

The Kissing Boy

Lee could see only the backs of their two heads, but that was a compelling enough sight in itself. The mother had such a nice way of bending her ear to her young daughter. And they both wore the same type of parka--which might normally have struck him as a little too precious but in their case merely underscored the intimacy the two seemed to share.

He was content at first just to observe them from the back of the bus, but as they lurched along beside the brick row houses of Boston's South End, the loose yellow hair of the two women swung together and an unabashed sense of sentiment began to well up within him, a kind of feeling he vaguely associated with having turned thirty-five. The feeling continued to grip him, growing, though its origin remained unidentified, and when the women suddenly stood up to leave it converted to a kind of panic. He might never see them again! Now he could see that they also wore similar black chinos.

He watched them get off, and then, although several blocks short of his stop, he leapt up and thrust himself clumsily through the rubber lips of the closing doors. Mother and daughter were ambling slowly up the street. He'd meant only to follow them, but they walked so slowly that his matched pace had to look suspicious. He soon found himself alongside them and still helpless to avoid observing them. All the while he marveled that he could be so drawn by the mere demeanor of these two, his impression of the quality of their relating, and not be motivated at all by the mother's face. As he could now see, it was pleasant enough. He received an impression of Scandinavian descent--a wide, tallow-colored face with a wide mouth. The corners of the mouth pushed up under slightly prominent cheekbones which, in turn, pushed up under eyes that were also wide. Stretched an inch longer, the face could have been more than just attractive. Looking across from mother to daughter, Lee encountered a face more difficult to gauge, caught as it was in the midst of certain pubescent alterations. All big teeth and uncertainly distributed tissues. The daughter's blue eyes, somewhat pale, finally regarded him, and then swung up questioningly to mother's. Those particular eyes were much darker, gunmetal blue, and Lee found

himself suddenly fixed by them. He decided to speak, but as he opened his mouth the eyes flitted away. Of course, he was alarming them.

"I just saw you two on the bus," he announced cheerfully, "and I thought you looked so nice together."

As engaging as he imagined his tone to be, the woman was still surprised to be addressed by a stranger. Her feelings were manifested by a nearly imperceptible stiffening--a slightly tighter grip on her handbag, a stutter in her step which, at the same time, brought her slightly closer to her daughter. In the next instant, her eyes came around to study him briefly. He could see her taking in his expensive tie and topcoat, the three tubes of drawings that he'd just shown a client.

"Well, thank you," she said, guardedly. "It's nice of you to say so."

"I live in this neighborhood," Lee added hastily. "Pembroke Street." This information was meant to convey the possibility that they were all as good as neighbors, but the mother didn't fall in with the implied chumminess.

The mother slowed a little, which had the effect of blocking her daughter from him. "I'm sorry, but do we know you?"

"No, oh no. This is crazy, I know, but I was just intrigued by you two. I..." but Lee stopped speaking. His statements came out of no reasonable context. He concluded that he should exit as gracefully and as quickly as possible. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. I meant no harm, I was just curious, and now I'll be moving along."

At that moment the daughter looked around in front of her mother and said quietly, "I think he wants to ask you out for dinner or something."

The two adults regarded the child, and then the mother looked up at Lee, who was still regarding the child. He was trying to figure out if she had read something in his mind that he hadn't been aware of.

To no one in particular, the mother said, "Is that what this is?"

"Well, I'm not sure myself," said Lee, "but it certainly could be."

He was forced to speechlessly search for words until the mother said, "We're going to Charlie's for a waffle or two. It's a Friday tradition. You could join us if you like."

Many hours later he would piece together that the mother's forthright tone and the way she had stepped in front of her daughter had initially thrown him. He had been thrilled to the point of distraction by these indications of strength. But luckily she and her daughter had taken up the slack and soon after the three of them were sharing a table at Charlie's Sandwich Shoppe.

The conversation was easy. The mother's name, he learned, was Gwen, her daughter's was Maddy, for Madelaine. Lee's name was Lee. Gwen, a divorcee he gradually inferred, lived alone with Maddy on Waltham Street. Lee, never married, was a self-employed architect who lived in his studio on Pembroke Street. Gwen was a supervisor of an office support pool at the big Veritek headquarters on the waterfront and had hopes of soon getting into a training slot for something better. Maddy was in school, of course, and Gwen was worried that she might be moved to another school because of a new redistricting program.

"I wouldn't worry," said Lee. "There'll probably be some sort of grandparent that'll allow her to stay where she is."

"I'd be glad for that."

Because Lee had never been a parent, he hadn't given the redistricting news more than a moment's thought. On reflex he assumed it would be a good idea because it was new. But of course parents would be concerned about a number of things. "A lot of people thought bussing was a great idea at first," he offered.

"I think the new choices make more sense, but I finally got Maddy into a good school and now they might reassign her. I don't know how I would afford a private school."

