

One***A glow like a candle flame.***

One night, Jane changed everything. She and Victor had been walking to their car after an evening with friends just as they had so many times before. On those earlier occasions, they'd be walking down a street in step with one another, perhaps with newly fallen leaves underfoot, crisp and dry, or still soft and flexible like old paper, or through snow, over the softened reliefs on covered slabs or bricks, or down a bare sidewalk swept by warm breezes, and Jane would be talking, already deep into her analyses of how so-and-so and so-and-so seemed to be getting along, or failing to, or how so-and-so really sounded despite his or her actual words, and he, Victor, would not really be listening, not at first, because he would be wrestling with sadness at the breaking of so many links with those they were leaving behind. As they walked to the two-door Solara that they had bought together so many years before and that still, like an old friend, continued to run for them, he would be aware that he should be listening to her words--because when she spoke word upon word like this, he felt he should honor her urgency or risk her lapsing into one of her poised silences--but the sadness had him in its grip.

Jane's words would pile up, like leaves, like snowflakes, and he would snatch one here and there to hold at the back of his mind as he worried about those people they'd just left, the things he should have thought to say and the things he had promised to do for them, as if his leaving them were leaving them too much on their own. They were still back there, with their triumphs incompletely expressed or their difficulties still unresolved. Gradually, this feeling would give way to the suspicion that these allegiances were trifling, more than half a kind of psychological projection or insecurity, or even unfounded, wholly manufactured by his own needful soul; then, he might begin to admit that the sadness was coming from the two of them. Just as gradually, he would begin to hear Jane's voice more clearly, fasten with greater concentration on each word, and become more aware of everything about her: the sound of her step (with what solid care she brought down

the heel of her winter boots, or how softly her summer sandals slapped), or even the muted music of her long, tiered earrings which peeked occasionally from the layered, blonde mane that she still maintained into her forties. Then, in a moment of quick, hidden ferocity, he'd rifle back through his stored snatches of her earlier statements, reconstructing until he was able to form responses of his own, to answer her and to participate. And then they would be talking, and a new feeling would arise within him, much stronger and more familiar and more comforting, that he was not leaving her behind at the party as he was their friends and acquaintances, but had emerged once again from the teeming grasp of the present into another future, wide and leaf-strewn or snowy or breeze-swept, with this woman, Jane, beside him.

He felt then, at this moment in the pattern that he had isolated months and months later when he was no longer in her daily company, that he'd broken the bank, gotten away with something extraordinary. A thousand forces had plucked at them--symbolized by the din and confusion of some high-stimulation event, or a period marked by unresolved plans on paper, or the stubbornly distant sales targets at his workplace--and yet he'd come away with the one thing he most wanted in that whole hectic smorgasbord, this woman, this sometime intimate and sometime stranger, Jane.

He knew the nature of the sadness then, which he chose to ignore, as he did several other sorts of feelings whenever sensations dutifully presented them again. He appreciated Jane most when others appreciated her, or when their marriage seemed more stable in comparison to the sorrier sorts he noticed all around them, or when he was away from her for a while, even only mentally, as when he talked hard with an acquaintance in a corner over chips and salsa and one or two too many drinks, or found himself involved with another woman. For two decades Jane had asked, in one form or another, to be appreciated for herself when they were alone together. A large part of him had not been able to do that, or perhaps fully understand what that meant. A feeling might prick, as they walked to their car together, that he did not deserve her, that she was deeper, stronger, more selfless than he, and that, therefore, he had, literally, gotten away with something by first

winning and then holding onto her for so long. He might suspect, too, that there remained within her a last layer, a final stratum of mysterious suffering and attendant misgivings that remained untouched, and for their failure to confront and eliminate their causes he must assume partial blame. But with a sigh he would conclude that most importantly they stayed together, a conclusion that he suspected was little more than a collapse of his will before closed doors against whose other sides several painful truths had wedged their boots. Perhaps, before he and she reached their dependable vehicle, he'd find her hand and squeeze it. Before long, he found that he had slipped into a kind of three-dimensional chess game of the heart, a stacking of thought and response in which he knew that he and Jane, side by side in the car's recliner-like bucket seats, were thinking about themselves while thinking about others while thinking about each other. It was an intensity of being, a short-gap burst of emotional intercourse that pulsed throughout the drive home, continued as they entered their home and even later while he watched (delightedly when she'd kept her weight down, and only slightly less so when she occasionally plumped up) as she removed earrings and barrettes and bracelets and rings and watch, then sheaves of clothing, emerging from her slightly exotic panoply of decorations to douse herself quickly in the shower ("to get the smoke out of my hair"--even when almost no one smoked in range anymore), and finally appearing beside the bed as a basic scrubbed Jane in a white shift.

It was after one such protracted distraction, in particular a party in late spring, that he turned the key in the Solara's ignition and the starter merely chattered unconvincingly, and the engine did not start. The car had failed to start with the first turn of the key only once before in its long history, and the cause then had been a dead battery; normally, the pistons lurched directly into self-sustaining motion. With a soft "Hmmm" he turned the key again. The starter again chattered and clicked, but again without results. In fact, with every revolution, it began respond more reluctantly. He paused, and was about to try again when Jane said sharply, "No, don't!"

A light chill passed through him at the desperation, the near disgust in her tone. The intensity froze his hand on the key. When he looked over at her, he

discovered her looking at him as if from a great distance. *This was a sign she needed*, he thought. *Now, now at last, she will begin to change things*. Her look, with a harrowing glint of appraisal in the night-deepened blue of her eyes, caught him unprepared. On his face he felt his bemused smile stuck on like that of a second string TV actor. Her eyes flicked from one of his to the other, and then looked down. Her face remained strangely immobile as if it were hard for her to move its parts. She seemed to stare through the firewall as if it were transparent. "Answer me," she said.

He watched her closely. "Answer what?"

There had been something she was saying before he first turned the key, something about how he had supposedly promoted their family's wonderfulness to someone or other, again.

"Why were you bragging about us to Jen Stuart?"

He stared at her. "Bragging?" He gripped the steering wheel with both hands and rolled it back and forth. "Bragging means taking credit for something unearned. I might have been *boasting*."

"That stuff about how we and the boys all talk so well."

"Oh. I think I was telling her something about Bobby's brush with the law over those bad checks. Was that what you heard?"

"It wasn't a brush with the law," she said firmly. "He wrote over three thousand dollars' worth."

"I know that." He sat, waiting. Wide maples, spacious and undisturbed in the quiet suburb, stood in rows on either side of the street. Their leaves were arrogantly unfurling, already broad, tender as lettuce, whole trees unaware of the smiting they were to receive within a few months. There was something very different in her voice; he had definitely waited too long, but to do exactly what he didn't know. He said, "Why are you so angry, anyway? I didn't kill anybody." He'd said something similar once, maybe twice before, over recent years, with no constructive effect, but it was too late to retract it. Meanwhile, she said nothing, a pretty eloquent nothing to his ears. In time she would get to the point; she did that sometimes, winding up first before her big pitch. In the meantime, he might tease

her. "Three thousand dollars isn't so much these days."

She laughed, and he kept his head forward, mock-serious. It was part of the fun that she knew that he knew that ill-timed teasing sometimes bollixed her.

She said, "Why did you say it was a brush with the law?"

He smiled, and then registered how short-lived the bollixing was. "I didn't characterize it that way to Jen. I said he'd been up on criminal charges and faced..."

"Okay, but I mean just now."

He thought a moment. She was looking down at her own lap, into the palm of one hand while plucking at the extended tip of the ring finger's nail. The light from a street lamp pushed through the airy curls of her hair, crisper looking with age but still quite soft to the touch. She refused his hints at dyeing it, like the nice reddish thing Jen Stuart did. Years ago, he would reach over and grasp her two hands in one of his to stop her picking at that nail. But he no longer did that because once she had pulled her hands free and said, "I think I should be able to pick my nails if I need to." It was the "need to" that had shut him up.

He said, "I called it a brush, just now, because Bobby wasn't trying to get away with a crime, he was just losing track..."

"Okay, okay, but..."

"Stop interrupting. You're going to hear my answer. You asked a pointed question and now you should hear my pointed answer."

"From your pointed head?" She laughed a little. "Go ahead, what's your pointed answer?"

He felt relieved at her joking. Maybe this third degree was no big deal after all. "Bobby got scared--we discovered through the psychiatrist, remember?--that he could just keep doing that. He wrote ahead of his balance, and then got this growing scary idea that nothing could actually stop him."

Jane took a breath. "Wasn't that strange? Poor kid."

"He couldn't sleep."

He could feel her nodding, her earrings tinkling. He looked at her and she was looking down at her palm again. "Do you think," she began, "that telling Jen about all that is liberating for you in some way?"

So, she might be only exploring. Inwardly he let certain other muscles relax. "What do you mean?"

"It's like I said earlier. You were almost bragging about Bobby's so-called brush with the law."

He shook his head. "Jen and I were talking about the importance of communication. And I remembered how at first we thought, you and I, that the talking with Bobby was getting nowhere, how he kept cutting off the conversations and running off and hiding from us. But how eventually he admitted that all that forced talk, awkward as it was, had been the way out for him."

He shook his head again, this time because he sounded as if he were briefing subordinates at a meeting, the few who still remained after several stages of downsizing. He waited for her to claim that he'd been too confrontational with Bobby, and that's why he'd "run off." In a way meant to appear casual, he turned the ignition key and the engine roared to life. "There, you see," he said.

"Yes, I see."

Again, a difference. The tone ironic, quiet, distant. It was best to ignore it. He rolled the car from the curb and once under way reached over to grasp her hand. Weakly, she grasped back. He looked over at her and smiled.

"Isn't that how you remember it?"

"Remember what?"

"The bad check business! That talking helped him."

"Sure."

Maybe now it was over, whatever it had been.

He smiled at her, took her in without fear. It was always a little thrilling to discover just how good she could make herself look, and with so little expense. Her therapeutic trips to thrift shops were often stunning triumphs of economy. And here was the result. The long hair, brushed out and pinned at points, set off the nice shape of her head, rounded with a smooth exposed brow. She had rolled up her sleeves past the elbow, exposing her tapered forearms. Long pewter-colored earrings with glints of enameled colors, six thin bracelets on one wrist, a wide belt that secured the coarse-napped cotton blouse of washed-out purple, folded left then

right over her breasts, long skirt made of simple but fashionable ticking, the arranged tucks and folds of cloth both disguising and exploiting the extra weight of recent years. Finally, ankle boots of dove-colored leather. The things she pinned, slipped on, attached, and wrapped around herself to layer up her attractiveness. He considered the thousands of tiny plans, experiments, decisions, and adjustments that had resulted in such a correct appraisal of what exactly made her look good, as if she were a gift for someone. Of course, she could not be said to fit into the knockout category, and he applauded himself anew that he had chosen ability over beauty in his choice of a wife. He had to admit that he did, on some kind of deep level, hunger for beauty, though. It made him feel awful that he'd done certain things, with other women, that he'd sought for, found, and liked those answering flickers of flirting from really pretty women, as when he'd played sensitive family man to Jen's potential home wrecker. It was the culture, all screwed up.

He felt a sluggish erection beginning. Sex was always easier after Jane had felt that they had talked.

Her eyes came around shortly before the light changed. Lighter blue now with porcelain whites. He moved the car forward. She said, "I heard you say to someone that I was doing really well at work."

He felt his lips part though his breathing shallowed further. Briefly, a mean sort of accounting invaded his thoughts: The boys were in college now, sufficient savings and solid financial aid locked in. She and he could part. Would she want the house? How much money? He was still young enough for another go with someone else.

He said, "I can see that my activities tonight were very closely monitored."

"Did you forget that we talked about the possibility of my quitting?"

"Did we?" He laughed. "With all the grants you bring in, they'll never let you go."

Jane ignored the compliment. "It's strange. Sometimes, for all the living I've done...." Then, with his hand still in the air, she stopped.

He thought to ask her to go on, but a touch of fear stopped the words. What might he hear her say? Instead, he touched her hair, a testing stroke with the backs

of his knuckles, and then retracted his hand. The gesture was meant to establish her troubles as private, isolated, with him nearby to help. As he waited for her to think more about what she wanted to say, he found that her uncertain thinking moved him. He must supply words for her. "I think you're just upset by my talking to Jen about Bobby."

"No," she snapped, but not meanly. "I guess I'm wondering at how quickly we fold up problems, you and I... I mean, are we just going to package Bobby's felony into a neat little tale for parties, as if it was all over and solved, like a TV crime case? I mean, how could you say that 'we're better for it'?"

His eyes widened helplessly. "Did I say that?"

She answered quietly after a moment, "That's what I heard."

"Boy, you were all ears, weren't you?" He felt blamed, pegged, but not unjustly. In fact, whenever her intelligence swung its arch-beam onto a subject, even if it were an alleged error of his, its brightness excited him. The excitement often turned quickly sexual, as it was certainly doing now. Jen had been clearly jealous of them, and that had been a jag. He let up. "You're right, sweetheart. I should be facing up to how serious a business that all was."

"Is."

He nodded in agreement, but automatically, and then they were on their home street and neither spoke as their front yard rolled closer, the porch light cut into dim bands by the verticals of a single linden and the triplet trunks of a clumped birch. He pulled into the driveway and stopped before the garage. After he switched off the ignition, the engine kept up some irritated chugging, so he hit the gas once, hard. The chugging rattled to a halt.

As she reached down for her bag, he touched her shoulder. "You were saying, Jane?"

All at once she turned under his hand and slipped closer to him. Her face moved to an inch from his. "I don't want to talk, I want a kiss." She said it like a breath.

His heart sank, when it should have risen. Had he had fooled her, again, into believing they had reached some deeper understanding? The particular feeling that

triggered its sinking was a warning that he could never completely understand. It mystified him, their double life of feigned understanding and precarious control. They could, at times, ease into physical intimacy as an extension of naturally escalating affection, but so often it seemed that anxiety still triggered their desire. But her lips were there to kiss and he kissed them. "We'll kiss more inside," he said, to buy time.

As he got out, he felt his legs heavy with a kind of invasive gravity. His lips were only then registering how different her kiss had been--no softness, no parted space between her lips. It had been strangely sisterly. In the next moment, he understood that she was working the far door handle, before he could cross and manage the heavy door for her, a long-established and accepted ritual. Her feminist independence accepted, neither of them liked that she had to hurl herself against the extra-long door (he liked the convenience of two-doors, flipping the seats forward so that he could toss briefcase and topcoat onto the back seat, or book samples back in his on-the-road days.) He got his legs moving (too many drinks, definitely a contributing factor) and reached the door as it swung open to reveal her.

He was instantly struck how Jane, seated there, quite still for the moment, could be considered as a form of coiled potential. Then, when one leg swung out, pointing to the earth in its round-pointed boot, he felt himself inwardly bracing a little. The simple act of her exiting made him catch his breath, was undoing all his cooling off tactics. The other leg followed and she leaned out and then unfurled smoothly upwards into the complete woman she was. Her straightening, with a little accompanying sigh of breath, brought into alignment the whole evolutionary marvel of the human female. The stunning balance of breasts and hips, the fulcrum waist, head like a crown set upon the straight neck. His wife. When she took a step he stopped her. "Wait."

He wanted to return her earlier, nearly cousinly kiss in full-blooded fashion. In truth, his palms ached to feel her body through her clothes. He had to hold back the curl of his fingertips as they pressed to her ribs. He slipped one hand across and up her back and along the bare nape of her neck beneath the curls and let his fingers sink into her hair. Gripping her head, and with his other hand on the small of her

back, he pressed her to him as he leaned her back against the car. "One more kiss."

He moved his mouth slowly to hers, pressing full to it, then plucked and teased her lips, which she now left expectantly crumpled and soft, and kept slowly plucking and biting until he felt her heart beating hard between her breasts. When her mouth opened further beneath his, he moved closer to press his hips more directly to hers. It was going well, like their best times. He could sense now, after their years together, when this was all right for her. In full intercourse she sometimes winced from mysterious cramping. The remembered late-term miscarriage, or could she sense the embedded sensations of another woman's body on his palms? But now she pressed back, her thighs to his.

