Coleman's is all the way across town, and every time we'd pass a Wendy's or a McDonald's, Ray wanted to stop. I kept saying, 'No, don't you want to go to Coleman's?' He was getting fussier, but we finally made it."

"You bet," says Ray. "The food was good." He's relaxed some after taking the first bites of Chinese.

"So now," Tess Gallagher says, when we look at each other's work — new stories or poems — we say, 'No, you didn't get that one quite to Coleman's.' Or when a thing's good, 'By golly, you really got that one all the way to Coleman's!'"

We laugh, and in this moment Ray's hunger has been turned to merriment and metaphor. His anxiety to eat on time is very real, physical, a residue from his long years on the bottle. He hasn't had a drink in a decade, and for most of that time, it turns out, he's been living
with Tess, a strong-willed poet with some hard luck and sound success of her own.

Late one afternoon, as we drive in their big Mercedes and Ray lights another Now 100, we talk about smoking and the things you shouldn't do, and Tess, cracking a rear window, letting in damp Pacific air, says lightly to Ray, "God has given you to me to take care of." Outside, it's what Tess calls the blue hour. The Olympic Mountains in evergreen and melting snow, the Strait of Juan de Fuca reaching twenty-two miles to Victoria's urban shore, the town of Port Angeles beneath us, are shades of deep watercolor blue. The towns near Port Angeles are Sequim, Sol Duc, Discovery Bay, Forks, Sappho, Gardiner. There is woodsmoke in the air, and the sound of chainsaws and foghorns.

Ray snuffs his cigarette, and we cruise down toward Port Angeles, the small mill town where Tess was raised and where she and Ray now spend most of each year, a place remarkably like Yakima, where Ray grew up in the forties and early fifties.

Ray Carver’s checkered life story is familiar to the small world that pays close attention to who's who in American writing. His spare short-story masterpieces about hapless characters in straitened circumstances have influenced a generation of younger writers and prompted what some have called a short-story renaissance in this country. He is greatly recognized in England, Holland, Germany, France, Denmark, and Japan, where his story collection Cathedral is a best-seller. His papers are of increasing value to libraries and collectors, and there are perhaps a few thousand fans — professional literati — who could tell you that Ray met his ex-wife, Maryann, when he was sixteen and she was fourteen and that within two years she was pregnant, gave up a scholarship to college, married Ray, and together they began a life of reckless hope.

Tess Gallagher has not met Maryann, though in Port Angeles Tess and Ray are not far from the town where Maryann lives on a parcel of land with Ray and Maryann's daughter, Christine, her two daughters, and Christine's come-and-go biker husband, Shiloh. Tess, whose style inclines to passionate contrasts — blacks and whites, deep wine reds, purples — whose long dark hair, often twisted up with pearled combs or tortoiseshell sticks, and fair complexion remind me of the Kabuki masks
she collects, tells me plainly what she has heard about Ray's marriage: "People who knew them then say they lived from dream to dream, each new dream as good as the next, a real possibility, while the present grew worse and worse, horrible in fact."

Tess's information is accurate, from family and old friends who knew Ray as the son of a drunken mill hand in Yakima, and knew him later as a janitor who wanted to be a writer. But her facts could have come from reading Ray's fiction. "Drinking's funny," Ray wrote in a story called "Gazebo." "When I look back on it, all of our important decisions have been figured out when we were drinking. Even when we talked about having to cut back on our drinking, we'd be sitting at the kitchen table or out at the picnic table with a six-pack or whiskey."

In 1976, when Carver's first book of stories came out and was a finalist for a National Book Award, he was pushing forty, nearing the breakup of a twenty-year marriage. His son and daughter were almost grown but by no means settled or happy, his working life had been a series of mostly menial jobs, with time stolen for writing (often in the front seat of a parked car), and he had given himself up to serious drinking. To his credit, he'd published three books of poems, contributed a story to Martha Foley's *Best American Short Stories* annual, attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop, published in big monthly and little quarterly magazines, received the encouragement of John Gardner and Gordon Lish. Yet his health was dissolving and he didn't care if he ever wrote again. He spent most of 1976 in and out of hospitals and drunk farms.

Tess first saw Ray in November 1977 in Dallas, where both were feature attractions at a writing conference and Ray gave a reading of a short story about one of his bankruptcies. Tess remembers his shakiness on stage, and she wondered "how he could do it, hold himself together. He seemed so fragile." Carver had quit drinking five months earlier.

The following year they met again by chance at a writers' conference in El Paso. Carver had won a teaching job there and was just coming down from Iowa City, which he left driving his son Vance's cast-off Olds. The car died in Van Horn, Texas, and Carver arrived in El Paso on a Greyhound, carrying in his arms a single cardboard case of belongings.