"I can see the problem," said Lee, but what he was thinking was that too much intimacy was springing up. He rifled through the possible motives for his wanting this encounter, and concluded that if, as Maddy put it, he wanted to take out Gwen then it was also his intention to have Maddy along. What he really wanted was to see how they lived, how they interacted, if they liked each other's company. It was beginning to seem too much like a pickup.

When their outing began to wind down, he suggested that all three of them go out for dinner some time. Gwen said, "It seems like a nice idea, but I should warn you

that Maddy and I are something of homebodies." She turned to her daughter. "What do you think, Maddy?"

Maddy thought it might be nice if they had Lee over for dinner at their place instead. Gwen agreed. "Yes, wouldn't that be a good solution!," and the two women smiled at him with such enthusiasm that Lee let all of his options slam closed like the roller doors on a line of shops. He had envisioned dinner together more as a verbal questionnaire. Now he'd be sitting in their parlor. Too much too soon for him. Still, they parted on that.

The night of the planned dinner arrived and Lee, with a situation looming for which he could formulate no useful definition, found the simplest decisions very complicated. Should he wear coat and tie, or just slide in as Mr. Casual? Bring wine? A doll or something for Maddy? Flowers, candy, nothing but himself? He finally concluded that Gwen and Maddy wouldn't be expecting anything more than a friendly evening. They would cook a dinner and he would eat it and they would talk and that would be Stage Two or Stage Last. Right? Right. He put on an open collar shirt, a red sweater, and black Levis. He also bought a small bouquet of yellow sweetheart roses for Maddy and a few yellow long stems for Gwen, and he would make a nice little comment about his color choices when he arrived.

They lived in a row house apartment like most other people on Waltham Street. He liked the fact that Gwen came down to let him in at the front door rather than merely buzz him up. But he didn't much like the slightly girlish way she ducked her head after she let him in. He read it as, "Well, here we are, beginning our crazy bold adventure." But as quickly she threw up an arm and said, "Come on up!" and dropped back to allow him to ascend the stairs before her. She even pushed on the small of his back to get him started!

Lee looked up and saw Maddy looking down from the banister on the top floor. She smiled in the most touchingly fragile way he had ever seen. It was barely there, that smile, just hanging on his reaction to seeing her.

"Hey, Maddy!"

Her spotless underwear was visible beneath her plaid skirt, so he looked away.

"Hi." She made a small nervous laugh.

"I'm glad your underpants are so clean, Maddy," said Gwen behind him.

"Oops." The girl quickly stuck her bottom back. When they reached the apartment she was there to handle the door.

"Hi," she said again as Lee approached.

"Something smells good."

Maddy released the doorknob, then turned back to it uncertainly as if she were responsible for the door's closing, and then abandoned the conflict and seized Lee's forearm. "Come look!" She began to run away with his arm.

"Wait. Me first." With the roses clutched against his chest, he rolled his captured arm around Maddy's so that he could grip her by the back of the neck. He had meant this only to stop her, but he was surprised by how pleasantly her thin neck fit into his grip, almost indecently so. Her soft yellow ponytail flopped across his wrist. She stiffened a little in surprise so he released her.

"Lee's brought something for us," Gwen explained. She stood beside him with arms folded--as if she were accustomed to the two of them standing this way before Maddy.

"Oh, flowers, let me see!" Maddy's hands came up and pulled down the edges of the green floral tissue. "The smaller ones are for me, I know." Lee handed a bouquet to each of them.

"They're wonderful," said Gwen, and then: "Hey, you're looking pretty sharp, I have to say." She placed a hand easily on his shoulder and pushed a little so as to appraise him at arm's length.

"It's all carefully planned. You two were wearing red and black when we all met, so I'm wearing the same colors in honor of the event. And the yellow roses are for the color of your hair."

This gesture was a great success. Maddy said, "Heyyyy, that's neat. Isn't that neat, Mom?"

"More than."

"We've got flowers for you too!" Maddy dropped her bouquet like a rag doll on the kitchen table and grabbed a red carnation from the vase in the center.

Lee took it from her. "But my hair is brown."

"I know. It's for your eyes."

It was a joke, but he was so beguiled by it that he caught himself simply wondering at it instead of reacting. Maddy, he noticed, was looking embarrassed by his lack of response. It was too late but he managed a positive appraisal. "Heyyy, that's neat."

"Maddy's quite smart," said Gwen. "And a good friend." She then took a step, swung around between him and Maddy in a maneuver that Lee instantly understood. Before, the adults had been placed conspicuously in front of the child. Now they were a triangle, more equal. Better.

"Come sit."

"I'm supposed to see the food."

"You can see it from where you sit."