He let his hands slide down over her buttocks, splayed his fingers to feel the curves of them.

Against his cheek, she whispered, "Not now, Vic." Then she went tense in his arms as he became aware of brightening lights. "Neighbors," she said.

He came away to find them lit by a periphery of headlights. They stood straight to wave as Craig Pelson and Miriam Healey, two septuagenarian shack-ups, went by in their little station wagon. Both elders had their mouths open in delight, and Craig saluted with a raised hand as he looked sideways to them as he steered the car slowly on.

Victor waved with an expression of mock surprise, but already Jane had begun to step free. "The envy of the neighborhood," she said under her breath.

Consciously, they walked quickly up the walk way, stepping together to the flagstones he planned to set handsomely in pea-stone but for the moment had only plunked at intervals across the lawn. He watched the movement of her legs beneath the skirt.

He expected that they would enter their home, simply and easily, with the habit of returning with relief to something familiar and welcoming, but at the stairs she stopped with a look up at the closed door. A moment passed before she turned and faced him.

"I still can't get used to Bobby's going." She looked off into a neighboring yard. "It's getting hard for me to be inside the house."

So that was it. Bobby, fresh out of high school, had announced that he was going to join his older brother, Arlen, down in Providence, take on a summer landscaping job to save up college money for the fall, and within a week he'd packed and gone.

"Me neither," he said. "So let's keep each other cheered up."

He started to lead her up the stairs, but she held back. "What?" he demanded, looking back at her. In the dim light from the porch fixture, he could see that her eyes were glistening. "Jane, are you crying?" He tried, with only partial success, not to sound as if he were scolding.

She shook her head. "Not really." She took a deep breath and said, "It was like a signal for me."

"What was?"

"Bobby's leaving. How the house felt without him. Full of unfinished business."

He only half succeeded in not glowering down at her. "What are you talking about?"

She looked off across the yard, either to avoid meeting his eye or to scan for eavesdroppers. "I have to tell you something, Vic. I'm not sure how you're going to take it."

"Jane, for Christ's sake what is it?"

"I need to go away for a while."

He said nothing.

"I hate to hurt you, but I really need to go away for a while."

A sigh betrayed his irritation. He was certainly not going to get laid this evening. "What are we talking about here, separate vacations?"

She shook her head. "More than that."

Her tone, quite firm, chilled him. "Should we be talking about this now? Out here? What time is it?"

"I don't know. What difference does it make?"

He stepped down and embraced her. His own arms felt strange to him, as if they were detachable; what did she mean by "more than that"? His breathing was

laced with a series of sighs that sounded only like irritation.

Finally, he got words out. "Okay, okay, for how long? You must have a ton of vacation time left on the books." He sighed yet again.

She stepped back from him and half-stumbled down one stair. "I'm talking about quitting, like we talked about before. But I also want to go away, Vic. For maybe a year or so...."

"A *year!*" He recoiled from her as if she'd slapped him. He quickly scanned the neighboring homes, all spaced at the psychological arm's length imposed by suburban zoning. Then a laugh burst from him. "You can't be serious."

She nodded, watching his face closely. "I need at least a year, Vic. I'm really serious about this."

Her tone of conviction disarmed him. He scowled with helpless, self-directed worry, but she was struggling not to feel too responsible for that, he could see. She said softly, "It sounds strange, I know."

"More than a little, Jane! What, are you dissatisfied about something?"

A harsh laugh sputtered from her. "We both know that."

"But then...you've always figured it out." He was nearly whining.

She shook her head. "Never completely." When he said nothing, she added, "I think I've been subconsciously planning this for some time."

"Could have fooled me. You never let on about it."

He didn't mind sounding hostile, and usually he did so whenever the issues under discussion were large. Her perennial complaint was that he would eventually dismiss any shock or disappointment as nothing more than a temporary variant of the ordinary. He had done that with his failure to become a teacher, by neatly raising his book rep career to the stature of a cultural mission, and he hated her for discovering the ruse, hated her for not swooning with gratitude for the half-again-as-much income it represented that allowed her to work for less. Whenever she hinted at her suspicions about his wayward impulses, hints thankfully only rare and always indirect, he could defend himself by turning the discussion to her insecurities.

"I'm going to do it, Vic."

He forced his hands to raise and grip her shoulders. "You should see Marilyn," he said quietly. The therapist who, she claimed, had helped her deal with the miscarriage.

It was a good card to play, but once the words were out he felt a brief pang of self-loathing. He knew that she regretted all the talk they'd amassed around her persistent grieving. It was all supposed to be liberating, clarifying, but it had just given him more cards to play, more edges to pry up. His own ears, attached to a self-stabilizing individual, were never automatically sympathetic. They pricked less often for solutions than for useful information, in the covert operations sense.

When she did not respond, he hurriedly added, "Or maybe a couples' counselor."

She whispered curtly, "People just use them to justify their narcissism, or get the goods on each other. I don't want any of that standard super-compatibility crap. You and I both know what a good marriage is supposed to be."

"Whoa!" He nearly laughed but was once again distracted by his begrudging admiration for her intelligence. Still, only an explosion could divert the logic of her argument. "Fine, all right! I should've known, always something new and dramatic. Let's talk about it in the morning."

He stomped up three stairs, even fidgeted with the keys to give her time, but still she hung back. "Come on," he barked, and then feigned working the lock. With immense relief, he heard her begin to step up the stairs behind him.

But once inside the door, she hesitated to enter the house more deeply. She dropped her coat on a chair, did not hang it up, and then walked slowly around toward the couch. "I am going, Vic," she said quietly. She dropped onto the couch, into its center--no room for him there. He was in for a long one, that he could see.

"At least stay the night."

"Make fun of me if you like."

"So, where do you intend to go?" He asked this question quietly, careful to sound off-handed.

"Just somewhere where I can be alone, and think."

Only one light was on, the table lamp on a timer, but even it seemed too

bright. The light solidified her, threw a sharp black shadow behind her. In the present moment, her very density was an affront.

He peered at her. "Could you be more specific?"

She looked up at him. "I'm not sure yet. It has to be far away though. Far enough for a real change."

He nodded, felt his thick brows lowering. "Maybe I can help with the choice."

She smiled and said, "It'll probably sound strange, I know, but I think it's important that I do all the planning myself. Actually, it would be better if you didn't know where I was."

He said nothing at first. For all her avowed troubles, for all the twists and turns in her thoughts and moods, from a certain perspective she was remarkably of a piece. For example, she could lay out her values like pistols on a table, and he knew that at the drop of a word or turn of a situation or snatch of broadcast news she might grab one up, and the arguments she subsequently fired off were straight and sure. His wife could galvanize entire workplaces around alleged injustices. Her celebrated lawsuit against Arlen's school after they failed to protect him from a rash of schoolyard beatings had made the papers and created new system-wide policies. He'd gritted his teeth while the legal fees had mounted, but she'd never wavered, not once, and in the end banked the fat settlement check in Arlen's college escrow account with no more fanfare than if it had been a rebate delayed by a distant processing department. Jane had practically dictated to him--sometimes at a single sitting--every letter or memo that had gotten what he needed at his job, at least for those altercations or opportunities he chose to tell her about.

He stood pinned there in the center of the rug. He again felt that she was playing life as a bigger game than he was, and that fact humiliated him. And her announcement was further evidence that her problems could not be solved by him, nor, it now seemed, in his company. He was still relatively young, he reminded himself. Women still found him attractive.

He snickered. "Is this like finding yourself or something?"

"Come on, Vic. Don't patronize."

"I'm not, I'm just not sure what the right words are."

"Not those."

Three, four years ago, if she'd proposed this separate vacations plan, or whatever it was, he would have rushed to her side and asked her what the matter was, but more and more that made her clam up. She'd sniffed out that the interest was not as deep as required, admittedly true, but couldn't that be temporarily satisfactory? And since she'd shrugged free from his ministrations they hadn't found a workable substitute. There was less touching, more words of a fussy, psychological variety.

"Help me out, then. You want to go away alone, without me and the boys...."

"The boys will both be in college."

"For the record, one is and one is about to be, but not yet."

"In a few weeks he will. It's an okay time for me to go."

He nodded. "So you've been waiting for this time. Go where? Go why?"

"You sound angry."

"No, honestly I'm not. Frustrated maybe. I guess I'd like to be able to make a difference here, but, as usual, you find that insulting or something."

Her eyes came up, now strangely softened. She sensed regret.

Inconveniently, he could recall a time, as perhaps she was now, when his reactions to her strong resolve were prompted by affection, by a healthy regard for differences. She beckoned with her hands. "Come, hug me."

He shook his head. "Not yet." He disguised the punishment by laboriously lowering himself into an armchair. When he clamped his arms to his chest and looked away, he caught his own reflection in the broad brass plate of the fireplace screen. His heavy light-brown hair was in place, lying in its two layered waves. His large squarish head confronted him, embarrassed to be expressing so little. It was the mask-like, not-quite-honest facade that most men suppose they have mastered, but as in certain horror stories it had grafted itself to real flesh. He was stuck with it.

When he managed to look over at her, he caught that little self-satisfied smile on her lips, which he could see was now straining to hide a tremor. For years he'd thought that little smile was a reflection of extraordinary confidence; then, for

several more he worried that it was false, an accoutrement of human service professionals, especially women; now it was neither of those things. It was the constant gift of her, the little glow of hope like a candle flame that always burned in the darkest corner of her heart. He marveled that the meaning of that little flame, which events continually sought to douse, had come to be only its good effect on him, and that that kind of self-centeredness might be acceptable, even natural. There was, really, so little choice in most matters, he told himself, even as he felt a pang like incipient weeping.

"Are you going to tell me what this is all about, Jane?"

She nodded. "It's not that complicated, Vic."

"Tell me." When she still hesitated, he added, "I won't scoff. I promise."

She shrugged, searched for words, and then lifted her eyes, clear and blue, to his. "I feel like I've been cheating the boys. Demanding that they grow, deal with their problems, while not growing or not dealing myself. I figure I owe it to them."

He closed his eyes and opened them slowly. "Honey...fine, that's great, but why go away? Why go away from them to do all this?"

"I have to face stuff, deal with it on my own."

"But they'll be without you."

"The boys are old enough. Besides, I'll be in contact with them."

"And what about me?"

She smiled, raising her brows. "You're old enough too."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"No, not at all, but with you it has to be different." When he merely stared back at her, she went on. "You have to promise not to be hurt, Vic. Not to take any of this personally."

He looked over at her. "Now how can I promise such a thing? What if I'm the cause of some pain you're experiencing?"

"You'll take the blame whether you deserve it or not. You'll peg yourself as the cause of it. You like to take the credit for everything."

"You make me sound infantile. Or stuck up."

He was aware that her hug request still hung in the air; to ignore it any

longer would seem callous rather than playful. He struggled up from the armchair and went to lean over her. She reached up, willingly enough, and pulled him down to his knees in a long hug. "Thank you," she said.

"We'll talk more about all this," he assured her. "Right now I want to get some sleep. I want the whole day for yard work tomorrow."

"Yes. Go beat the bushes instead of your errant wife."

"I'm going to pull up the redbud by the roots and whack big dents in that awful siding the Petermans put up."

"Peter-sons."

"Whatever." He got to his feet.

"I'll come in later."

"Why not now?"

"All right."

She started to rise, but then he saw her fall back with a hand to her eyes, as if she felt dizzy.

"Now what?"

He could see her eyes blinking rapidly between her fingers. "I just had a terrible feeling. I mean, God, I haven't felt this way since I lost Emily."

He hung there in space, a sickening feeling kicking up in his middle. "Jane, why are you torturing yourself? Why mention Emily? This is all getting ridiculous."

She had gone very pale and appeared not to have heard him. Then she said, measuredly, "I'm just always amazed at how much we all fool ourselves. It's not exactly lies, but...forms of protection." She rubbed her forehead. "Once in a while, I get a glimpse of how much energy we put into all this protecting, and how much we have to pay for it."

Her words actually frightened him. He had the brief thought that he had spent far too much time insuring that she did not speak in this way, and realized yet again why: It was too downright eerie. Now, before his eyes, she sat very still with her hand by her brow and her eyes squinting hard, as if she were looking through a portal revealed only for certain initiates. Clearly, what she was glimpsing was painful to perceive. He rifled down through himself, groping for sympathy, but there

was none immediately available. His hands hung at his sides like rocks on ropes. It was unfair that after so many years new episodes recurred, each ending with what was evidently a false solution, divulging no final truth. He quickly fought past his suspicion that there was something vain, self-indulgent about them--an artificial whipping up of feeling. Soon, he might be able to step back to her and gather her into his arms. But she acted before he could; she surprised him by grabbing his face and pulling him to her so hard that her cheekbone struck his eye painfully.

"Honey, what in God's name is happening?" Again, the question came out like a scolding, as if he were really yelping, "Control yourself!"

She was not breathing, and all the while gripping his face with surprising power. Within himself, he fought back a stab of revulsion that prompted a quick thought--*Would things ever, ever get better?*--then squeezed her shoulders, trying to calm her by a kind of insistent massaging. Finally, she pulled away and pressed her fingertips to her closed eyes.

Several seconds passed before she dropped her hands. She looked down at them where they lay in her lap. "Vic, I am so sad for how upset I know you'll be. Because...I am really going to do this and...and I think you're going to have a terrible time with it."

He knelt down, buttocks to heels, and regarded her. She was feeling sorry for *him*? "Honey, really, I'm not so sad." He wasn't. "Going away for a while is not the end of the world."

"It's not for a long vacation, Vic." She paused, rifling for a tissue in her bathrobe pocket. "You're not hearing me. At least a year, and I don't want anyone to know where I am."

He laughed, but when she did not laugh with him he peered more closely at her. "Not even the boys?"

"Yes, of course the boys. I already told you that. There are cell phones now, jet planes, buses. I'm not going to abandon them."

He laughed harshly. "The boys will know where you are but I won't?"

She produced a wadded tissue from another pocket. Every woman he had ever known kept tissues in almost every pocket of the clothes she owned. Janice

Patrice had produced tissues like a magician back when he was breaking things off with her. Women always seeped. Jane pressed the tissue to her eyes, but only briefly, and he was baffled to feel disappointed that she had not dissolved into full-blown weeping. The fact pointed at a less revocable resolve, something he could not withstand or reverse, and that suspicion, or fear, produced a novel conclusion: that she and he were two single shields against the fact of emptiness for the other was not healthy, it was not enough. The emptiness should have been banished by being filled, and from the inside out. They did not heal each other, they kept each other the same. It was simple, really: he needed a different woman, she needed a different man. Good luck to them both.

His hamstrings were beginning to ache. Gradually, he came up and then let himself half-topple forward until his head came to rest on her belly. Her fingers interlaced over his ear, his other ear flat against her blouse. When she asked quietly, "Are you all right?" he could hear her voice inside her body, deep down where two children had been conceived. No, three.

"I'm fine," he said. True enough. Maybe it was time that she went off alone, because she had so often said she needed time to think and sort matters deeply private, actually mysterious even to her. Certainly mysterious to him, though it had become confusing how much of that alleged mysteriousness he maintained as a convenience. Yes, it might be good, her going away. He thought about it. He had become so accomplished at reading her feelings like a kind of Braille, but the powerful way they directed the hours of his days had so often exhausted him.

If she went away, maybe he could fulfill some fantasies of his own. Go with the flow of them. The economics was frightening, though, stirring his brain to clumsily calculate revised combined income, savings, escrows, new costs.... A bit more economizing might close gaps, but at some level he knew how self-denial in most forms eventually turned back on him, forced him into ingenuous play-acting as ruffled aesthete and someday professor, as intriguing misfit at the workplace with a secretly loved wife somewhere.

"Look," he said with a sigh. "Let's let this rest for a while."

"Okay. You going to bed?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'll be in later."

He remembered waiting some time for her, flat on the sheets, damned if he was going to tramp back in there and beg her to come to bed. But, of course, it would have meant so much to her if he would, right? He must have fallen asleep, because when he awoke later it was dark in the room. Then he discovered Jane's face hovering above his. The expression he caught, just before she disguised it with a smile, was harrowing, because it was so deeply studious. As if she were committing his features to a place where memories were deeply stored.