In El Paso, Tess and Ray started going out with a gang of friends. They
crossed the border into Mexico for a bullfight; they went to faculty parties, to a Texas poolside barbecue; and one night they went out together alone. Tess was nervous, fiddling with an earring, so nervous she pulled the ring through her lobe and then covered her ear with her hand as if fixing her hair. Finally she said, "I think I have to go to the hospital."

At the emergency room, while they worked on Tess's ear, they accused Ray of abusing her. Tess says: "When we drove away from the hospital, his line to me was 'I can't just let you go home after this.'"

They went to Ray's, where, Tess tells me, there was a bed with sofa cushions for pillows, and for pillowcases white T-shirts pulled over the cushions. "Do you know what he said?" Tess laughs. "He said, 'I'm a forty-year-old without a pillow.'"

Five years younger than Ray, Tess had already published two books of lyric poetry that drew on the voices of family and friends in the Pacific Northwest. She'd won a Guggenheim Fellowship and was living in an unheated cabin near Port Angeles, and she and Ray began writing each other and placing long late-night calls and visiting back and forth, until Tess moved to El Paso.

Ray describes El Paso folk as people with two of everything and more than willing to lend housewares and furniture. Tess remembers Ray pulling up to their new home with a borrowed antique dresser on the back of a rented truck. One of the drawers had fallen out on the road somewhere. Ray hunched his big shoulders, frowned, and said, "I don't know where it went! We won't find it now." Tess sent him to look. And when he found it miles back on the highway, she glued and patched it together. She told him: "You have a lot of bad luck, don't you? That's going to have to change if you're going to be around me. I don't want to be around that much bad luck."

Bill collectors were circling Ray. "The gasman came around one day," Tess says, "and I opened the door and said, 'May I help you?'"

"'I'm here to cut off the gas.'"

"'But I need gas.'"
"It wasn't that there wasn't any money then," Ray says. "It was that I still wasn't any good at taking care of things."

"That's when I took over all that stuff."

"I'm not very good at details."

"But you take on a lot of detail work now."

"Yes, that's true."

But money was a problem in El Paso. Their first bad fight was over a credit card Ray wanted to borrow to take to Houston. "A reformed alcoholic with two bankruptcies!" Tess says. The argument ended with Tess tossing the card on the bed. "Take it!" she said. And now, in the retelling of this small domestic tale, there rises between them laughter, the mirth that is so much the sound of their voices. Sometimes, too, a look passes between them, a gleam of competition over who will use the material first and who will write it best.

It is late. We are drinking small, strong coffees from an espresso machine they've just bought. Ray finishes, gets up, and stokes the woodstove for the night. He's a little restless and does not look or move at all like a man who almost died from booze. He clears our cups and saucers to the sink, and at the counter switches on the playback of a telephone-answering machine: a British magazine publisher who calls every day asking if Ray won't please send him a story; an old poet friend of Tess's calling from New England to say hi; Tess's sister-in-law about dinner plans for tomorrow night; an editor asking about a book of essays she's doing with him; one of Ray's relatives, who doesn't leave a clear message but likely needs help of some kind; Tess's brother Morris, who says he treed a bobcat this morning but couldn't get a shot — an entire day and a half of connections, in a world that gives life to art.

Ray shuts off the playback and takes the phone off the hook. Next morning we plan to rise at four and go fishing for steelhead trout. But the rivers are muddy and swollen with rain, and we drive back home at sunrise, the long swift caravans of logging trucks blowing past us. The classic 1950s and '60s cars and trucks on the road look picturesque, but are a matter of economy. Vietnam vets have moved here from all over
the country, and Tess tells me, "This is a good place to come to heal."

After El Paso, Ray and Tess moved to Tucson, where Tess had a teaching appointment at the University of Arizona. That was 1979, and Ray had been given a Guggenheim Fellowship to spend a year on his fiction. Tess would often go off and write, sitting on a park bench. But Ray was not writing. He says, "After I got my health back, I didn't care about the writing. Every day was a bonus. Still is."

Tess says, "I didn't know if he would ever write again, and in one way it didn't matter, but in another it really did. One day I said to him, 'Why don't you write me something good to read.' Well, he started, and then an essay I was working on, 'My Father's Love Letters,' got him going to write 'Fires.'"

In "Fires," Ray recalled his life with Maryann and the children: "There were good times back there, of course; certain grown-up pleasures and satisfactions that only parents have access to. But I'd take poison before I'd go through that time again.... My kids were in full cry then ... and they were eating me alive." What am I to make of this? Ray wondered. The obvious answer is art. Tess, in her own essay, had considered the terrible effect of her father's drinking: "Unreasonableness could descend at any minute.... Emotional and physical vulnerability was a constant. Yet the heart began to take shelter, to build understandings out of words."