He was glad to find himself deposited at the kitchen table, and that it was there that they would eat. The small place didn't have a dining room, but the kitchen was large enough to use for eating. Though he hadn't been given the usual tour, he'd seen enough South End row houses to know how renovators subdivided to squeeze in more rental space. From where he sat, he could see at least one newer partition, its perfect drywall flatness affronting the elegant whorl of the original plaster walls. He doubted whether he would find any of the small, intimate hallways and certainly none of the linen closets and pantries that had existed at one time. The scoured layout depressed him a little, and tugged him towards reactions he felt he shouldn't have; he found himself disliking the type of appointments Gwen had chosen, the framed copies of predictable paintings, the second-rate ceramics. He began to see the color choices as surly--bright this and bright that--which he lumped in with the expressionistic bent of modern women. He didn't like most of it, but at bottom he knew could at least understand or tolerate it. It would require some effort. For the moment, his disliking seemed silly because, surprise!, he felt so wonderfully comfortable.

"We're doing pasta with vegetables," said Gwen. Her and Maddy's backs were to him, the two of them conferring over a pot of something that smelled delicious.

"We're trying to get off meat."

"Me too."

"Would you like a drink?"

"Sure."

Gwen turned half towards him--that curious fixedness of her neck again. "Your choices are red wine, tequila, or vermouth."

Maddy turned around too, probably so that they could both laugh at his expression. Gwen said, "Our whole stock is comprised of gifts. We don't ever seem to buy any liquor."

"Do you have both sweet and dry vermouth?"

"Yes, in fact."

"Okay. Half sweet, half dry vermouth--on ice, with a twist of lemon."

"I'll make it!" cried Maddy.

But Gwen was frowning. "I don't think we have any lemons."

Her daughter slowed to a full stop and the two women stood and considered this new development.

"Do you have any lemon juice?" He didn't care for it, but it might serve to palliate the situation.

Gwen leaned back against the stove and bit a nail. "No, none of that either."

Now the two women appeared even more concerned.

"Look at those faces," said Lee. "I'm getting out of here. You call this place a restaurant?" He rose as if to go. "No lemon? Come on!"

He'd gotten them both laughing. He kept up teasing Maddy while she made the drink. When she spilled a little, he said, "Just in the glass, please." When she started to put the vermouth in the refrigerator instead of the cupboard, he said, "That's right. Now put the ice cubes in the bread box."

"Don't." She shook with helpless giggling. "You're mean."

"I know," said Gwen. "Isn't he terrible?"

Dinner was just fine. Hearty and palatable. Gwen went at the food right along with him, matching his bachelor eating habits. It gave him a little thrill to see her eat with such relish, as if it pointed to other and more exciting appetites. Conversation moved along tried-and-true lines: school, neighborhood, work. After dessert, Maddy exclaimed, "Let's do a puzzle!"

"A puzzle?"

"We're trying to do less TV," Gwen explained.

Maddy's eyes grew wide. "Did you see our model ship? We made one. It's in here." She was up, leading him around the corner into the living room before he could put down his napkin. "There," she said, pointing.

The thing stopped him dead on the rug. It was set in an alcove that appeared to have been made for it, a model clipper ship about eighteen inches long. He walked up to it as if approaching the sacristy of an old cathedral. The ship, under closer inspection, revealed very minute details of rigging, spar, and sail--tiny ropes, rows of little belaying pins along the rail, little metal pulleys. He hung over it like a kid at a hobby shop window.

"You did this?" He was answered with pleased laughter from both of them. He could see that they had done a good job--little mistakes here and there, too much glue or some inaccuracies in painting, but all in all a very laudable job of model ship building.

"It took us months," said Gwen wearily.

"I love it."

"There was a point when we hated it. My cousin built the alcove for it."

"I love it."

Back at the table, Maddy interrupted Gwen about the puzzles, but Gwen cut her off. "I'll explain it, Maddy."

"Sorry, Mom."

Gwen poured the puzzle pieces out onto the cleared table and they all began to turn pieces face up. "We started with puzzles that were mostly comprised of a single thing, like a church or a bridge. But we got tired of those, we weren't concentrating so much on shapes and colors as parts."

"We switched to landscapes," Maddy neatly slipped in.

"Landscapes. With small details and pieces." Gwen hesitated, smiling. "We like them. You end up placing pieces of color or texture together, and the whole landscape slowly explodes into something." She shaped it with her hands, hands with that beeswax pallor that would darken to gold in the coming summer.

"How metaphysical," said Lee.

While actually doing the puzzle, they pressed him hard. Both of them--Maddy more than Gwen, of course--seemed to want a quick affirmation of their theory of higher puzzle-making, but Lee quietly stuck to his own guns. He liked to weigh the effect of an experience on himself.

"Isn't this neat?" asked Maddy, for the third time.

He looked across at her. "Yes, it is. But you must give me time, Maddy, to make up my own mind."

Maddy settled back into her chair, a little stung. She looked to her mother. "He's right, huh?"

"Yep."

Later, skipping down the front stairs, two fresh kisses still vaporizing on either cheek, he thought to himself: "Now, aren't you the big man. Taking that kid to task." But as he reviewed the evening during his walk home, he concluded that no harm had been done. On the positive side he believed himself to have been in the company of two bright, capable people earnestly applying some attractive beliefs. It did nag him, though, that Gwen had used "comprised," twice, and incorrectly. Picked up from a staff seminar at work, looked up when she got home? And the we-do-this and we-do-that. And that close coziness, good or bad? He would like to see them again, sometime.