Two***A thousand thousand kisses.***

Victor steered the Solara toward Providence, Jane quiet beside him. He pretended to be interested in the uninteresting landscape while Jane stared straight ahead and gently gripped the slip of paper that held Bobby's telephoned directions to his work place.

It would be nearly a decade before she would accurately understand what was about to transpire. Victor had described it as a family meeting; however, she would come to understand, as she gradually understood both him and herself better, that it would be an uppercase Family Meeting. It would be something devised by Victor to advertise that his control of the family was intact. His wife was about to take an unprecedented dash toward independence, but at some level he would try to co-opt her attempt to slip his leash by suggesting to all inside and outside the family that he had just allowed it to be lengthened.

It could not have been part of his plans that Jane was of such a different mind during this period that she was largely immune to his controlling powers. Her thoughts were often miles away, figuratively, just as she would soon be miles away, literally. She had been jolted once or twice back into the local dimension; when the plan for the two boys to share an apartment for the summer had fallen through, she was not surprised, but her claim that the boys "don't need me as much now" had lost some of its validity. Victor had been quick to point this out; perhaps her plans should be put off until the two sons were firmly situated in their parallel collegiate lives. But her intellectual powers, always strong but often ignored or muddled over the past twenty years, focused on the facts with breathless ferocity. The supposed setback was actually just the next logical point on a very straight line: The brothers found that they couldn't live together any better outside the family home than they had in it. Should anyone be surprised that their personalities seemed to diverge more widely with each passing year? Bobby went for "class," as he put it; he now lived in a studio on one of the city's wider canals. Arlen insisted on the crusty digs

preferred by his schoolmates at the Rhode Island School of Design--attic rooms in mansions with mansard roofs, or sprawling group living apartments, and once a little redbrick cottage on Prospect Street that had been a 19th century playhouse for children of one of the wealthiest families in the city. He moved often, at first in and around RISD, affectionately pronounced "Riz-dee" by familiars, and then farther out with each successive school year.

At the halfway point on the trip down, smooth with the light Sunday evening traffic, Victor sighed and announced casually, "Tomorrow I've got to wheedle my people into getting behind Nina's cross training stuff." He was talking about Nina Johnson, his boss at Hill-Broadmore, and the new move to beef up their software and mechanical writing departments. But what he really wanted to say to Jane at the moment was, "Are you sure you don't want to change your mind before we involve the boys in all this?"

Jane's eyes came up, blue as the distant horizon. On her side, she was grateful for some distracting work chat. "I thought the cross training was already set up."

"It is! But some people are dragging. Subconscious sabotage. Stiles, for example, has gotten half his staff assigned to it, but he can't seem to get to any of the sessions himself."

He could ask her, "Are you hoping to find someone else out there?," but then that might stimulate her to throw back what she might know about his own philandering--and he didn't want to know if she knew anything about that. But then again, she had to know. They knew, women did; maybe not consciously, but deep down they usually knew.

Jane shook her head. "People are afraid of new things. Old dogs and new tricks."

"Nina's going too fast is what it is. New Web-based products every day, it seems."

"She's got guts, I'll say that for her."

Victor clucked at this assessment. Jane was a big fan of Nina's, and vice versa from what he could sense, but he didn't sense much genuine interest at the moment.

They were filling the air with talk. Still, he was helpless to stop it. "I don't see it as guts if you keep giving your dirty work to everyone else. I'm the one that's got to massage Stiles."

"Maybe she's enlisting you, Vic."

"Maybe, but she's got the wrong guy. I hate having to learn all this new computer crap and pretend like we're not caving in on paper text. It's retooling by any other name."

Jane's face clouded slightly. "But at least it's not downsizing this time." On her side, learning about new computer applications could be exciting.

"It will be. If we keep spending gobs on a Web presence to make us look like *The Boston Globe* online someone's going to have to start pilfering salary lines."

Jane nodded slightly, but again her real thoughts were elsewhere. What would Arlen say when they told him? Two months, three months down the road, would there be a call about Bobby from some police station? Her chest hurt. To soothe the aching, she inwardly repeated a version of a useful mantra she had constructed: Yes, she was about to impose a monstrous selfishness on her family--but what good was she to anyone as this half-finished person?

She turned from the window and said, "Do you think that Nina really has a choice? If anyone who wants to share content, and especially if they want people to pay for it, they have to go digital. I bet she feels that you guys are really playing catch up."

His middle tightened around a tiny flaring of pain. Did she think he hadn't thought of that? She kept trivializing the problem. "That's helpful, Jane. It really is. It's not the *need* for change but the *speed* of its implementation is what I'm talking about."

She laughed a little and was about to say, "So, we're saying the same thing, but coming at it from different angles," but held her breath. She shook her head at his inexhaustible ability to punish. It was not something she would miss.

He remained silent for a moment, and then blurted, "Listen, Jane, are you hoping to find a new husband or something?"

He could just see her head shaking. "Vic, come on. When are you going to

believe that there's no secret plan?"

"Do you think we haven't...made it? As husband and wife, I mean?"

"Not yet, we haven't. You know that."

Nothing was more frightening to him that the increasing recurrence of that tone of surety.

He thumped the steering wheel. "God, Jane, we already *have* made it. Twenty years?"

Her eyes swiveled at him, two points on a dead level plane. "I thought we were off to see the boys because we were in agreement about all this."

When he said nothing, she turned away, rubbed her forehead, hard, with the tips of two fingers. She considered that he wanted to pry loose the underpinnings in her thinking, supports she would need to talk confidently with her sons. Well, if he planned to play the calm, tolerant victim to them then she'd come out fighting. Maybe the boys needed to know more than they'd agreed to tell them.

Victor took a breath and said, "I guess I want to know if you really think that we're going to get back together again if you go away for a year."

Jane kept silent. They had talked about this before. But, now, there was that small tremor in his voice again, that little tone she was surprised to hear. He would miss her. No, it was different from that, or something additional. There was fear, deep misgivings about his own solitary strength. It was a dangerous tone for her to hear because she might feel sorry for him, start watching out for him, and then she would give up going, stay with him, and then, in a few weeks, feel again the slow closing away of light and air that the acknowledgment of his needs became for her; worse, the subtle and secret punishments she would have to endure at his hand for failing to completely disguise her awareness of those needs. With a sigh, she abandoned her self-protection and thought to pretend, just for a few moments more, that the problems were all hers. "I guess I think this little trip of mine..."

"Don't call it a 'little trip' for my benefit. And while you're on your little trip, as you call it, remember that the whole thing is being subsidized by my keeping up the home front."

She kept silent. Things were coming unraveled, but that was no surprise.

She considered whether to insist that they stop and turn around.

Victor waited a few more interminable seconds and said, "So, nothing to say?"

She shrugged. "It's all been said. I'm not going to be lured into one of your traps."

"It's not a trap, it's the truth. You couldn't go if I didn't agree to keep up the mortgage, pay the..."

"Look, do what you want, change the rules, anything. I'm still going."

He laughed, bitterly. "How could you?"

"I just could, that's all."

"You've got the funds?"

"Yep, I've got the funds."

Victor felt his face cooling. "What, you've been saving up or something?"

A pause, an exhaled breath. "You've said more than once that I'm a quote-unquote whiz at budgets. My cashed in vacation time alone would finance a trip to the moon."

His anger fell away into unmitigated sadness. She had been planning all this for months. He remembered a veiled conversation about Bobby's education account, which the boy had proudly announced he would not need to use, at least for his freshman year. She was going to embezzle from her own children! He ached to know the details, but instinctively he wondered if it might frighten him to hear them.

"Look, Jane, I guess I just can't understand why we can't work out our stuff back here, together."

Her hands came up and dropped. "We've been over this."

"Tell me again then."

"Because we don't work things out together. Family stuff we do, but not our stuff. And now the house is empty and we're alone in it, with all the stuff we haven't worked out. And we demand that our children measure up to standards that we can't meet ourselves, or even try to meet. Don't you *feel* that? How dishonest that is?" She left off because she was losing patience with all this stalling and sabotaging.

Why couldn't he help her here? Why couldn't he see that she was, truly, doing this thing for the both of them, for the whole family?

"So, isn't *this* the time to be working on us? With the boys gone?"

Long silence. Followed by a sigh. "We've been over this."

"So tell me again why not together? That stuff about it's not our duty to heal each other?"

"Please, Vic, can't you hear how dismissive you sound? And do you really want me to say everything out loud. Like how lame you are when it comes to dealing with illness or weakness in others?"

Inwardly, he buckled, but it was better to come out swinging. "Unspecific, as usual. Give me an example."

She raised her eyes and clucked. "That time when Bobby was eight and you got mad at him for getting the flu the night you were supposed to go to the Giants and Redskins game, how you wouldn't believe him, kept grilling him about his symptoms."

He blinked. "Boy, you forget nothing. You even remember the names of the teams. You're incredible."

"It's important to remember. You demand facts. Then six weeks later you forget you got them and demand them all over again."

"That flu thing is ancient history."

He could hear her thinking. Did he really want more? Did he want the whole list? She had more at the ready. She could recount, in great detail, he knew, certain episodes that followed the miscarriage. And there was that one incident that they had silently agreed never to bring up. Someday, not today, he would apologize for all that. Then again, if he apologized, perhaps she might stay. Did he *want* her to stay?

He sighed. "Okay, so where are you going off to again? I mean generally?"

Her heart sank further. A meaningless question, one designed to get them off the subject and back into one of their unproductive patterns of communication. Circular, obfuscating, distrustful. "Somewhere out west. I'm not sure." She was lying. She was sure. She'd made a deposit on an apartment.

"When will you know for sure? I mean, when are you even going? You don't even have a set date yet."

She did, but for efficiency's sake she said nothing.

He took one hand from the wheel to rub his head. "You have a list!"

"I've *had* a list." A moment later she added more quietly, "Honey, are we going to be squabbling in front of the boys? Because if we are, then I think I should talk to them on my own."

He looked at her, keenly taking in her face before returning his gaze to the road. She'd called him honey and he needed to see the way her face looked after she'd said it. But the simple reality of her face distracted him. It was at that moment both very familiar and very strange, and, shocking to discover, imbued with belovedness. The low sun shone through her hair. Her eyes, subdued in backlight, were searching his face carefully. There were her lips, just two feet away. A thousand thousand kisses, a million touches and caresses in two decades with this woman. That this one person, this single animate body so easily circumscribable in space and time, could be such a critical focus of personal hopes. He said, with conviction, "Your heart is *not* a stone."

He'd said once said that it was, about two years ago, in the midst of an argument. He had always regretted it.

For her part, Jane smiled a little, and then nodded slowly.

He shook his head. "And it will never be a stone."

They both started to laugh. "Lots of talk about stones," she said.

"Yes." He stopped laughing, and then laughed again. "Just promise me you'll go at a point when you really feel strong."

She thought a moment. "I'm afraid that's probably not the way it'll happen." Then, like a breath, she added, "I have to go exactly when I say I will. I have to go away for once and not be strong."

He nodded, and then smirked helplessly. "Great."

From that point, they traveled in silence between the increasing twists and turns in the directions. Something akin to calmness accompanied them in the car's spacious interior. Soundlessly, they agreed that as the moment approached when

they would actually tell their two sons about her plan, they would need their combined strengths to stave off panic. One achievement they could point to was a better than average record for putting their children first. A show of disunity would hurt the boys, even though they were young adults. But panic had recently begun to seize Victor himself at odd moments, at his desk between calls, while combing his hair, while standing before a vending machine. Just last week on the way home from a meeting with the road reps a thought had shot into his mind like a shout from the cosmos: *Your wife might be leaving you for good.*

He couldn't help but reveal details of Jane's plan to Alan Braverman, his friend and colleague; Alan's wife Nancy, Jane's good friend, already knew everything, of course. But he revealed to others as well, spontaneously and inappropriately; for example, to his boss, Nina Johnson. It had also come out one night during one of his occasional calls to his parents down in Florida.

His parents. He had a sharp, instant vision of their faces fallen from the news of their only son's divorce. He turned to Jane and said, "I've been thinking, Jane. I made a couple of big mistakes with us." His breathing shortened as he wrestled with a moment of confusion. He might blurt, instead of what he planned to say, a confession about other women. He struggled to suppress this surprising urge. Those affairs hadn't been mistakes, he reminded himself; they'd been respites from her reinstated virginity.

His wife was looking at him, waiting for more. He took a breath. "Your complaint about not being able to feel? Remember, way back when I proposed?"

"You didn't propose. You agreed."

He shrugged. "Okay. But I pushed the idea of having children. I pushed it hard, sure that if you had kids your ability to feel would kick in."

She took a deep breath. "You were right."

Only to a point," he said. "I mean, you became this fantastic mother. You *felt* like crazy, obviously you did. But I think what I didn't see at the time was that simply feeling something deeply wasn't what you needed." He looked over at her briefly and then brought his eyes back to the road. As they followed the last of the directions, the area around them had slipped from semi-residential to purely com-

mercial. The properties widened, closed up behind high fences, sprouted signs, harsh lighting, and parking lots. A foundry, and then a series of body shops and small used car lots. "It must have been hard for you, feeling and caring without being sure how to first."

Jane nodded, but she was faking agreement. It was just a new take on the same old story: It's your problem, Jane. I have no significant part in all this alleged failing.

She stared out the window; she would say no more, no more now that he had clicked into that regrettable human mode where intelligence is wasted on creating protective screens.

"There!" she cried and pointed into a wide lot. Bobby was standing in its center, waving. When she waved back, he began to guide them in dramatically like the signalman on an aircraft carrier.

"He looks pretty spiffy for a landscaper," said Jane, and laughed knowingly. Now Bobby was trotting toward them, already dressed for the evening in a leather jacket and heavy, well-cut chinos. In the dusk, they could see that his dark brown hair was wet and finger combed.

Victor muttered, "What did he do, wash out of a bucket?"

"Come out and meet Matty!" Bobby called before reaching Victor's window, and then turned to lead the way.

Victor killed the engine and looked to Jane. She said, "Do you think he might, I mean even possibly, be proud of us?"

"Ha!" His laugh, explosive, sounded welcome to his own ears. "Let's go."

He went around the car to work the big door and then kept his hand clasped to Jane's after drawing her out. Bobby lurched along in front of them, long and loose, his hands jammed in the bomber jacket. He led them through balled hemlocks and rhododendrons to where a short, thickset man was watering the plants from a garden hose with a spray nozzle. The three of them formed an even triangle before the little man, who went on watering and did not meet their eyes.

"These are the parents, Matty," said Bobby. He pointed at each of them in turn. "Victor, and Jane."

"I'm glad to meet you folks," said Matty. Up close in the late summer twilight, they could see the dark cheeks of a heavy-bearded man, his small square head with very short hair. "Bobby's a good worker. He really joins in with the others."

"I'm glad," said Victor. Neither he nor Matty had offered to shake hands, not with the hose still going. But then there was Jane with her hand out. "It's good to finally meet you," she said.

Matty wiped a palm hard against his jacket and took Jane's hand. A little smile jerked on his face. Victor stepped forward too. "So, where's Bobby taking you for dinner? Someplace nice, I hope. I pay him good. He can afford it."

Both parents laughed. "We're taking *him*, Matty," said Jane.

Victor followed Matty's glance to her. How straight she stood in the hip-length jacket with the deep pockets that she liked to plunge her hands into. A strip of paisley blouse peeked from between the broad lapels. He could read Matty's mind: Now she's a catch.

"So, what's the occasion?"

Neither parent spoke. They hadn't prepared a suitable answer for a stranger. "Family meeting," Victor ventured, frowning to look mock-officious.

"College plans, I bet. I'm glad to get a hard-working college boy once in a while." Matty swung the hose to another plant, shaking the spray needlessly. "They don't all put out, like it's beneath them or something."

Bobby said, "Matty's a creampuff. We all take advantage of him. When he drives off, we stop all the mowers and play cards."

Matty's face twisted into an expression that might have indicated pain, but the sound he made was a kind of choked laugh. "I know better. Well, have a good time. Nice to meet you."