Tess is twice divorced, once from a Marine Corps jet pilot ("a sweet man, he forgave me my defection") and later from a poet whose poems she had fallen in love with. She brought the poet to Port Angeles to live in a trailer next to her parents' house, and one night after his shouting and abuse brought her father out and then her mother to restrain her father, Tess said she and her husband would leave. Her mother said, "No, your father's just drunk. But I don't understand why you're with that man — he's drunk and crazy. But you've made your bed, you'll have to lie in it."

Tess, speaking her mother's old cautions about life and men, echoes the bitterness and pride bred in families like hers and Ray's. During the Depression, Tess's father came to the Olympic Peninsula from Missouri, and Ray's father from Arkansas. They took up logging work, sent for
their relatives, married, and started families. Tess's father had the one pair of cork boots the family could afford. So, in street shoes, her mother set the choker that drags felled trees toward the truck for loading. The five children played to one side, and danger was a constant. Tess, who went without shoes until first grade, tore her foot on a piece of glass in the woods one day. Carver, hearing the story for the first time, perceives immediately, "Your father felt you had betrayed him, lost him a day's work."

"Oh yes! He wrapped a dirty cloth around my foot and drove me to the hospital, but didn't say a word all the way in."

Ray tells of being ashamed of the poverty of the house he grew up in. He recalls the night his mother locked his father out, and when he came home drunk and tried to crawl through a window, she knocked him cold with a heavy skillet. He lay out on the ground till morning.

The fathers drank, and heavy burdens fell on the wives and children. In the end they would nurse the dying fathers, but long before that Ray and Tess worked to get away, to find and earn an education.

Tess's father wouldn't help with college. It would be a waste, he said. She was oversexed and would just run off and marry. And Ray was always baited about school: What are these books? Didn't make you any smarter, did it? Didn't make you any richer.

Earlier this year Tess turned down $20,000 for a month's teaching because she wanted to keep on with her writing. Since 1983 Ray has held the Mildred and Harold Strauss Livings Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, which provides $35,000 a year for five years. This fall Ray's fourth book of poems, Ultramarine, and Tess's first short-story collection, The Lover of Horses, will bring to ten the number of books they've published over the past three years. Ray, who drafts his stories quickly, set an example for Tess in the composition of The Lover of Horses, and Tess, in wanting to get "all the way to Coleman's," encouraged the full, luminous endings of newer Carver stories like "Feathers" and "Cathedral."

In Port Angeles they share two houses. The one overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca was built with money Tess earned from her poetry.
The other, across town on the bad side of Port Angeles, in what his readers would clearly recognize as Carver country, with its junk-ridden side yards and cars raised on cinder blocks, he paid for himself. Each house has two desks. Tess says, "I don't go into his study much at all, don't presume to. Only another writer can understand a writer's need for solitude." I ask if they ever think of marriage. "Oh yeah," Tess says, "we've talked about that. Sometimes we think we'll marry on a ship going to some strange place. Sometimes we think it's the unofficialness that makes it."

On a spring Saturday so bright and clear that from a great distance we can pick out with bare eyes bald eagles roosting on their nests high in fir trees on the shore, we finally do go fishing, not for river steelhead but out on the strait for salmon. A Nakamura freighter loaded with wood sends us bobbing in its wake as it leaves port for Japan. "Look out," Ray says. But Tess has already grabbed the rod. "It's a big one! Is it a big one?" Ray shouts. He and I move in to help, but Tess, who has fished the strait all her life, reels it in, a fifteen-pounder. They're both laughing, and Ray gives her a big hug.

It's early Sunday afternoon, and in a couple of hours Ray and Tess will give a reading at the Port Angeles library. Ray will read an essay about his father, then Tess will read a story about a father something like her own. But now it's still early and Tess plays Chopin on the piano, plays and practices while Ray reads and smokes. Over in Yakima, the house where his mother crowned his father with a skillet has partly burned and weeds have grown up inside. And down near the mills of Port Angeles, where her father walked to work in the years after he left the woods, the yard of Tess's first home is more dirt than grass, the window of her room hung with a child's patchwork quilt. Tess plays Chopin with quick emotion, Ray smokes and reads, and the house on the bad side of town fills with the wordless sound that lies beneath their best work, and it occurs to me that it might be too much to expect Ray to give up smoking too, that Tess's father died not long ago of lung cancer, that she hates it and has been good in not saying much about it — at least not in front of me — and that Ray may someday give it up. Yet Tess does not take nor would she deserve credit for his change. What's true, I think, is that together they've been happy and faithful and cautious of all that's ill. One feels between them an accumulation of gentleness and strength, a concert of energies. They seem joined by fate, and careful of
it.

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