For the past few months Lee had been sleeping with a twenty-two year old graduate student who had come his way through a college co-operative education program. She had been part of a three-person team that he'd assembled for a bigger job, then stayed on to finish out her term after the job had been completed. With the two of them alone in the office, she had gotten dreamier-eyed by the day. He was older, accomplished, single. She was young, needy, a little ditzy actually. At some level he always knew he was playing from both ends, striking just that perfect pose which appeared to be cool, distant, and respectful but with just the right dash of extra attentiveness and feigned vulnerability to keep her hooked. When it finally

"happened," and right there in his studio, he'd let his eyes drop closed at the first kiss as if he were surrendering to forces beyond his control. What made the whole thing workable was the end date of her co-op assignment. Sometimes she would arrive with a slightly anticipatory smile, delightedly set to work recasting floor plans, then make some tea and chat it up and, gradually, ease into it. Other times she would arrive with a tense demeanor, apologetic, which would propel her out the door early. Lately, she'd started to mutter about the pointlessness of it all, and he'd have to grapple with her mood using the best arguments he could muster about spontaneity and the inherent purity of desire. Other times he just said, "Hmm."

He didn't want to examine it all too deeply. Lurking in the penumbra of conclusions that he left conveniently unreached was the suspicion that he would remain unmarried, unattached. He had certain work habits, a semi-habitual cast to his activities. It might be that affairs with driven psychologists, lonely gallery owners, and compliant co-op students would do for him. Maddy and Gwen had drawn him somehow, but he was certainly in no hurry to say goodbye to bedmates and to settle down to childrearing and household budgets. For those reasons and others he did not allow himself to drift towards the apartment on Waltham Street. He would let chance or Gwen decide the next step.

Chance *and* Gwen decided. Some weeks later he was walking back from the post office when a red Toyota sedan pulled up alongside him. Maddy was leaning out the window, her long bangs loose across one eye.

"Hi, Lee!" Gwen was smiling at him from across the seat.

He felt genuinely glad to see them. They were both playing hooky, they announced, exploiting Maddy's sniffles to head out to a fresh produce market near Concord. They asked if he wanted to go along. Gwen explained that it was the first good produce of the spring, or so she'd heard from a friend out there. "Besides, it's such a nice day for a ride."

The co-op student was due shortly. She had a key, and things to do. "Well, here I am getting in," he announced.

He sat in the back and texted a quick message to the student as they drove off together. He felt free, even giggly. The roads were clearer at this early afternoon hour

and the weather was beautiful, full of clouds and sudden fresh gusts of wind. Lee gave himself over completely to the exhilarating sense of truancy that accompanied his ducking work like this, free-lance or otherwise. Gwen kept smiling as she drove, hands at ten and two o'clock with driving school exaction. She listened closely as Lee chatted about his design work on the Tufts library.

When they reached the old historic town of Concord, Lee launched into a nonsense tour of the area. "And here, Madelaine," he said, pointing to a famous tavern, "is where Paul Revere stopped to use the bathroom on his famous ride."

"God," said Gwen.

"No, I'm sure it was Paul Revere."

"Bad. Very bad."

"It's for the child, Gwen. She must develop a sense of history."

"Where did his horse pee?" Maddy asked.

"Maddy!"

Lee laughed out loud. "Right by that tree over there."

"They didn't have sewers then," said Gwen.

"Right, but after the horse peed they felt the need to put some in. It was a very long ride."

A moment later he pointed to a beauty salon. "George Washington had his wig powdered there."

"Please stop," said Maddy.

The vegetable market turned out to be a great place, and Lee stocked up right along with them. There were lettuces and sugar peas and scallions, and a broad choice of seedling flats which Gwen picked through for a narrow bed in their backyard. After the shopping he convinced them to stop at that famous tavern for a drink. Maddy was given something with a cherry in it. Still in the throes of his truancy mood, Lee continued to have great fun egging Maddy on, at mild expense to Gwen. They both blew bubbles with their straws (he had ordered a rum and coke) and ended by throwing their drink garnishes at one another.

"All right, you two," said Gwen.

"Is she always like this?" he asked Maddy.

"Yes." Maddy quietly stared down at her drink. "I'm afraid she's becoming quite a problem."

Gwen let a begrudging laugh slip out and reached over to give Maddy's head a push. Lee at last entertained the thought that Gwen's intermittent pose of severity might be the real thing. When Maddy left to use the bathroom, he reached across the table and took Gwen's wrist, which was looped around her glass of white wine.

"So serious."

She smiled wanly. "I'm just tired."