As they turned to go, both parents reached for Bobby at the same time. Victor's hand gripped the boy by the back of the head, up high where his hair had been left thick. Jane slipped an arm around him and drew him against her hip. "Good to see you," she said quietly. Between them, Bobby grinned.

In the car, he started chatting right off from his seat in the back. "Incredibly inefficient. He maintains two trucks, a whole second crew. The creampuff stuff is

true, he lets the crews fight it out over who plants, who mows, so he ends up with trucks going out with plants and mowers on the same bed and if the scheduling is screwed up, which it usually is, we're shoving materials in between the plants all day and bagging up the clippings rather than just jamming them at the front of the bed. Nobody wins, lots of time is lost, and he's saying no to new accounts because he thinks he doesn't have the manpower."

Victor blinked into the rearview mirror. Bobby was speaking sideways while looking out the window. "Sounds like my job. So how does he stay in business?"

"I guess he thinks it's okay what he takes in."

Jane said, "You always learn something, Bobby, no matter what job you do."

"I know that, Mom."

Jane was silent for a moment and then said, "No I meant *you*, in particular, always learn something. Not everybody does."

"Oh. Thanks."

They drove on for a moment in silence, and then Victor said, "You're probably wondering what this is all about."

"Let's wait for Arlen," said Bobby. "He'll whine if I hear it all first."

Jane's breathing rasped through her nose, once, and then again. Her hand found Victor's thigh and squeezed hard, twice. He reached down and patted her hand.

Victor said, "Have you been over at Arlen's, since he moved, I mean?" Both boys had moved, neither able to keep the shared apartment on his own--and they'd lost a security deposit in the bargain.

Bobby thrust his head between them, resting his chin on the seat. Victor could just see his scowling from the corner of his eye. "I don't get it. The guy runs with this like avant crowd, all dressed in black, everybody in black--black hair, black Levis, black T-shirts..."

"Black eyes," Jane quipped.

"If they can do it. Nose rings, nipple rings, all part of the uniform, and then there's Arlen with his pink button-down shirts and Stay-Prest hairstyle."

"Maybe he's an individual among radical conformists," said Victor.

"Nipple rings," said Jane. "Ouch."

"Sorry, Pop, this is no simple different drummer thing. He is one hundred percent like totally odd man out. I went to his new place exactly once because he meets me at the door and grins and then makes this pathetic come-here-little-boy gesture and I follow him into the kitchen, literally wading through kids everywhere on the floor..."

"Children?" Jane said in surprise.

Victor and Bobby both wailed, "No!" Then Bobby said, "His compadres, Mom. Comradereros. I mean, do they study? No, they pose. They pose like their entire total waking time, which is not so many hours per day, I bet. And they look at their phones even while they're walking to the bathroom. Anyway, he leads me into the kitchen and he's got the table set for two. Two plates, two forks, two folded paper napkins..."

Jane protested. "That's nice!"

"But listen, Mom. Then he points to a bottle of wine in the center of the table. I look at the bottle. It has a fancy label so I guess I'm supposed to say, 'Wow, Arlen, that's Don La Feet eighteen-oh-six,' but I don't say anything and he just waits, so I fall down on my knees and bow before the bottle."

Victor laughed along steadily, then explosively at the punch line, but Jane said, "I'm not so happy about this evidence of underage drinking."

"It's under control."

"And what's wrong with his wanting to impress you a little? I mean, maybe he thought it was a big thing having his brother over for dinner."

"I apologized. I mean, I did not want to spoil this incredibly planned evening. But then I have to follow him to the fridge where he opens the door, slowly, very slowly, and points to a dish of ultra-plain vegetables. We're talking your plain garden-variety broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, all arranged. He's got this special sesame salt we're supposed to throw all over this and a tub of vegan dip." Bobby slapped his own head and slipped back into the back seat.

In the rearview mirror, Victor caught Bobby's dark eyes, momentarily penetrating. He gave him a wink. "You didn't sense a compliment in all that?"

"Exactly!" said Jane, turning around. "He was putting on the dog for you."

"His kind of dog is a breed found in your garden variety neighborhood pound. And in the next room, in the very next room, six maybe seven extraordinary girls wearing only T-shirts and black tights and no place for them at our little table, not one introduction. I'll bet he didn't even know their goddam names."

Bobby had begun to sound a little angry, and now the car fell silent.

After a moment, Victor said, "So, how did the food *taste*?"

"Friggin delicious," Bobby admitted, and they all burst into laughter.

After a moment, Jane wiped her eyes and said, "He's just finding his way." Then she turned to Victor, quickly, and he looked over at her. She'd accidentally stated the theme of the family meeting. Victor turned forward again, flat to the windshield. Then he quavered in a baritone, "The infamous Arlen lies directly ahead." He had remembered the address on Benefit Street and caught the numbers of a few houses that they'd passed.

They rolled to the curb of the narrow street and found Arlen sitting on the front stairs of the Victorian triple-decker. He leapt up and trotted to the car. "You made it! I was just about to call."

Bobby muttered, "Who? The police?"

"Don't start," said Victor.

Arlen pulled open Victor's door and slid behind him into the back seat. His smooth cheeks were flushed. His dark hazel eyes took them all in. "So, where are we going?"

"It's supposed to be your choice," said Victor.

Jane flapped a hand over the seat to Arlen, who grabbed it then lurched up to grip her shoulders and kiss her high on the cheek. Jane beamed and Arlen said, "You look gorgeous, Mom. A picture."

Bobby shoved Arlen by the hip. "Could you get your ass out of my face?"

Arlen dropped back to his side of the back seat and noticed that his mother was gazing at him and boldly, her eyes going back and forth, in that way that made their cheeks go pink. Her smile said, *I am drinking you in*. She loved equally Arlen's soft bristle of reddish hair and Bobby's lanky dark brown locks, the one's green eyes

and the other's brown. To break the embarrassing spell, Arlen shook his father's shoulders from behind. "You okay, Pop? Keep going straight and take a right at the first light. I know a really good place."

"We'll be the judge of that," said Bobby.

Victor said, "I'm fine. And hungry."

Arlen's choice was a small family-owned Italian restaurant centered on a block of square-fronted shops just down from Brown University. They were directed to a booth, dark wood with vinyl covered cushions, by a waitress who hailed Arlen as she dealt out one-page menus like big playing cards. Arlen grinned to be recognized as a loyal local.

"Is that an earring?" Jane asked, leaning closer to him. She reached out turned his head by the chin. "Arlen, you did. You got pierced!"

Bobby tweaked the small gold-wire earring on his brother's left ear. "A virgin no more."

"It was time," said Arlen.

Victor kept his face in his menu. When their drinks arrived, they all ordered and then Arlen raised his glass of Coke. "To family." They clinked their glasses. Then Arlen smacked his lips and said, "Can I be so bold as to just directly ask out loud what this is all about?"

Bobby said, "Excellent move." He meant it, but everyone looked at him to check if he really did.

Victor sighed, but gratefully. He opened his mouth to speak, then caught himself and shut it. If he started things off, Jane would certainly interrupt and scold that it was her show. But when he looked at her, his lips pursed in what he hoped appeared as amused self-restraint, he saw that she was holding back. She looked relaxed enough, half-turned to him and leaning back in the corner of the booth, but her fingers turned and turned the stem of her wine glass.

As Arlen watched his mother's fingers turn that glass, he felt a tapping pulse of fear start up in his heart. He had the oddest sensation of his forearms' growing heavy and seeming to take root through the checked plastic tablecloth. Something unpleasant lay ahead, he could see that now. He hated this sort of drama, it would

be too much reality at one time. He looked at each parent in turn, saw his father trying to hide his concern, his mother poised and breathing shallowly. Of all things, he wondered how they made love, how often they did it, if they still did it at all. He couldn't imagine them making love, though once when he was three or four he'd walked in on them. He still didn't associate that memory with the people before him. He stared at his mother, wondering whether to say something or cluck in amusement or put some sound or other into the air. As he nearly always did at tense moments that involved her, he became distracted that he had originally come out of this woman's body. The fact amazed him, continually, made him realize how terribly important she rightfully was. But his father would have had to impregnate her, which meant lovemaking. Just as he wanted to be free of these thoughts, he heard his father say, "Just say it, sweetheart. Just remember that I'm very proud of you for it all."

Arlen saw his mother's eyes crimp at the edges, as if under the table her leg had been pricked by fork tines. She made a little shake of her head, mouth clamped for the moment, and then said, "I need to go away and be by myself for a while. I've talked to your father about it, and he's supporting me on this. It's not that big a deal, really, so I don't want you boys to worry about it so much. I'll be in touch with both of you, that goes without saying."

Bobby didn't really hear the last sentence or two. His vision had gone strangely white at the edges and then his thoughts had raced ahead on their own to a point two or three years into the future when he felt his parents would divorce. The phases of this vision snapped end to end with a kind of automatic logic. Separate visits, lots of phone calls, painful confessions, each member's life taking on its own lonely significance. That wink in the mirror from his father, an invitation to take sides, right? *You and me, we can handle her.* He shouldn't have smiled back. Several kids he knew had gone through this. He recalled forgotten episodes when he'd noticed his parents occupying distant positions in the house, their two bodies radiating separateness, which made more sense now. But other memories did not. He recalled glimpses of the two of them planning, talking, huddling, or extended episodes such as that time last year when they'd gone out to UConn to take the

walking tour with him, bracketed him like bookends through the entire walk, and muttered advice into each ear by turns; and years ago when the two of them had had the house expanded, the *addition*, night after night with his father carefully explaining, frustrated as he pointed to this line or that, and his mother not getting it ("I just don't have your three-dimensional sense," she'd say, or "I didn't ask for this, Vic. This was supposed to be your career change time.") and then, occasionally, the moments of laughter and teasing. The time his father had pulled his mother onto his lap right in the middle of some cousin's wedding reception dinner. He could remember grinning at Arlen, remember his brother's whiff haircut, and how people had clapped and called out even from across the room. He had laughed and choked and ginger ale had come out of his nose.

No one was speaking. "For how long, Mom?"

"I think a year. Maybe more."

Even through his own mild shock, Arlen noticed his father blink. Perhaps the "maybe more" hadn't been agreed on. If he knew his father, the man would have to say something soon. He waited for the moment when his father would start to take control.

Victor said, "I think we should feel proud that your mother..."

"Let her tell it, Dad," said Arlen, but not meanly.

"Right." Victor leaned back in the booth.

Jane said, "There's not much to tell. I feel, strongly, that I've never had the time I need to really know myself. I grew up--you've heard all these stories--in a big family where we each had about a square yard of space..."

"We're not a big family," said Bobby.

Arlen looked at him with surprise. "So now who's not letting her tell it?"

Bobby shrugged, smirked. "I'm letting her tell it. I just want to...get the whole thing."

Jane said, "I guess the best way to put it is that I need a kind of emotional space to work some things out in."

Arlen said, "I guess I'm not sure why they can't be worked on in the family."

Jane nodded. "I believe I still will be, just not in close proximity with you all."

I think that having space, actual space around me will work better for me. Or at least I'm hoping it will."

Victor had become aware, with the challenging, insistent logic that drove their questions at her, that the continual denial of the emotional space that she required was being demonstrated right there in that tiny booth. At the same time, he registered that they were three males and one female and for the very first time how important that simple fact might be. He looked from face to face, heard Jane start speaking--"I guess there are certain things..."--and felt strongly that he should step in and terminate the debating, the purported insistence on reasons and sense. He saw his two sons and himself as creatures, a wolf pack?, bent on establishing turf, or claims, rushing to replace the pickets that Jane was gently but persistently prying loose.

"Look, guys," he called out, and then turned quickly to Jane. "Sorry, honey, correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think you should be defending a need to find out something on your own." He looked to the boys. "Am I right here?"

The expression on Victor's face was momentarily shocking to his family. It appeared that he was desperate to be acknowledged to be correct. In compliance, the emotional ambience of their small shared space ebbed to calmness.

"Don't put it as a question, Dad," Arlen coaxed. "If you think you're right...."

Bobby said, "If you need it, Mom, then do it."

"Exactly," Arlen said. "I know this girl whose parents teach English in different countries every summer. Then they get back together in the fall and, you know...." He paused when he realized the two situations weren't the same. He hastened to add, "There's no standard way to run a family."

"Here's the food," said Jane, looking past them to where Tookie approached, salad bowls laid up one forearm.

As soon as the salads were set before them, Victor began to wolf his down. "At last." After a long, quiet pause, he added, "Hey, this is a good place, Arlen."

"That earring," said Jane. "Pretty cool." She smiled.

Bobby said, "Hell with the earring. He still wears double-knit pants."

Arlen groaned. "What is your investment in that peepy-dicky memory of me

and that one pair of corporate office pants. The damned things are moldering in a landfill even as we speak."

"I'm talking figuratively."

"You're talking through your ass."

They all laughed, even Bobby. Arlen told a long story about his latest gallery rejection, this one from a solid place on Newbury Street in Boston that had briefly courted him.

"Arlen, why are you in such a hurry?" Jane demanded. "Evolve. Someday, they'll be begging for you."

No one spoke for a few moments.

"He wants it all, and now," said Victor.

"Hey, I might not even enroll this year," said Bobby.

Both parents looked at him and then immediately at each other.

Arlen shrugged and said, "Okay, I'll bite. Why not?"

"Might work a year or two. Make some money, put you all to shame."

"You're teasing us, Bobby," Jane said, smiling as she pressed her fork firmly across a little heap of salad. Her eyes came up and held those of both sons, one after the other, and then rested on her husband's but as quickly looked away. All at once, an urge rose in her to confess particulars about her decision, particulars that her sons should never hear but that nonetheless were pressing at the back of her throat to be spoken, because with just a few sentences neither boy would deny her a chance to escape into peace and space for as long as she needed. But she must never tell them that sometimes when she looked at Victor, unbidden images invaded her thoughts--his hand on a young woman's thigh, or worse, her hand holding his distended penis. When these images assailed her, they stopped her breath, as they did now. A moment later, she pressed the napkin to her lips and rose to her feet.

"Bathrooms are in the back, Mom," said Arlen.

Father and sons looked down at their plates as she walked off, as if a request for complete privacy had been voiced.

Bobby broke the silence. "Think she'll go through with it, Pop?"

Victor shrugged. "I think she'll certainly go off somewhere," he said, with

eyes still on his plate. "I doubt if she'll stay away for a whole year, though. That's a long time."

Arlen had reached a very different conclusion. A moment ago, when his mother had walked away from the table, it had felt like a minuscule rehearsal for a larger event. He thought of the few times that his mother's eyes actually held to his. That linking happened so seldom, but it was powerful when it did, usually weighted with something, a puzzling complicity. A secret greater depth was revealed, of that he was certain, but it was only the sense of depth without details illuminated. The rest of the time, always looking a bit to one side, or down at her hands. And the way she ate her salad, as if she were blading the fork into a piece of pie. He thought back through the years of her steady, coolly poised presence among other adults, how she sat a bit sideways in stuffed chairs and leaned against couch arms, stood in doorways sometimes with her hands flat behind her on the doorjamb and, once in particular, with one knee cocked up beneath her long skirt. Had all that been a kind of faked confidence when it was desperation that she was feeling?

He continued to look down at his plate as if studying the configuration of torn lettuce and arugula. He realized that he really didn't know his mother very well at all.

Three
Two thousand miles.

As the plane taxied slowly toward the terminal, Jane felt her breaths coming shorter. What could she say about herself to the new people she would meet out here? There really wasn't very much that she knew for certain anymore. She was a woman who loved children, had wanted six but who'd had two, though the full truth was nearly three. She was a person who loved animals but who'd owned only one timid cat since she'd left her childhood home. She rolled her head, heavy with fatigue from the long flight, to the plane's tiny window. "Already things are coming clearer," she thought to herself, but she suspected that her mind had manufactured the thought to calm her.

She did know that if she had Foxy, her father's old Shepherd mix, right there in the plane with her, she'd hug him to her, right in plain sight. She'd hug his big warm body with her arms around his trunk, while he pranced in air for footholds, awkward with delight. She'd have a dog out here, that was sure.

Maybe things *were* coming clearer. She had forgotten about her father's old retriever for years, but then, just before the plane had begun its descent, she'd remembered that on the night of the miscarriage, years and years back, she had been dreaming about Foxy. Just when the dream had gone darker, when Foxy had begun whimpering and tapping her arm with his paw, she'd awakened with contractions and the girl-child had begun to slip from her. The dream and the physical sensations were nearly as clear now as they had been fourteen years ago. It had hurt, but not at first, and not as much as the mysterious cramping that had afflicted her through the pregnancies and births of her two sons. That sweet old dog had come back from the dead to warn her that she was losing Emily, or perhaps just to be with her.

Or had God played a trick on her? Sent Foxy as a diversion while He was taking her little girl back? She sighed at herself, so loudly that nearby passengers might have heard. How many years had she spent mulling over questions about God and

fate? Colossal wastes of time. From now on she would concentrate on the present.

The plane lurched gently to a halt. Outside in the dark a group of workers swarmed out. They seemed to be in a hurry, perhaps because the flight had come in very late and found no berthing at first. The workers' long shadows, cast by mounted lamps, swept before them like blades. From what she could see, they seemed to be members of a different gene pool from ones she'd known: smaller, darker, with sharper facial bones. The man with the orange stick and the enormous ear protectors had a black braid down his back. It swung out when he turned. She worried for him, briefly, wondering if that braid could be sucked into an engine vent or something. Now, two young women in mid-length blue shorts were rolling a ladder across the asphalt. A ladder that led up to and down from nothing.

Fear, a quick rising of it, took her by surprise. She was two thousand miles from home. What was she doing here? She tried to slow her breathing as a first sharp spasm dispersed in painful prickles along her ribs and up her back. She tried to breathe more deeply, just let the feeling move through her as certain books and magazine articles had told her to do. She had left her home.

She was saved by the chime that signaled permission to leave seats. Several impatient passengers were already on their feet and struggling, half-erect, beneath the low overhangs, tapping and banging the pimpled plastic luggage doors like chicks breaking from their egg casings. Now she stood to distract herself with the task of gathering her. When she yanked her bag to the front of the storage compartment, the nametag flopped down before her eyes. It wavered there in the dim light as if it were trying to catch her attention: Jane Bill. That was her name, Jane Bill. It had never seemed plainer, sillier, or more insubstantial. Bill was her married name, and she and Victor Bill had shared that small last name and endured for years the well-meaning puns of friends: "Hey, you made it. I was just telling Jim that the Bills were overdue. Ha, ha, ha." Her name at birth had been Jane Marie Verdianne. She decided on the spot that out here she would be Jane Verdianne again.

She was being kinder to herself too, did not see herself as so silly to have boarded this plane and come all this way. West Mesa Airport, Albuquerque. West *Mesa*, a wholly different word from those she used in daily speech back east. In the next

moments, she accepted as innocent the pounding of her heart as she smiled automatically at the final flight attendant and emerged from the plane's door and felt a blast of cold desert air--sharp and clear, piquant with clean silicates and thin like the first spank of dry white wine on the tongue. The sensations lifted back to life a few rough memories of her first visit to this land over twenty-five years before. She pressed away a thought about fate, its alleged mastery over the lives of mortals.

She kept her head down inside the terminal and headed for the baggage claim machinery. A two-hour delay from a missed connection in Denver had pressed her deeper into the night, deeper into the worrisome atmosphere of strange corridors glaring with artificial light. Hardly anyone was in the place. Her original plane full of fellow passengers had been winnowed rather than supplemented by the two connections en route, both of which had saved her money. Soon, one of her canvas bags, rumped and loyal like an old dog, was rolling toward her on the rubber conveyor belt. When she wrestled it away from its square plastic brothers, a skycap wheeled a cart to her side and reached past her to yank it hard from the floor onto the wire frame. What he mumbled at her she interpreted as a request for permission to act on her behalf. Perhaps this was the way they did it out here. "Yes," she said softly. There, she'd communicated with someone. Her other two bags came at them, side by side.

And then they were charging across the area, at the skycap's pace. He would want to get outside and back soon for another patron, she knew, but still she slowed a little. What she had first felt as anxiety had turned into excitement. Back in the plane, she had been awakened by a shuddering and looked out to discover the distant city's tracery spattered on deepest black. Now, all around her, pasted to the walls or screwed down in laminated panels, were ready images of space and grandeur--a slice of the Sandias, a length of the Rio Grande, several monoliths of pink welded tuff grouped like a family portrait. She turned to look, her long skirt swaying around her. Across the way, leaning against a closed rental car counter, a lone man watched her closely. He nodded and put two fingers to his cowboy hat. She smiled briefly at him, and then hurried out to catch up with her skycap.

Just outside the front doors a short man in black and silver stepped near and muttered, "Cab?" His eyes pulled at hers, gentle but desperate. Two other men in short

white shirts stood back, both of Spanish or Indian descent, or both--high cheekbones, short black hair. They appeared to be watching around them, as if policemen might appear and herd them away. Meanwhile, her skycap had swept on at the first cab in line.

"No, here!" she called out to him.

When he turned, she indicated the cab driver before her. The skycap shook his head vigorously. "No, here!" he called, nodding toward the first cab.

Her face grew warm. "I'm going with this man!" she called back, more loudly.

The skycap froze in place. Now her driver was walking quickly toward the skycap with his companions. In a moment, they had stripped the bags from the cart and hurried out into the loading area to where a long, greenish station wagon waited with its hazard lights weakly flashing. Jane stepped along a median between the station wagon and the skycap while fishing in her purse. Three dollars; no, five. She might have compromised the man in front of his peers. He met her half way, and she held out the bill--for anyone watching, a bestowal she hoped would signify her respect. He took the bill, bowed, turned, and loped off.

Inside the cab, she announced the name of her obscure mid-town motel to her renegade driver. As they drove off, someone cursed from the short line of cabs.

"Is a big problem," her driver called back to her. "The unions is trying to keep the independents out."

Jane nodded. "I see."

He was older than she'd first thought. There were several iron gray strands of hair mixed in with his jet-black lanks. She recalled that as he'd stepped near to her, several emblems pinned to his dark shirt had flashed in the light. Inside, she'd discovered other decorations embedded in the dashboard, including a pair of tiny plastic cattle horns and a molten, epoxy Jesus with a red bull's-eye heart glowing from a gash in its chest. Victor, her husband, would have never agreed to get into such a cab with her. He would have cautioned danger, and a spasm beneath her ribs accompanied this imaginary claim. But paperclipped to the visor on the passenger's side was a snapshot of her driver's face, smiling, with a baby pressed hard to his cheek, its dark head as small and rumped as a ripe avocado.

They were moving, steadily, without interruption. She took a breath and tried to

settle her mind among the silhouettes of black humped hills, each apparently a single mammoth stone that lay about like giant gravel in and among the flat, commercial bungalows strewn along the perimeters of the service roads and highway. The cooling desert air from her window would sometimes gust with warmth, a leftover pocket of sunburned atmosphere, or a curl of the airy current that had passed around one of the great stones, still hot from the September sun. How long before the excitement of novelty faded? What would she feel then?

Within her mind, a gloomy vision of her husband and two sons receded, not pillars of sealed volcanic ash but real flesh and blood. They would be of no help. They were back there, and now she was here, *here*. With her next breath, she reminded herself that she had a plan, that it had short-term and long-term phases, and that with this plan she would better herself and become stronger and when stronger return to strengthen her family. She was over forty, and people over forty could take care of themselves. She might have prayed for guidance at one time, but no longer. She had no use for God; He let bad things happen to children and animals. She knew all the arguments, that bad experiences toughened them up. For what, more pain? Any plan that allowed for children's suffering had nothing to do with any goodness she might consider. Pain was something to get out of, and she meant to do just that. She'd had enough of it. For the moment, she needed only to concentrate on getting to Santa Fe the next day.

The driver half turned to her and asked, "You is here for the balloons?"

She thought for a moment. What could he mean? Then with a rush she remembered the problems she'd had securing a motel room for this first night. "Oh, the festival!"

"Fi-e-sta," he corrected. His articulations pounced magnificently from vowel to vowel of his native Spanish. He ee'd the "i" and ay'd the "e," and completed the "s" before launching the "t." He was instructing her; already he'd pegged her as a non-local. "But you'll see them. You cannot miss them, they is going up everywhere, filling the sky. Practicing, I think."

"Ah."

He asked more questions about her, rapidly growing more loquacious as if they two were old friends. It was difficult to keep her answers simple. No, no, she hadn't

come for the balloons. A vacation? "No, a long rest," she answered simply, but within her chest her unpredictable heart was pressing more words to her throat. She admitted in silence that she'd come to escape, that she had fled the flat, placid faces of therapists who sat across rooms folded in armchairs, heads rising and falling like moored boats. She had fled the sudden, incalculable emptiness of her home. She had fled the swelling store of unspoken words that had gradually pressed into the widening space between her and her husband. She had fled to escape her unlikable self and to create one that she liked.

To distract her mind, she pricked her ears for the driver's diction. It sounded so delightful to her: "People is really nice out here," he was saying.

"I feel that already." She spoke with conviction.

Very soon, they arrived at the motel. They had driven without slowing, as if there were no traffic lights in the land. Now they were here, and with a sharp stab of panic she realized she should have called ahead to the motel when they'd landed. As she fumbled for the fare, she looked up to check for light in the office window. It would be all right; motel owners never slept.

But inside she had to listen to her voice's trembling as she confronted a narrow, white-haired man behind the motel counter who professed to have no record of her reservation. Her first look into his watery, bluish eyes unnerved her, so she argued with his string tie instead. That alien article distracted her a little from her recurring terror at being homeless in a strange city. From where had that chunk of amber-veined, calcified material been hacked before it was sawn flat and polished and, finally, bonded to the silver clasp that held those twin braids?

I've become so weak, she thought.

With age she'd managed the strength to look most people in the eye, sit across tables in very tense professional situations and make her thoughts known, but here she was staring at silver-tipped braids jiggling on a white shirt front piped with contrastive stitching and potted with beige stains. The man's eyes were so watery and pale, like the eyes of something spawned in a cave.

Instinctively, she appealed beyond him to a soft, turnip-shaped woman seated in a back room within the numbing rapid-fire repartee of a late-night sitcom. Her words began to penetrate the woman's consciousness, setting the soft body into motion. Now

the woman rose and turned and came forward with an averted smile. She leaned forward to peer under the counter beside the man. "Here," she said, and came up with a slip of paper. "We never put it in the book."

There would be no nice room on this first night, just a spillover space with tiny windows in the far corner. It was cheaper by a third, but she had to wrestle her bags in two long trips to the high distant corner of the long, two-story structure, all iron and rust-colored blocks. The effort left her breathless and close to tears. In the shower she did weep, for a full minute. The few tears squeezed free and mixed with the hard water squirting oddly from the encrusted nozzle. She stayed on, healing under the hot water, a plentiful supply despite the motel's crammed roster, and tried to exorcise her husband from her thoughts. Her vulnerability at the motel counter had brought him back, and now too the acts of undressing and showering brought him back, the mind so powerful it could collapse two thousand miles of distance in an instant.

To banish him, she concentrated on his heavy solicitousness at the Boston airport, how between questions his silent, breathless bulk had telegraphed his distrust of her ability to take care of herself. It was one of several episodes in their history when he'd refused to understand her; this time, that now she needed to take care of herself--not just "be on her own" (as she kept overhearing him put it to friends) but be the one who took care of her. One thing she'd learned, there was something wrong with the way God and husbands took care of you. There was always some kind of debiting being silently recorded.

It was almost better to be mad at him for the moment; she'd miss him less. How he'd huffed when she finally spat out that the third bag was fine, just *fine*, where she'd dumped it on the back seat. All through the wait for boarding he had sat beside her like a warmed gargoyle, his two stony hands affixed to hers. That her carefully laid out steps from door to airport left him only a small area for participation was less the point than his faking sadness. If his sadness had been genuine, fine, but she knew that his real feelings had been anger and resentment. When she refused yet again to reveal her final destination (he knew it as far as Cincinnati, her first connecting point), he whined, "So you're going to stick to that silly idea." The problem with his emotional support was that it had an end to it, it only ran so far. And hadn't her awareness of its end in the near-distance

always distracted her, throughout their marriage, forced her always to step behind some protective wall within her and peer out as its cut end slid up?

She braced herself for a moment before turning off the shower; the silence would rush in upon her. It did, but the work of drying off was shockingly quick. The arid air? She was soon into her nightdress. Soon, too, her hair had dried to a curling, blondish heap. She might sleep through the night after all; already a mental heaviness was pressing through the jet lag, as if her body were dropping through clouds. She might awaken to daylight. Cheered, she decided to repack her bags until sleep overtook her, perhaps send one bag home as a kind of ritualistic shedding. She'd only just opened the first bag when the oversized Cadbury bar tumbled free from where she'd stashed it among her underwear. It lay on the spread like a wrapped bar of gold.

The sight of the thing made her gasp brought back the last days of feverish packing, the combination of exhilaration, bafflement, and guilt that had settled around her like a loose netting. Had she really thought she would need that heavy slab of chocolate to see her through some sort of unforeseen crisis? She decided to throw the thing away. She didn't need it. She dropped it into the waste basket, wheeled about, gripped her upper arms, and strode to the window to look out. But when she drew back the curtain, the window glass repelled her so sharply and intensely that the sensation took her breath away. An old phobia of looking out of windows when it was dark outside returned in force. Was this how her new life would begin? With old fears deepened and invigorated?

She made a small choking laugh in the center of the empty bathroom, amused to be panicking while acknowledging the genuineness of the panic itself. She was just alone, that was all. Still, how discouraging that her old business with windows had come along with her. With a sigh, she walked from the bathroom and set the Cadbury bar exactly in the center of the bureau, a tip for the housekeeper. Ta-tah!

Soon, she lay in the center of the bed with her ankles crossed, waiting for sleep. On the night of the miscarriage, she'd lain down quiet and trusting and awoken to the aching of Emily's expulsion into the world, dead. And Foxy, who'd come to her in that dream, they'd put him down, her parents had, before he was ready. She'd protested when her mother told her what the vet said, but not loud and not long enough. There might be

the need for tears and panic out here and, who knew?, even a total collapse of some sort at the end, but she would not be caught by surprise again. She had come to fight, fight for all that best that was still within her.

Four

On the bosom of Mother Nature.

Jane grew sleepy before the bus reached the Albuquerque city limits, despite all the coffee she'd drunk at the motel. Her head dropped back on the bus seat. She pressed the seat release, slipped back, and let the bus take her into the spacious embrace of the desert. Everything was so wonderfully different, though, that she couldn't sleep. Even the ramshackle poverty of homes at the city's margin seemed romantic. Up ahead, a brown boy in sneakers and tiny white briefs rode a little bicycle around and around a front yard of packed clay. Once they were on the string-straight highway that would take her to Santa Fe, the bright expanses of land tinted rose and orchid pried at her heavy eyelids. She gazed deeply, head rolling, drinking in the blurred, dusty-blue bushes spaced below the raised arms of spiny plants. The spiny ones would be cholla; she'd read about them. All along the drainage ditch beside the road, flat pads of cactus interlocked and spilled down. Beaver tail. She was glad to have chosen to take the last leg by bus, to ease into her new town by taking a broad measure of its setting.

A few miles out, the bus driver announced through rasping static that they were passing the main balloon launching area. Behind Jane, an old woman said, "Ooh." They drew beneath an immense globe illustrated with a crown of flames, the whole rising slowly into the blue like a purified soul. The next thing she knew the bus was lurching to the curb outside of an open convenience store. She sat up, blinking.

"This here's Santa Fe," said a skinny boy beside her. That seat had been empty when they'd started. She stared for a moment at the boy whose head supported an enormous cowboy hat made of woven straw. He could not have been much past thirteen.

"Thank you," she said. She checked an impulse to run the back of her hand along his cheek. "You traveling alone?"