They sat in silence for a few more seconds, and then Gwen suddenly shook her head, throwing her hair across her face. She cleared it away with her hands, and then left the fingers of one hand beside her brow. "No," she said, firmly. "I'll be honest with you. I find that I'm beginning to like you, and for some reason I just can't be myself anymore when I get to that point."

"Well, that was honest."

"Yep. But it's no big thing."

They sat quietly once again. "Oh, by the way," she said. "We got your thank you note for the dinner. It was really nice."

"It was a really nice dinner."

Outside on the walk, when Maddy ran ahead to the car, Gwen held back a little. "What I said in there, that was for what you might call my own emotional convenience. It doesn't require anything from you. I don't want you to worry."

"I'm not worried, Gwen." He was looking at the walk before him, but those gunmetal eyes were on him and probably raking the side of his face for the slightest tremor of insincerity or feeling.

All the way home he blessed Maddy's unending chatter, and hated himself at every blessing. Clearly, Gwen's admission in the tavern had done little to relieve her, she sat so quietly behind the wheel.

Some time passed before he saw them again. And with something akin to regret, he monitored the progress of a very familiar process within him. Now that Gwen

seemed to want to get closer, his natural inclinations lined up against that. He saw her in a self-flattering light--doing puzzles with Maddy while secretly pining for him--which was at the same time unflattering to her. He tried to give solid weight to the real strengths he had noticed in her; she didn't play games, she was direct, she certainly had courage, and she was very resourceful in her way. But with a kind of resigned amusement he noted too how these observations sifted to a lower stratum of importance. It was more convenient to see her behavior as a little desperate. With less amusement he found time passing and him doing nothing. He was letting chance or the woman decide for him again.

This time chance alone decided first, or rather provided an opportunity for a seemingly natural encounter. He was passing Waltham Street on a fine Saturday, the best yet of the spring, and found a street fair in progress. There was little doubt that Gwen and Maddy would be somewhere on the street. He plunged in, wandering from table to table for a while, and then he noticed a woman staring at him. This woman turned out to be Gwen. She had been watching him for some time, it seemed, waiting with a smile for him to recognize her. The reason he had not at first was because her face, as well as Maddy's beside her, was completely made up in theatrical grease paints. The three of them burst out laughing when Lee finally grasped the situation. He came forward with open arms to the table covered pots and tubes of paint, construction paper, scissors, brushes, glue-sticks, yarn, mirrors.

She raised her stained hands. "I'm afraid I can only kiss you." She leaned across the table and pressed her wide mouth briefly against his. He was smiling so much himself that their teeth clicked together lightly. Her direct gesture of greeting threw him into a tizzy all over again. She was just not a weak creature. The fact pushed all his snug conclusions into the sorting room again.

"It's been too long," he heard himself say.

Maddy piped up. "I'll say. We thought you were on vacation or something." She stood expectantly behind the long table, her hands crossed at the wrists upon it as if she did not know what to do with them. Lee reached down and took up those hands. He squeezed them together in his and then brought them to his lips. They were small and pale, fresh as flowers despite the little dabs of stain across them.

"How *are* you, Maddy?"

"Oh, fine." She retrieved her hands and immediately asked brightly, "Want your face done?"

He looked from one to the other of them and shrugged. "Why not?"

"Okay, then come back here and sit down." She indicated a chair behind her and he came around obediently and sat down. Gwen and Maddy arranged themselves on stools before him. At first neither of the two women said anything but simply stared at his face. He began to feel self-conscious.

"What's the matter?"

"We're determining a plan of attack," said Gwen.

"Oh."

After a few more seconds, Maddy said, "His eyes are pretty small."

"Thanks."

"And very green," said Gwen.

Maddy rummaged through the paints until she came up with a tube. "This?"

Gwen went "Hmmm."

"This? It's darker."

"Better. You do the eyes--I think very large egg-shapes, don't you?--and I'll work on the mouth."

But neither of them set to work on those parts first. Instead, they began to smear white cream all over his face, except for around his eyes and lips.

"We'll silver up the sideburns," said Gwen.

It was really quite nice to sit there and have those four soft hands crawling over his face. And those intent stares, which in effect bestowed such importance on his physiognomy. A short while later, while Gwen was running a big banana smear around his mouth and Maddy busy around his eyes, he felt the presence of onlookers. He turned slightly and discovered a number of fairgoers assembled before the table. Other faces in the traveling stream were also watching at points. Everyone looked very interested and most were smiling a little.

"Let me take a peek."

"Against the rules," said Gwen.

They continued to work on him for about twenty minutes, gradually becoming even more intent. Maddy worked and worked along his eyebrows with dark pencil, and Gwen dabbed delicately along his lips for the longest time. He could study their faces to his heart's content, reading their expressions of frustration and satisfaction through the make-up on their faces. It was very poignant to him how with such careful pressure Maddy pressed her fingers to his face. Gwen went about it as if she were doing a paper mache head.

They ended with his hair. They wet it, parted it exactly in the middle, fluffed out the sides, and then sprayed here and there while masking other parts of his head with pieces of cardboard. At last they sat back with smiles.