"My dad called me to help him. He's a carpenter, got work settin up for the

fiesta." He was already on his feet, pulling down a heavy bag.

"I've got two grown boys myself," she told him as they made their way to the front. But those boys were miles and miles away. She ached briefly to have both Arlen and Bobby back a decade younger; she'd touch them so much more often.

She did touch this boy, quickly, sneakily, just as she reached the front of the bus behind him. She laid a hand on his shoulder, as if using him to guide her forward. His big hat swung halfway about, then, at the door, the brim lifted to reveal his watchful eyes.

She smiled at him. "Your dad's lucky to have such a helper. Good luck."

"Same to you, Ma'am."

As she gathered with others to wait for attendants to fish out their luggage, she saw the boy heave his bag into the back of a parked pickup truck and then slip through the door shoved open by a wide male silhouette. The tiny scene seemed so poignant to her, so fraught with earned intimacy and pride that she grinned right there on the sun-scoured walkway.

Her hotel, the LaFonda, was not two hundred feet from where the bus stopped. She left two of her bags just inside the store beside several others. There was a safe, honest ambience to the town that she sensed instantly, that she hadn't sensed anywhere else in years. She lurched with her single suitcase, unbalanced against her lighter shoulder bag, gawking as she walked at the postcard purity of the downtown square. The streets were clean, the storefronts shining with good paint, and planters and corbels and stair faces set with gleaming tiles. Whitewashed adobe and bare terra-cotta walls closed around glimpsed patios like so many welcoming embraces. Her hotel, too, was a welcoming sight; it was wound about with a terrace, spangled with small-paned windows, decorated with huge glazed planters that gushed bougainvillea and bird of paradise. Exhilarated, Jane stepped into the lobby.

A woman instantly recognized as the hotel matron, a sturdy, middle-aged woman with a mien from an earlier century, had posted herself at the counter as if particularly awaiting Jane's arrival. The woman sent a dark, thin man to fetch Jane's other bags, and then grabbed the single suitcase in her own stable grip and lead the

way through a maze of narrow halls, up two floors on the elevator, and finally into a spacious room full of hewn wood appointments. Across the room, two terrace doors were so heavily flooded with light that they appeared to be forced ajar by it. The matron gabbled efficiently, "bassroom," "leenens," "cable televeejun," while turning in a circle and flinging out a hand. She disappeared just as the thin man appeared with Jane's two other bags. He smiled at her for a moment longer than necessary in the doorway, and with a start she reached for her billfold to extract some dollars bills for him. He seemed pleased with the amount and saluted with two fingers as he backed toward the stairs. A moment later Jane stood alone beside the double bed, still groggy with the deep napping in the bus.

She took a breath and then sighed and then the phone rang. Tentatively, she lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

"Jane?"

"Charlotte!" It was her next older sister.

"You made it! You did it! How *are* you? How does it *feel*?"

"Charlotte, my God, I just now walked into my room, I haven't been in town ten minutes. How in the world did you know I'd be here yet?"

Charlotte lowered her voice. "I didn't, but my boss slipped out for a meeting and I thought I'd take a chance and stick the company with the bill. I can't even talk long, honey, but I thought you might want to hear a friendly voice."

"Oh, Charl, you can't know how much it *means* to hear your friendly voice. I hope I didn't make a mistake by doing this." She didn't feel she had, the words just came out.

"Ease up, honey. Nobody's going to *die* or anything because of it."

"I know, I know...." Jane plunked down on the bed and whipped the cord over her knee. "But I might end up not married anymore."

"Well, that was quick. Hey, I gotta go. I'll call..."

"No, not yet. Please. Charl, it's so clear to me now that I got married for all the wrong reasons, I was never a good wife." Where were these words coming from?

"So who didn't and who ever was?" Charlotte laughed hard. "Slow down!"

Whatever you learn it will all be for the best. Just remember to breathe the air and smell the roses. I'm so proud of you, but listen, I gotta go. I'll call tomorrow. By the way, your cell phone says it isn't accepting calls or something."

"Really?"

Then the far, cheering voice was gone. Jane hung up and actually blushed to have so quickly gushed such silly confessions. Slowly, she stretched out on her side. Charlotte, always so blithe, so accepting of her own lot. She seemed so satisfied with still being a secretary at forty-seven, and still so playful about getting caught copping a personal call at her age. Most people seemed satisfied with so little. The thought made her feel self-indulgent, even greedy. With a fingertip, she traced a huge print of a peony blossom on the spread, where she might have expected to find some sort of Navajo pattern. Should she have just settled into satisfaction over the years? Was that "maturity"?

The next thing she knew she awoke, still flat out on the peony-print spread in her new hotel room. She couldn't keep dropping off like this. She had to rouse herself and call Ruth Jameson and make arrangements to move into the new, temporary home she'd arranged for herself. But first, a quick rinse in the shower, to be fresh and presentable.

The spacious bathroom confirmed how extravagant her choice of a hotel had been. A custom-made mirror rimmed with weathered wood ran the length of a double sink. Most of the walls were tiled to chest height with coral and sand-colored squares, the coral ones arranged in evenly spaced crosses. The deep tub was a pink well. Above, riven beams peaked through stucco. It was a transporting experience to take a shower in that beautiful little environment.

Afterwards, at the mirror she peered at the age lines of her own face and thought of her mother, pictured her wheeled smoothly through the halls of a nursing home a few miles from Sissy's apartment in LA. She thought about, and admired, the old woman's tenacity, her relentless letter writing, her insistence on cleaning her own room and using old family sheets and pillowcases that she cherished, the discipline with which she ordered her long days in a progressive institution with its heated pool and craft classes and tiny theatre for presentations by visiting speakers

and artists. (Her dead father had planned carefully for his wife, pushed to secure and hold a shorter term mortgage to get the house paid off, kept up his life insurance payments, all in the face of otherwise near poverty.) Her mother's long emails contained so much genuine talk, excitement equally proportioned in her descriptions of tiny events transpiring in window boxes or terrible ends to fellow residents. There was always lots of news about her six brothers and sisters too; she learned from those messages that Sissy was still doing well in real estate and that Charlotte's youngest daughter, Jennifer, was getting great grades in high school--but she found her mind prying between each line for words that she'd grown anxious to find, though she could not have listed a single one if asked.

When she opened the closet door, she was surprised by the reflection of her own naked body in a full length mirror. Her breasts were still nice, she concluded, though the nipples had been darkened from breastfeeding. Her waist had filled a little, her hips taken on a boxier shape, the upper curves thickening to more corner than curve. The caesarian scar was always a shock, but the thick, ginger-colored pubic hair hid most of it. She realized that at some level she was pretending to be a man who might look at her and find her still attractive. She'd been bred to please, all right. With irritation, she grabbed a robe and disappeared into it.

The sight of her scar always sparked an ineradicable memory. Late in the third and final pregnancy, her obstetrician had explained with an embarrassed smile that the daughter she thought she was bearing was actually to be a son. Some misreading of the ultrasound, a not uncommon foul up. She had puzzled over the error, distantly, as all the bright and possibly silly images in her mind of hair braiding and dressmaking and deep talking dimmed and shimmered away, again. In her eighth month, she began cramping, more often and worse until she often awoke late at night to wonder if she were miscarrying again. The doctors, Victor, everyone said she was being irrational, to relax and wait out these false contractions.

But then one afternoon she'd gotten up from her desk at Emerson College, the baby too still for too long inside her, and walked outside of the building and weakly hailed a cab on the corner of Massachusetts Avenue. At Beth Israel Hospital, the young intern, calm at first, began to betray something with his repeated

"Hmm's" as instruments flurried through his hands. Then, he and other staff people were talking in the hall, and then all at once a team of doctors and nurses were assembling around her and speaking at her in short, strong sentences as they pressed closer.

"I'm afraid we must go in."

"There's no time, Mrs. Bill."

"It has to be now."

And all the while, hands were moving her wrists back and opening her sleeves and other hands were unhooking her skirt. "Oh my God," she whispered hoarsely at the ceiling as they bore her backwards onto a gurney. Her eyes had gone wide, like a cow's going to slaughter.

"Just try to relax, Mrs. Bill, Dr. Stillman is on the way."

Her clothes kept coming off. "He's not dead, is he?" she gasped. By then she was willing them to hurry even faster.

No one answered, and then a man strode up with a syringe. "I'm just going to give you a topical...."

As someone whipped a curtain closed, she felt a sharp prick and then a moment later she heard a rasping sound and felt her belly peeling open under the scalpel. It cut deeper and deeper with a sharp, insistent penetration that outstripped the spreading, tingling numbness of a local anesthetic. At the first jerking of her knee in response to the pain, hands clamped harder on her wrists and thighs. Blood spiderwebbed thickly across her ribs. "Best to keep your head back, honey," a nurse told her as she held her right arm to the bed frame. Her left arm remained cuffed in someone else's two-handed grip. A minute later, four other hands were rummaging inside her abdomen below crisscrossed swathes of bloodied pads and then before her eyes, Bobby came up blue and still and smeared as if he'd drowned in a raspberry aspic. He was held there, aloft, for only the second needed for the metallic snip that freed him from her, and then he was swung off. A herd of footsteps rustled off with him.

"Oh my God, is he dead?" she wailed. She struggled to rise, to go after him because he would need her, and because if he had a breath of life still in him then he

must know in the last moment of his short life that she had always really wanted him. She writhed to be free, but the hands had her. "No, no," someone said beside her head. A command, or an answer to her question? Two of the masked figures were lifting handfuls of bloody tissue from the hole in her middle. She faded into unconsciousness as they began to stitch her closed.

He had lived. He had lived. Jane pulled the robe closer around herself. *What she needed was to be opened up again, right?* Ironic to consider. She remembered that her mother's favorite childhood book, *Peter Pan*, had begun with that strange prelude about Mary Darling's having a little box hidden deep inside herself to whom she gave no one the key, not even her husband John. That part had always scared her. She'd stayed very closed up after Bobby's birth, hadn't she? Every moment she'd been home from the intensive care nursery, her leaking breasts pumped of milk, she'd just sat on the back porch and bitten her nails.

She really must get going, call Ruth Jameson, make the connection to ensure her moving into the apartment that afternoon. She clapped her hands to her thighs, smiling at their spring. As she strode off to dress, she fastened on Sissy's lifelong envy of her, and then Victor's strangely abiding approval, he a handsome man yet with poor women like Alice Cunningham and Jenny Stuart playing up to him, all that makeup so carefully worked around their faces. She suppressed a few quick thoughts about her miscarried daughter, briefly gauged the agony of another try, thought that with her luck another boy, came back with a shock to the realization of strict warnings about the tilt to her womb, a result of scarring from the hurried C-section, and then felt anew the sharp sad feeling that accompanied the mental image of her inward disfigurement.

As she dressed, she thought of how her tough mother must be ashamed of her, for her rocky marriage, for running off like this. She thought of Bobby and Arlen down in Providence, how the whole house had collapsed around Bobby's departure. Her plan to leave had been only an idle dream until he'd left, but wasn't part of it the need to break old patterns? It had been comforting for her, his mother, to be "on call" in a sense. In truth, it had always been seductively easy to be a mother. But a wife. It was frightening that she still could not define what that particular role

demanded--being a friend to someone you had a lot of sex with at first and then less later? It had frightened her how often she found herself carelessly probing the useless columns of women's magazines for meaningful advice. Often, when she was alone in the house, she'd snap on a radio talk show. Nobody knew anything of use, they slapped Band-Aids on open wounds. Or they might be on to something, like talking to each other more, but they had no idea how entrenched dishonesty could become in human communication.

She had to keep breathing deeply as she dressed, to calm herself. How silly to want to shower and change before making a telephone call. But she knew why; she was putting it off, because she wanted to feel just right, because something would go wrong. Her forward progress might be stopped. At least she felt snug and comfortable for the moment in her light flower-print dress and sandals.

When she strapped on her watch the face showed ten past noon. Okay, time to connect with her new landlady; her phone, however, refused to put through a call. When she hit the dial icon, it brought her right back to the home image of her three men's heads crowded together like a small bunch of white grapes. She now read "No Service" just below their smiles.

How did one call a cell phone service if one's cell phone was not working? Beside the hotel telephone was a little card that cheerily announced telephone surcharges for outside calls. There would be only one, though, right? The phone rang on the other end, and then continued to ring until an auto-receptionist announced a long menu, which Jane dutifully navigated. Another voice told her that all technicians were busy helping other customers. She was put on hold and forced to listen to jazz fusion. A blunder that she had not thought to call the landlady first and *then* her cell phone service. Oh well, it was only mid-day.

She hunched on the edge of the bed, phone receiver clamped to her jaw, and filed her nails. No money spent on manicurists or hair stylists, she reflected with pride. Not Jane Bill...no, wait! Jane *Verdianne*. She did her own nails and cut her own hair, and neither badly. After twenty minutes a human voice came on the line and the shock sent the phone bouncing into the air. Jane reeled it in and she and her technician discovered within just a few minutes that something in her cell phone did

not like to talk to the towers intermittently strung across the Santa Fe high plateau. She would need a different something card, which would be mailed to her immediately but would not reach her for a day or two. "There's no other way?" she pleaded. "Isn't there a kind of store I could go to for that?" Yes, there was! In Albuquerque.

With another hour wasted, Jane finally put through the call to her landlady. The phone rang for a few moments on the other end and then a message announced that calls for Ruth Jameson should be directed to Wayne Jameson at another number, which was enunciated so quickly that Jane had to call back again to get it written down. When she dialed it, apprehensively, a woman answered at once, "Bonita Realty," as if posing a question. Jane asked tentatively for Mr. Jameson and was told that he was out to lunch but would be back at one-thirty. "Any message?"

"Does he have a cell phone number I could call?"

"I'm sorry. He leaves it at the office so that he can have his lunch undisturbed. It gets very hectic around here."

Jane physically scowled. What kind of realtor was ever without his cell phone? "I see. Okay, well, I'm calling about a studio that I've rented from Mrs. Jameson..."

"Oh, yes, well you see she's fallen very ill. Mr. Jameson is taking care of matters. He's her brother."

"Oh no. Well, I'm very sorry to hear that she's ill."

"Yes. It was unexpected."

"I guess just please tell Mr. Jameson to expect my call."

She would take the new number with her out onto the streets of Santa Fe, call back from some quaint cafe somewhere. Everyone was so pleasant she imagined that they would allow her to place a quick call, if she happened to linger too long outside her room. It had been stupid to wait until the lunch hour to call, and now this illness business. On her way out, she did think to check on the possibility of stretching her reservation through another day, just in case. The matron was there in the lobby, solid as a block, scrutinizing a pile of paper slips stuffed into an open ledger. Without raising her eyes, she told Jane that the hotel was booked up. "The

festival," she explained with a shrug.

"Ah," Jane replied simply, though she wondered that balloon enthusiasm could stretch all the way across the desert from Albuquerque. She might have made a call to another motel at that point, but the matron, peering up at her clouded face, pointed to the ceiling and said, "I think something is going to open up. There is some people who hasn't confirmed."

Outside on the large central plaza, men in trucks marked Rentals International milled about as if planning some sort of civic event. She wandered by them, then down an adjoining street. Soon, a pair of open, heavy doors, reddish and split so deeply that she could see through in places, drew her into a sparsely planted patio and then several rooms of paintings and cases of pottery specimens and coyote skulls. She emerged half an hour later into shockingly bright sunlight and found herself on a strange street crowded with small twisted trees and fences made of simple wire as if strung up to hold in those strange trees. Small houses, all with plain dirt yards, hid behind the thick growth. She walked on and on, lost in a dreamland of thrilling truancy, and then all at once she felt worried and stupid. When she turned on her heels, over the trees she saw the whole downtown off in the distance, surely a quarter-mile or more. The distance, though short, made a sharp pain flare beneath her ribs.

Had she fled so far just to discover that she'd brought her same strange self along with her? Just strange, with no pattern to it, so that one colleague would call her a life-saver and the one in the next office, unknowable. She turned left at the nearest corner because she sensed a more heavily paved surface in the distance. Soon, she came out of the small forest to a roadway that clung as closely as a snake to a weaving cliff face. A vehicle approached, revealed itself to be a cab, and the driver slowed before she even waved. He cheerily brought her back to the hotel.

She felt a bit chastened, and silly, as if she were slinking back into town. Now it was almost two o'clock. She had meant to give Jameson plenty of time to get back to his office, but not quite so much time. Out on the plaza, a bandstand was materializing under the flailing hammers of three small, swarthy men as nearly alike as triplets. She mentally wondered if she were stereotyping but concluded, with

relief, that they had to be at least three closely spaced brothers. A steel pole sprouting four identical bullhorns stood in the plaza's center like a giant metal amaryllis. The city certainly seemed to be gearing up. Logically, all these activities struck her as signs of diminishing vacancies, but she stayed uncharacteristically calm, which she interpreted as a sign of growth.

Back in the room, she fumbled the dialing on the first try, but on the second, a voice exploded after the first ring. "Mrs. Bill, there you are!"

"Hello, Mr. Jameson. What a relief to hear your voice."

"Well, you might not think that in a moment. There's been a big change and I'm kicking myself for not calling you earlier. My sister, Ruth, she's in the hospital."

Jane brought her other hand up the receiver. "So I heard. I hope it's not serious."

"Pretty much, I'm afraid. Anyway, her house is all shut down for the moment until we can sort out what's going to happen."

Jane sucked in her breath. "Oh no! Are you saying that I can't stay there?"

"That's about right. Boy, I'm kicking myself for not calling you..."

"But, mightn't you want someone to stay there, watch the place?"

"We thought about that, but it'd just be one more complication, if you know what I mean. What if Ruth doesn't come out of this tailspin and then you're in the house, and...you can see what I mean."

"I suppose so. But, Mr. Jameson. The fact is that I have no other place to stay. And there's the deposit." She laughed giddily. "The hotel is..."

"We all batted that around, Mrs. Bill..."

"I'm going by Verdianne these days, Mr. Jameson. But please, just call me Jane."

"Oh, okay Jane. Divorced, I guess, eh?"

There was a sub-auditory tone of something more than simple curiosity that gave her a split second's pause.

"No, not exactly." She stopped. She didn't need to tell him anything more, did she? Besides, the more she told the less attractive a tenant she might seem. "Did you say you thought about...the problem?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed, as if coming to. "I've got a few properties, and one is a garden apartment with a private entrance that I'd be glad to rent you. You can keep it, or move on later if you like. How does that sound?"

"That sounds wonderful! I'm so relieved. Can I please see it right now? I'm sort of in a bind...."

"Sure you can. You driving?"

"No, I didn't actually rent a car."

"I could sneak out early and pick you up. Hey, it's Friday, right?"

"That would be wonderful."

"Where are you right now?"

"I'm at the Hotel LaFonda."

"Sure. Let's say I pick you up in an hour."

"I might go downstairs and get something to eat. Can I watch for you out front?"

"I can just text you when I arrive."

"Ugh. My phone needs a different card of some kind."

"Ah, okay. I'll be driving a blue Toyota coupe."

"Great. I'll watch for you." She laughed.

Downstairs, it was easy to find a table with a view of the circular driveway in the front. She claimed the table, ordered a turkey sandwich, and trotted off to the tiny "business center" off the main lobby, a room with three computers, a telephone, and an all-in-one printer. She found three other motels within what she guessed would not be drastically expensive cabbing distance and wrote down their numbers. She had to wait for another customer to free up the phone, but she copped a lesson on how to use punch in her room number to place outside calls. All three motels were full--My God, just how popular were those garish hot air balloons anyway!--but one of their websites linked her to site with a decidedly homemade look, the Santa Fe Community Billboard. There was a tab labelled Rentals, and then a text box edged with a doily pattern opened up to announce in bold letters, *Beanfield Beauty, freestanding home perched on the bosom of Mother Nature. Rates flexible as a black hose in July. Still available.* She wrote down the landlord's name and number, but in

the next moment decided against calling. She could only imagine what sort of place that was, and what sort of landlord.

She thought to check in with the matron once again, but the desk was abandoned for the moment. A courtesy phone was turned enticingly in her direction, though, so on an impulse she pulled out her notepaper and dialed the number for the bean field beauty. A nattering, vintage dial tone rolled over twice and then a loud voice jumped out of the receiver at her ear. "Yo!"

"Hello, yes." Jane took a breath. "I'm trying to reach an Emmitt C. Hewitt?"

"You've reached him. His voice, anyway."

"Yes, well, my name is Jane Verdianne..."

"You callin about my bean field beauty?"

"I am, yes."

"Well, it's available. It ain't much, but it is real clean and it's pretty cheap."

Jane hesitated. "Can you tell me a little about it?"

"Well, there ain't much to tell. It's got the standard sleepin loft, kitchen's all butane. Nice view of my bean field, of course, and you gotta take a quick shower mornings cause the tank's pretty small."

Jane tried hard to piece these snippets of description to something resembling her bottom-line studio apartment. To make matters worse, she had to strain to hear him when a Mariachi band took up position outside the hotel's front doors and struck up throatily. Beyond them, a crowd of people were following a tall, clown-like figure with what appeared to be blood on its billowing coveralls. "I guess I don't understand, Mr. Hewitt. Is this apartment somewhat separate from the house or something?"

"Separate! I'll say it's separate. It's a goddam *trailer* is what it is. Say, are you from out of town? Don't you know what 'free-standing' means?"

Jane laughed, surprised that she could laugh. "I'm so sorry. I'm such an idiot. I've taken up your time for nothing."

"Hey, that's okay." The man was laughing on the other end. She imagined him with lots of gray whiskers and a red bandana around his neck. He seemed very friendly, and perhaps even kind. "Give me a ring if you change your mind."

"I might have to," she said. A lie, because she'd already decided against the place. "I can't seem to get anyone else on the phone."

"That's probably on account of lots of people is taking in the festival."

"Yes, I know, but I haven't seen a single balloon, not like down in Albuquerque."

There was a long silence on the other end. "Well, I guess that would be strange, no balloons in a celebration." He laughed uncertainly.

Jane felt she had created some sort of confusion. "They were beautiful from the bus on the way into town," she explained. She grimaced at her chattiness. How weak she was, she couldn't let go of even a stranger's voice and after only two days.

"On the bus?" said Hewit. "Say, wait a minute. What kind of balloon we talkin about here? The little itty bitty kind or the great big kind you ride around in up in the sky?"

"The big kind...up in the sky."

Hewit's laughter burst against her ear. "Balloon Fiesta! No, that ain't it. It's the Santa Fe Festival that's happenin up here. Comes back like the locusts every year."

Jane nodded at no one, and then an explosion outside made her start. She turned to see a woman swiping at two adolescent boys who were dodging away from her. Firecrackers? Now the matron appeared and charged past her toward the front doors, fortunately leaving her alone with the phone for a bit longer.

"I guess I am a little confused," Jane said to Mr. Hewit. "Excuse me, but if I were to happen to call you back, sometime today say, when would be a good time?"

"Just about anytime fore nine o'clock. I go to bed early."

"No, I meant during the festival. I mean, aren't you going to it?"

He laughed his barking laugh again. "Hey, lady, celebrate a bunch of blood-thirsty Spaniards' kickin some poor Pueblo Indians' asses? I'd rather root for the Pueblos, thank you."

"I see. But I seem to be right in the middle of it all." Would she ever let herself get off the phone?

"Oh, you downtown there?"

"Yes, I'm staying at the La Fonda."

"The La Fonda! Ooh whee. That's a fancy joint."

Jane laughed. "It's just a single night's extravagance. Till I get settled." All at once she became sickeningly anxious about her situation. She hadn't confirmed an additional night anywhere. It was suddenly obvious and stupid that she had not. She could have simply cancelled the second night once she had truly secured the Jameson apartment.

Her sandwich was waiting patiently at her table. She wolfed it down with helpful gulps of iced tea. She would freshen up for Mr. Jameson, check her teeth for specks of lettuce, splash some water on her cheeks. In keeping with what she was beginning to guess was a local sense of hygiene, the tiny bathroom off the lobby was immaculate. Her mood was further dimmed by the discovery of some spotting on her panty liner, a bit of inter-period bleeding that always signaled stress for her. At once, she felt the small, curtained window at her back. As she brushed her hair, she tried not to look at the window's reflection, but as always she could not prevent herself from looking. Now she looked, her eyes pulled helplessly to it. No matter how quickly she did it, no matter how fleeting the glance, her mind would helplessly grip and hold the image of the window while her sense of privacy faded into fear. The trick was to face the fear squarely by forcing herself to look out. When she turned and flipped back the short patterned curtain, she found a view of only four walls close around a little service patio, plastic trash barrels scattered about, mops propped and drying. But there, just behind the edge of a blue dumpster, a narrow passageway between two high walls afforded a glimpse of very distant mountain peaks. The sight instantly brought back a strong, recurring memory.

The memory consumed her as she returned to her table, held her so strongly that she barely tasted the sandwich she had ordered. She must have been about fifteen at the time when her father had decided to check out a rumor of construction prospects in the Southwest. "Why would we ever move out there?" she'd asked her mother while the two of them were folding laundry together.

"I guess he's tired of bouncing around between car joints."

If they did, she was thinking, she'd never see Jeff or Tommy again. Boys who

made her feel good, when they were being nice.

As it happened, she'd gotten to go along because her good grades had won her a scholarship to a special high school that had a spring break out of sequence with her siblings' schools. Her parents left the other kids under the uneasy surveillance of Grandma and Grandpa Kilhoughy, from her mother's side, the source of her own blue eyes and light hair, and the three of them piled into that enormous station wagon that her father kept running somehow and just went.

They set off from their shoddy Kansas City neighborhood, a flat, square-cornered tract of square, red-brick homes that better neighborhoods had closed around, and within a few hours the landscape had changed from the last of the verdant hills to flatlands and then to the rolling red earth near Oklahoma City. "Look," her mother said brightly, pointing at this or that--a hill with a farmhouse, a specimen tree, a flock of crows. She had always begged Charlie, as she called her husband, to take them on trips away from their cramped little house, but he always cited expenses, mostly upcoming college tuition in those days, and, hey, who was it anyway who was always talking about saving for a bigger house? Late in the second day, when the view began to include plateaus and scrubby bushes, Jane grew irritated, novel as the traveling was, that there would probably be no boys to flirt with in those mostly unpopulated spaces.

It was comforting to finally pull into a town with a thickening nest of aerial wires, storefronts to explore, the inviting glow of neon. At the motel she pleaded for the first shower. Delightfully, her hair dried in a few minutes, a sensation she missed every day after their return to Kansas. Perhaps the area had a few things to recommend it. As she luxuriated in the private space of the bathroom, she tuned into the aural clues that would tell her how much more time she had before someone complained. She heard her father rattle the newspaper; so, he was still propped up on the bed and occupied. She could picture him there in his usual white T-shirt, his thick dark hair lightly oiled and combed back from an even part, his black-brown eyes frowning at the print. Her mother's even pacing to and fro telegraphed in squeaks from the cheap floorboards beneath the thin carpeting. She imagined her mother smiling as she brought each small handful of clothing from the

suitcases to its perfect space in a drawer, as if they were moving into a new home and not just crashing in a cheap motel for a night.

The bathroom felt close and hot after the shower, so she raised the small opaque window an inch to let in some cooler air. Outside, the view was so wholly unexpected that she gasped. She brought her eyes close to the opening. Outside was nothing, and nothing for countless miles. She had not known what to expect, but at least an alley, another building, or even a free-standing trailer with some big steel drums against it, but there were only rounded, loaf-sized stones, millions of them, lying atop each other and rolling away in clay-colored mounds and hills and finally, far off, disappearing into whole mountains of ever larger stones. Just rocks and air. She stood there, naked behind her motel towel, and felt the clean breeze sweeping in from those barren plains. It touched her legs, brushed along them as smoothly and furtively as a human hand. She just kept staring.

Her last thought, before the sound of her mother's call brought her back, had been to squeeze through that little window and walk slowly, naked and dry, her hair rustling like grasses, across the warm stones and on forever into that deep freedom.

And because of that small silly memory and a dozen other muddled reasons she was wandering around a hotel lobby with no place to live. The promised hour had nearly elapsed. She stepped out front, cleaving a wave of incoming patrons, and waded through a crowd that encircled the Mariachi band. She could see down the way where a small, silver car peeked out from behind the panel trucks, but she couldn't determine its make. It wasn't blue, though.

Back at her table, she began to feel even more lost, and she wondered if Bobby were feeling that same way, across the miles, just entering his first year in college, his summer away a dark trial-run of the aloneness she knew he always felt and would feel so keenly during this new chapter in his life. She had never felt so selfish as at that moment. Face it, she'd abandoned him. He'd be the first person she'd call when she got her phone back in order.

Get a hold, she told herself, as her lungs filled and emptied and she drummed the glass tabletop with tiny percussions of her nicely filed nails. Bobby did well, both her boys did well, and that was such a consolation, but he had been fairly lost

in the last half of his senior year after he'd nailed down his college acceptance. He'd always been able to make and manage money, remarkably well in fact and a surprise to middle class parents. Suddenly, he was out most nights and off most weekends on jaunts to ski resorts and concerts. Because he'd worked so hard, in school and out, for three and a half years, she and Victor had decided he deserved the sprees--but they didn't know that he was picking up tabs and tickets left and right for his friends. Somehow he'd trapped himself into some kind of self-imposed Ponzi scheme that ended with maxed out credit cards and checks against insufficient balances to buy time. "He slipped our watch," Victor pronounced by way of explanation, and only after Jane relentlessly insisted that Bobby see a therapist did she and her husband unite forces in support of their son. When the summer came they agreed to let him join his brother in Providence, poignantly another failed test of sibling compatibility.

A man appeared at her table. "Are you Jane?" he asked. He wore a strange white suit, with flared cuff trousers belted high around a thrusting paunch which he drew attention to by his strange maneuvering to hide it.

"Yes! Mr. Jameson?"

"You didn't see me parked out front?"

"I saw a silver car just down the way..."

"Silver, light blue, whatever." He laughed, but not so kindly. "Well, you still want to see the place?"

"Yes, of course." She was already on her feet.

"Let's get a move on, then. Our little misfire sort of put me behind."

"Yes, I can imagine. I am so sorry about the mix up. Really, I'm a very responsible person normally, but this is all new to me."

She was talking at his back as he charged ahead of her through the lobby and out the front door. The band was walking off toward a courtyard with festival-goers in tow, so the way was mostly clear to where Mr. Jameson's car was awkwardly inserted between the parked trucks. One of the drivers had a few choice words for him as he yanked the passenger door open for her. She was barely belted in before they shot off, past and uncomfortably near knots of people, then onto the main

roads.

“They really don’t know what’s wrong with her,” Jameson announced.

“They’ve done scans and blood tests, but nothing comes up. She’s not the hysterical type, so no one’s saying it’s some kind of woman’s thing. You can tell something’s up though because she looks so godawful pale, and she can barely raise her arms.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Jane.

While he talked on, Jameson kept wheeling the car left and right, as if he were depending on chance to get them to their destination. He was a realtor, though, Jane reflected, and so he probably knew every short cut in the region. Suddenly, they were there, but God knew where. A street with small houses just off a big thoroughfare. Jameson came around the car at a trot and threw open the door for her. The rest happened quickly. First off, her apprehensiveness about Wayne Jameson was instantly enhanced. As he walked beside her, waddling on flat feet and keeping his arms splayed out like a small boy pretending to be a fighter plane, he appraised her with a barely concealed aggression that made her flesh crawl. It was only when she noticed that his tieless shirt was opened two buttons down that she realized that all his careful flapping and waddling and thrusting were supposed to be sexy. His sparse hair was combed completely from left to right across a very tanned pate. She barely heard what he said, though she remembered later that twice he'd remarked that he'd originally thought she was a college student and then laughed both times.