"Perfect," said Gwen.

Maddy handed him a hand mirror. "Here you go, Lee."

He looked and exclaimed immediately, "My God!" Laughter broke from everyone around the table, surprising him. He took little notice of it, however, because he was so transfixed by the image that stared back at him from the mirror. His face had been completely transformed. His eyes, set low in dark green ovals, seemed almost to touch. His brows arched aggressively, huge and black, and his sideburns exploded outwards in silver flashes. Gwen had completely reworked his mouth, placing a tiny perfect pucker at the center and disguising the rest with a thin red line. His features were further compacted by a beauty mark placed close to his nose. In total, he looked like a caricature of an outrageous old man trying with all of his might to spit out an olive pit. When he smiled the effect partially dissolved.

"It changes when I smile."

"That's why some clowns don't," said Gwen. "They let their make-up do their talking for them."

Later, when he went for hot dogs all around, he bounced along the street with a light, exhilarated step. He was very happy not to feel self-conscious with a clown's face on at his age. When he returned, the three of them munched their hot dogs in a triangle. Maddy was continually thrilled with the face.

"You look so perfectly awful."

"That puts it perfectly."

He stayed on and watched them do a child's face, then a woman neighbor's, and by then he felt restless to go. When he made a move, Gwen asked him to wait a little longer.

"We're all going to shut down around five, and we've got everything to clean up with at our house."

As it turned out, Lee began to run into people whom he knew (repeatedly surprised that some of them could recognize him) and the time--which turned out to exceed five o'clock by a wide margin--went by fairly quickly. Maddy and Gwen had to drag him away from a potential client. He was enjoying the novelty of negotiating in clown's face.

Upstairs, the three of them stood before the large kitchen sink and removed their make-up together. Lee stripped to the waist and the two women went off and came back bare-shouldered with big bath towels knotted under their arms. They smeared cold cream all over each other cheeks and scraped it off with tissues and cotton balls. Lee found himself cleaning Gwen's face with helpless tenderness. It moved him to have her chin resting in his one hand, her face tilted back with eyes closed and trying to keep her mouth shut against a smile. Her whole face was an emblem of trust. It was all so intimate and innocent at the same time. With his free hand he slowly brought back the tallowy gold of her skin.

When Maddy went to get some face towels, he and Gwen exchanged a glance. His hand rose irresistibly and he brushed along her upper arm with the back of one finger. Her shoulders were the color of white grapes.

"Such beautiful skin." He damped the implicit intimacy with a matter-of-fact tone.

In return, she reached up and stroked his shoulder. "Women call men's skin smooth very often. I think men are usually surprised to learn that."

Her hand was back by the time Maddy returned.

Still later, with Maddy in the shower and Gwen looking skin-bright and glowing in her bathrobe, the two adults shared a drink on the front room couch. He stared at her unrestrainedly and she seemed not to mind it. Then, abruptly, she slouched down and lay her head back, eyes closed.

"Going to take a nap, are we?"

She laughed. "No, no. Just a little nervous."

He regarded her quietly. "And does this nervousness...have anything to do with what we discussed out in Lexington that last time?"

She smiled up at the ceiling. "Uh huh."

"Well, do you know what I'm thinking?"

"I think so, but go ahead anyway."

"All right. I'm thinking that we should become lovers."

He immediately supposed that it might have been better to have simply gathered her into his arms and physically signaled his desire, but he felt the need to keep things on a cooler plane. Something about Maddy, the proximity of the bedrooms, the second-rate ceramics--all of it.

Gwen had not moved. She did open her eyes, finally, and stare up at the ceiling. Finally, she said, simply, "I see."

When she said nothing more he became anxious. "I know I might seem..."

"No, it's fine. Anyway, it was your turn to be honest."

He laughed, gratefully he supposed.

She sat up slowly and swung her gaze his way. "I won't deny, Lee, that I've considered it. We both like you." She stopped as if searching for words, but he suspected that she was allowing the portentous use of "we" to have its effect. It had its effect.

"Are you saying no?"

She looked at him, rolled those fast-fastening eyes upon him. "I think so. It's not you, of course. It's Maddy."

"What, against the rules?"

"I don't want to hide anything from her, carry on behind her back."

"Come on, Gwen."

"No, really. When I touched you back there in the kitchen, I found myself worrying that Maddy might catch me. I don't like that feeling."

"Then why fake? Maddy's a big girl."

The sound of the shower had stopped. "Don't talk so loud. I'm sorry if I'm not explaining it very well--faking wasn't the right word, inauthentic or something would have been better--but I know that it's not right for Maddy and me."

"And what's right for *you*?"

Again she turned those eyes upon him which, even in the falling light of the late spring evening, flashed blue in their metallic intensity. He braced himself inwardly, aware that his cozy challenges would be taken up with the same strength that continued to draw and frighten him at the same time. "I'm thinking of me, you can be sure. But what's right for me is what's right more me *and* Maddy."

He fumed to himself on the way home, regretting he hadn't stayed longer to use some of the decisive arguments that now came to him so easily. The pending reappearance of Maddy had precluded that. What Gwen wanted was good old-fashioned normalcy, the womb, the whole middle class ball of wax. He told himself all this, and furiously inveighed against that mindless legacy of fear that deprived him of that wide mouth and those creamy shoulders.

Fortunately, he had the willing body of the co-op student student to console him. He ravaged it and she ravaged back, God bless her. These episodes were grand, they consoled him, they burst like fireworks and then the hours swept on past them. Though he believed firmly in the temporality of all things, and in fact lived the philosophy personally and professionally (what architect could not?), he preferred that temporality disguised. After a time he could no longer hide it from himself that he was spending most of his conscious hours fretting like a long-suffering, unrequited lover. At odd moments he imagined Gwen sitting about feeling noble, or bent above the sleeping Maddy with a sickly sweet expression of maternal self-sacrifice on her face. He saw all of this, more or less clearly, for what it was. But the seeing did not help much, and after two weeks of flailing in this morass he decided on a move that broke with his tradition of prudent avoidance. He called Gwen.

She came to his studio at the appointed hour, early in fact. When he saw her standing on the stairs through the window of the outside door, his heart began to pound like a schoolboy's in the throes of a crush. He flung open the door, a gesture meant to signify to both of them that he was taking the bull by the horns.

"Come on up," he sang out.

But her way of beginning the little reunion was different. What she said was "Hi, Lee," and what she did was slip up close and kiss him lightly on the cheek. The difference was telling and of a magnitude that he could not handle at the moment. All he could do was ignore the hand that she left resting one moment longer on his side and turn away towards the stairway. But he had to say something more. "Thanks for coming."

Once upstairs he fell onto his drafting stool as if into the arms of an old friend. But she had greeted him, and had kissed him, and thereby further substantiated a suspicion of his that he had been successful in suppressing until then: that she would be more often right than he. Now it was going to be tough. He needed very much to be right about the whole matter, and since he'd avoided thinking it all through from that perspective he was going to have to think on the run. But no quick projections that he could devise led to a satisfactory conclusion. She would remain forgiving, she would *let* him pick and probe--she would, in a word, be Gwen.

"I've been thinking about your arguments," he said. "You know, during the last time we met."

"Me too."

"You have? What have you decided?"

"Nothing, really. Nothing more, that is."

She had not taken the chair which he had earlier indicated. Instead, she was walking around the room, head a little down between her shoulders. She paused at times to study the graphic prints, the framed copies of house plans, the photographs of his most satisfying renovation efforts pinned to areas tiled with cork. She stopped once to take in the whole room, then took a step to the little table beside the windows and touched the stack of perfectly white ceramic saucers that the co-op student kept perfectly clean. Finally, she tipped sideways gently against the window frame and stared at the view of regentrified buildings. She just stayed there, leaning, looking. He had to speak.

"You're just thinking then?"

She turned her head a bit towards him, but continued to look out. The light splashed across one cheekbone, bathed the good mouth, paled the gunmetal blue of her eyes. The hollows of the other side of her face filled with shadow. She could be very lovely.

She finally spoke but still without looking directly at him. "It's beautiful here." A moment later, her eyes swung around, darkening again. "You outclass us, I'm afraid."

"What?" He tried to look shocked.

"It's true. We'd bore you to tears."

"Do you really believe that?" It was a question he'd rather have put to a third party.

The question, his response, seemed to throw her. She appeared to consider it seriously, her face clouding. Perhaps she'd wanted him to disagree. But after a few moments she merely shrugged. With a sigh she turned away from the window and took a chair beside the table. "Do I really believe that," she echoed remotely. "Well, I do. But only when given who you are. Or choose to be."

"Gwen. This is all very enigmatic."

She laughed, but as quickly stopped and shook her head. "Whew. This is hard."

"Why? Why is it hard? And *what's* hard?"

"It's hard to speak when there's no shared vocabulary."

"You think that's the problem?"

"I know that's the problem."

He switched around on his stool with unconcealed irritation. "I'm not even sure what we're talking about."

"Well," she said softly, pausing to think for a moment, "then let me tell you something." She looked at him directly. "I really love sex."

He stared back at her in silence. His lips had become parted and he could not muster the neural signals to get them closed. "Is that supposed to clarify things?"

She nodded. "Yes. It is. Because it's always amazed me that all you men seem to need to try out the body first. And it's funny, but I've learned--and men never seem to--that it's not always the best way to go about it."

"What way? What isn't?"

"You see? It says so much that you have to ask."

"Come on, Gwen. Just carry the ball for a while and I'll try to join in where I can."

He was reaching deep into a place which he suspected he visited infrequently, a place where he stored the strength to be, above all, fair.

"I don't know exactly how to express it to you. I assumed, I guess, that we were both trying to get to the same level of seriousness. And it's causing me a little pain to find that we weren't."

"That's just it! How *did* all this get serious so fast?"

She looked faintly offended by the question. "Roses, touches. Those are pretty traditional ways of, you know, showing a certain kind of intention."

"Oh." He thought back.

"And then that suggestion to become lovers. I'm sorry, but I was sort of plotting things along a line as I was seeing them."

"I see. So you were expecting a proposal that afternoon?"

"Oh no." She laughed a little. "Just a kiss. You know, a real kiss. It would have been the next step--as I wanted it, anyway. And Maddy too, I think. Everyone wants a real father."

Lee recalled Maddy's smile on the stairs the night of the dinner and grasped for the first time part of the nature of its hopefulness. He shook his head. He was feeling more and more hollowed by steady, thumping increments. "This is all too much. It isn't fair. Couldn't you have just liked me or something?"

"I did! But mainly because of what I thought you wanted. I liked you at first, and then when I thought I saw you considering our way of life, Maddy's and mine, I started having hopes. Investing I guess they say these days. You seemed to understand about Maddy and me. And approve."

"Sharing is very big with you," he offered.

"It's the most important thing." She smiled. "Maddy's taught me a lot."

He shifted about in his stool, letting one elbow thump down on his drafting table. "Well, what about my asking you directly to be lovers? Don't I get high marks for that? I wasn't being sneaky at least."

"No, I was grateful for that."

He knew she was being sincere, but at the same time he realized that he was getting high marks in an inferior category only. And he could see where all of this was leading now. If she wanted him in her, their, life before, she no longer did. She had agreed to come merely to explain. Predictably, because he was going to be denied her, she had never seemed more desirable than she did at that moment. It was a pattern he knew very well, and one that he had long ago learned to distrust.

"So what now?" he asked. "You've got all the answers, it seems."

She nodded at him from across the room. After a moment she got up from her chair and started walking towards him. "I guess we say goodbye."

"If that's the way you want it."

She reached where he sat and stood before him. "You know better. You're just being mean now. I can be mean too, it's easy enough."

"I wish you would. I'd like it better than this avalanche of whatever it is."

"Okay." She plunked a hand wearily on his shoulder. "I know about your lover."

He tried not to flinch. "Oh, come on. Now what?"

"You have a guy that does carpentry for you sometimes?" She mentioned a name that Lee knew. "Well, he's my cousin. You know, the one that built the little alcove for our model ship?"

"And he told you that I have a lover."

"Yeah." She cocked her head sideways. "And a young one. It was disappointing, partner, but it fit."

He shrugged. "Well then, Gwen, I guess it *is* goodbye."

It was a very efficient thing to say. It had all the effect of a slap without his raising a hand. And it caught her while she was standing there before him with her hand on his shoulder. He had the dubious satisfaction of seeing her strong eyes instantly soften and hearing the uncertain laugh that broke from her. She did manage to pat his shoulder once more before falling back and saying something in leaving that he could not remember.

But he could not forget her final look, and in the weeks that followed it continued to chill him. He found himself again and again sorting back through the

several small encounters of his relationship with Gwen and Maddy, though he tried hard to let the sorting drag out so that time could have its effect.

In fact, the next time he saw either of them was one of the few times he could remember not thinking about them. He was merely walking down the street when two girls suddenly ran out of a side street before him. He saw with a shock that one of them was Maddy. She did not see him because she and her companion were earnestly calling back to a third girl, heavier and slower, who had just emerged.

As Lee watched, frozen in place, Maddy stopped and cried, "Come on, hurry, or you're gonna get kissed by the kissing boy!"

The lagger hurried up and then a young boy shot past Lee in pursuit of the three girls. He closed quickly, but mainly because the girls had slowed down. They encircled the boy, then squealed and ducked as he dashed after them with his face thrust out in a threatening pucker. The girls were agile at first, so the boy succeeded in landing only a few awkward kisses. But when their evasiveness faltered, when they groaned as if the effort had tired them, the boy appeared confused. Almost as quickly as the game had come up, the girls turned away and ran off.

Lee had instinctively stepped into a shop doorway from where he now watched Maddy until the last moment, the moment when she and her friends rounded a corner and disappeared. Gradually, the boy, now alone and dragging his hand along the shop wall, came up to the doorway where Lee hid.

"Did you get 'em?" Lee said, meaning to put him at his ease.

The boy, perhaps from the surprise at being addressed, only smiled shyly. Then all at once he looked up at the sound of running feet. Maddy and her two friends were back. They were squealing and running in the street before where Lee, with a kind of terror, had pressed back into the doorway.

But there was no escape for him now. Soon she would see him. She would start at the sight of him. She would say something like, "Oh, it's you," and then she would laugh uncertainly, then hold for a moment, confused that she could find no place for him among the people of her world. In the short space during which her gaze held and before she ran off, her child's eyes would lay bare all within him that he labored daily to conceal.