The "garden apartment" was a sunken half-basement, made over with rough sawn planking stained brick red, its "private entrance" a plain basement door. Jameson yammered about the heating panels he'd bolted to the walls while she stood beneath a fluorescent fixture set into a low, dropped ceiling. The awful, greenish light seemed to hold her body in place. She imagined herself steadily wilting beneath it like a dying plant. By that point, her throat had narrowed until her breathing was nearly audible, a whistling that she felt deep in her chest. If she did not move within the next five seconds, she would be hearing herself accepting this place and would then have to live here for months and months, growing thinner and paler by the day. She began to count: one, two....

She leaned toward the door, but forced herself to hold back. "Mr. Jameson..."

"Call me Wayne!"

"Mr. Jameson, is there any space available on the upper floors?"

"Well, there could be, but I don't know if that would work out for you."

She regarded him closely. "Why not?"

He smiled queerly. "Well, because, you see, *I* live up there."

Jane blinked. The walls began to move toward her by centimeters, a bit closer with each second. She took a breath and said evenly, "Thank you, but I don't think this arrangement would suit me," and stepped to the back door.

She reached it just before he did, though he waddled quickly to beat her to the knob. Outside, she plied the air with just enough amenities to qualify as cordial behavior as she kept her eyes averted and performed false errands in her shoulder bag. As she strode away, Jameson puffed and protested, "You see, my other places are full up right now. I felt guilty about not making good on Ruth's commitment to you." But she couldn't imagine ever again sharing space in any form with Wayne Jameson. She made for the thoroughfare on foot, so quickly that she barely heard Jameson calling out to her, "At least come in and use the phone."

Luckily, empty cabs were streaming through the busy intersection. One pulled up instantly when she raised her hand and she fell into it with a feeling of deep relief. This county's cabs would save her yet, as long as she had the money to pay for them.

Back at the hotel, she began racking up more phone charges by working down the list of motels that lined both sides of outer Cerrillos Road. She learned from each apologetic clerk the many factors that had conspired to blot up the entire city's rooms; there was the festival or fiesta, whatever it was called, of course, and then also the summer opera season's final performances. (It had been the best season ever for the opera, one clerk cheerily informed her.) Whatever spare rooms were left had been sucked up by parents bringing in their children early for the startup of the two local colleges. It seemed that somehow she had chosen the busiest weekend of the year to wander into town. The best that one of the clerks could do was to pencil her in behind a possible no-show. That kindly man suggested

that she call him back in the morning. She must have begun to sound really desperate because he told her not to worry, something would probably open up.

In the hotel's dining room, she took stock as she forced a tiny meal on her resistant appetite and then ruminated over a frozen Margarita. The tequila kicked in quickly and quelled her panic. She had a bed for the night, she wasn't going to be thrown out onto the street, for God's sake. She resisted a deep urge to call Charlotte (it would be so humiliating to be needing her within twenty-four hours of touching down in New Mexico); instead, she made do with a long imaginary conversation in which her spectral sister chanted again and again to slow down. By eight, she had calmed herself enough to take a stroll out into the plaza to watch the festivities. The scene was marvelously distracting, with two stilt-walkers battling with light sabers at one end and at the other a fire-eater spewing enormous orange explosions to wild cries of delight. The loudest reactions came from two Great Danes in the back of a battered pickup truck. The truck, she noticed, had to be parked illegally; in fact, it was right up on a raised grass divider. And the poor dogs were truly spooked, straining backwards from the flames to the limits of their tethers.

Jane stepped slowly toward the truck. As she drew closer, she began to mew at them in a high pitched voice. "It's okay, it's okay...now, now." The two massive dogs began to whine back to her, and by the time Jane could reach way up to their worried faces they were communicating quite openly in their various modalities. The darker dog suddenly splayed flat and laid a tongue as large as a throw rug onto one side of her neck and raked lusciously upward over her ear and into her hairline.

"Oh my God!" she cried in delight.

When she lifted her shoulder to dry her cheek, she noticed that a small man was standing just beside her. He wore coveralls and a checked flannel shirt worn by a thousand washings. His deeply tanned and channeled face was grinning from ear to ear.

"Oh, are these your dogs?" Jane asked.

The man reached past her to grab a lank ear in his fist. "More like I'm their human," he said with a laugh. "Anyway, we're family, that's for sure."

"I can imagine," Jane said. It felt so good to openly smile as she was at that

moment. "Are you...waiting for someone at the hotel?" she asked, idly.

"Yes, Ma'am," he boomed, "I'm waitin for *you*! That is, if you're Miss Verdianne."

Jane's eyes went wide. Now her other ear was getting a licking, but she hardly noticed. "I am Miss Verdianne! How in the world..."

When he laughed at her surprise, his big teeth glowed orange from the latest gust from the fire-eater. "I called in and they says you didn't have no luck findin a place so I come down to get ya. My name's Emmit C. Hewit, and I believe in Jesus."

Five

Hell and heaven both.

As always, Arlen woke just before the alarm. He'd set it for six to get an early start on his work and beat the others to the bathroom. In the hallway it was silent. He stepped quietly, keeping to the threadbare runner, pinkish and beige in patches, and away from the jutting handlebars of two bicycles that leaned against the wall. He had to be quiet when closing the bathroom door because across the hall he could see that Terry had left her door partially open. She usually did. Through the ten-inch gap, he could see just a bit of bare leg where the sheet did not quite cover her.

Now that he had claimed the bathroom, he didn't have to be so quiet, but he continued to move cautiously out of courtesy. He'd been working hard to shorten his showers; the late autumn mornings left a chill in the house that rendered the hot water nearly unbearably pleasurable. He spent a few moments clearing away haphazardly hung towels, a few still damp, and opening them across the welter of tacked up racks. His five-by-eight inch message push-pinned below the mirror, "Clean up for the next person," occasionally persuaded one or two members of the careless household, now five students distributed among four bedrooms, to keep the sink reasonably clean.

As he soaped up in the shower, he kept banishing distracting daydreams that would certainly lengthen his stay. He remembered that he still hadn't read, hadn't even opened, the text he'd received from his mother yesterday. Always, it seemed, he feared some nasty news from her, of her or both his parents, or at the very least some dramatic reference to "finding herself," though that was hardly her style. He pushed these thoughts aside, keeping to the process of close cleaning he traditionally followed.

He worked the washrag vigorously behind his ears, down the back of his neck, over shoulders, down and under arms, never stopping until he'd lifted and cleaned each foot. He took the soap bar and quickly lathered up his genitals. Sometimes, when he felt particularly lazy, he'd lapse into sexy daydreams and then

give in to masturbation. It always took a little longer than he'd thought it would, and often some of the semen would spill out of his palm and he'd have to spend time herding the evidence down the drain.

He finished as quickly as he'd hoped to, then skipped shaving his sparse, pale beard and left the bathroom. He noticed that Terry's door was now closed; her stapled Escher print of two hands drawing each other now faced him squarely. She might be up soon and disturbing his quiet. He hoped that she'd just risen to close her door and then gone back to bed. If she were up, at least she would use the bathroom before visiting him, and she always took a long time in there.

Back in his room he pulled on loose chinos, sweatshirt, and slippers, all stained by paint drips and brush wipes, classic and comfortable to his mind: a uniform as much as any other. In the kitchen, downstairs, he made himself Chinese tea in a large porcelain mug with a lid, a gift from his mother, and then balanced it carefully as he took the stairs soundlessly by twos. Back in his room again, he breathed deeply and set to work. He pushed the tall director's chair up to the middle table of three, a wide oak surface set with a low easel that held a partially finished canvas. The canvas was lit by window light, the amount modulated by cheap chintz curtains or, further if he wished, by a rice paper screen that he could pull across it. It was an overcast December morning, but brightening with cloud glare. He stood at the window, dropping and pulling back the curtains, deciding.

He settled in his chair, feeling a sense of hurry. If one person were up, then more might soon follow; and then the noise level would start to grow: thuddings in the hallways, slammed doors, clanking dishes, and--absolutely the worst--TVs on and braying to provide ambience. He'd been shocked to discover how few of his fellow roommates, past and present, really worked that much on their projects each day. And it struck him recently that their more than occasional insensitivity about noise might be motivated by jealousy, as if they resented it that others worked. That conclusion did not entirely hold up; for one thing, Missy, the only other student who did some work outside her school studio space, liked to work to loud music, worked best to it, and it would be hard to ignore her output. When he'd visited her room to complain, perhaps the third or fourth time, she'd opened the door and eyed him in a

way that made him feel foolish--as if he hadn't grasped something important. Even then she'd been at work, cordless drill in hand, smeared black tights and apron and purple hair pulled back from her face. She aimed her drill at him, and then started quoting John Cage at him. How all sounds are beautiful, how all sounds are interesting, that hierarchy and judgment had to be dumped to make room for the inherent beauty of all sounds--traffic, a dropped plate, a dog's barking. Those ideas had actually helped him past some noisy moments, but silence--at least the relatively sound-free quietude he called silence--worked best for him. When she'd started using earbuds attached to her phone, it had given him hope for humanity.

He remembered that his father had also read to him about quiet, from Thoreau, when he was much younger. His father's love of books had briefly become a family contagion, but the reading aloud had fallen off by the time he'd reached seventh grade. If anything, his father now seemed to resent books, a strange attitude for somebody in the business. If his mother were to be believed, his father had long planned to write one, some sort of revolutionary new high school history curriculum where kids started with their families, and then their neighborhoods, and kept working outwards.

His father probably assumed that he'd be home for Christmas, but he himself wasn't so sure. Thanksgiving at the Bravermans' had been an agonizing disaster. Somehow, Ben Braverman and his father had edged into a ridiculous debate with Ben's wife, Nancy, about his mother's trip. They'd ganged up on her, supposedly kidding, but not really, goading Nancy about the ineffectiveness of the women's movement, the redundancy of the ERA amendment, nothing that he or Bobby could see had to do with his mother. And his father *drank* so much over dinner, something they hadn't seen him do in years. It had been downright childish the way he kept putting his hand to his mouth every time he refilled his glass, as if he'd just said something naughty. Then Nancy tried to get things onto a more positive plane with her little story about his mother, but that had backfired. She went on and on, laughing alone, about how she and his mother had gone shopping for trip clothes at Dick's Sporting Goods and how his mother had put on a hunting vest and started putting all her lipsticks and cream tubes in where the shotgun shells would go.

Nancy even stood up and walked about, fashion-model style, as his mother supposedly had up and down the store aisles. The story made everyone, except Nancy, feel as if his mother were secretly crazy. After the pumpkin pie, he and Bobby had split, fast, to the den for the televised football games.

He'd think twice before going home for Christmas. For now, he reached to the small table to his right where his oil pastel crayons were laid out. Before him was his third panel in a series of impressions inspired by fifties postcards selected from his collection: men in soft hats raddled with lures and yanking on bent rods, while in the foreground large greenish bass broke water in balletic flips (writhing in terror, really), or couples on beaches lifting beach balls (he'd never seen one; what did they used to do with them, just toss them back and forth?), women with each yellow wave of their mid-length hair still in place (did they ever actually get in the water?), modest swimsuits (asses completely covered, no hip bones, only a midriff exposed), men always dorky and sort of embarrassed looking, as if they'd ventured out in their boxer shorts, and crammed roller coasters and parachute drops and lines of water-skiers with enormous safety floats strapped around their middles. What struck him as particularly strange was the aggressive appeal to the viewer, an avid telegraphing of enforced happiness. He was certain that it was a cultural disease that should be isolated and examined, capitalism's incessant ramping up of expectations to levels that could never be satisfied and therefore bred an ever-deeper resentment that could only end in chronic depression on a national scale.

The postcard taped to the upper clamp of his table easel showed a perky family smiling at the viewer as they posed around a sandcastle. One boy, one girl, the girl's hair the same cadmium yellow as the mother's, the boy's the same burnt umber as the father's. Each family member held a plastic tool in its hand, the boy with a red rake facing the camera on squarely planted feet beside his father's knee. A good boy, obedient to the photographer. His sister, however, knelt in the sand and reached intently for a sand castle turret. The photographer had probably given up, settling for three out of four smiles. Mother's back was nearly to the camera, her ass discreetly tucked against her ankles, but the little red spade in her hand jutted up provocatively. Eric, a roommate who drank himself dead every night and then slept

forever in his downstairs bedroom off the kitchen, would certainly turn that spade into a whip or a vibrator and paint some drool on the woman's lips. Maybe a thick black swastika on the father's chest, the two kids grinning little skeletons. But he didn't want to think about Eric, so he shook his head and kept working on the strange vibrant orange of the woman's checked swimming suit.

Things began to go well, and quickly. Later, when he heard someone enter the bathroom and the shower go on, he could ignore it and continue. The sharp orange of the swimsuit came up vivid under mixed strokes of viridian red, cadmium yellow light, and stipples of cerulean blue to gray down the red values, but not so insular as to miss complementing the nearly straight cadmium yellow in the hair of both females. With a wide crayon, he worked up the sunshaft too, striating it with magnesium white, also flecked the light-facing edges of the sandcastle with spilled light, and then modeled the edges of some of the crenellations. The boy's figure stood there, troublesome as always. He had worked the face in heavy strokes, blurring up the charcoal underlayer to bleed surliness through that obedient smile. The Good Boy, always struggling with the terror of trying to understand one parent or the other's vacillating version of good. Father near, poised like a weight that could topple any moment and crush son. (The shower went off.) He got up from the chair and walked back six steps and turned. As he surveyed the piece, he worked his nail into the soft shaft of the crayon in his right hand. The balance seemed right. Father tipped, daughter perilously close to tumbling from sight into the quicksand castle, a consuming maw, home sweet home. Elements of menace that lurked behind that plastoid lie. The little girl's foreshortened arm aquiver for the castle dream. The mother, her task as promotional piece now completed by childbirth, every hint of languor or sexuality trussed in impermeable oilcloth, her yellow head blasted by sunlight shotgunned down from upper left. None of them would ever know what hit them, would ever know how they were being hit and by what. Liars, phonies, pandering after their Popsicle lifestyle. Who could believe that a real prick lay hidden between the father's carefully pinched knees, that the mother's locked loins, pert butt clamped to heels, would ever have opened to it anyway? The children then were virgin births, or no births--flesh-dolls dropped in place by

American dreamwires, consumables. He felt a longing to salvage some-thing for these trapped souls, so desperately grabbing for a week's worth of pleasure.

Before him the panel blurred. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and stepped up close to work carefully on the grudging, dutiful smile on the boy's face--he was too young to learn how to pull off his as masterfully as the nearly knocked-out gape of both Promotional Parents, poseurs, an assembled fake family, salivating before their big juicy slice of the American Pie.

There was a knock at the door. In some part of his mind he recalled that the shower had gone off. He calculated that enough time had passed for Terry to have finished her facial ministrations and then dressed, probably partially, and then decided (against his weakly delivered injunctions) to visit him after all. He ignored the knock. She might go away. Then he heard the door open behind him.

"Morning, Arlen. Oh, you're working."

He turned briefly to discover Terry standing in the doorway. (He must remember to buy a slide bolt for the door. The bolt would do his talking for him.) She wore a big white T-shirt with a faded Paul Klee portrait across it and, guessing from her bare white legs, only panties. Her hair hung down in long, wet strands. "I'm kind of into it," he managed as he turned away. He willed his mind clear of the lingering image of her thighs.

"Okay. I'll be quiet." He next heard a sigh of springs from his narrow bed.

A TV went on downstairs. The newest roomies, a couple, had thought to share it with the household by setting it up in the living room, but when Arlen had tried to point out the house rules on quiet he found that the earlier consensus among veteran members had evaporated. He could never quite tune out the deeply irritating hype of TV commentators. The incredible arrogance of their nearly maniacal insistence that everyone "listen up" to their incessant banality drove him crazy. Paired hosts and announcers were the worst; they laughed at each other's labored jokes as if slain by awesome cleverness, or leaned and nodded with ferocious fake interest to what the other was saying. You could hear the aching need beneath it all. Pathetic. And the weird thing was that hardly any of this merry crew even watched the damned thing; if they did, it was only to peek up momentarily from their cell

phones.

The squeal of the bedsprings bespoke the corporeality of Terry's body, the weight of her white legs, and her arms, which she sporadically pumped up with a friend at the Brown University gym. He carried in his mind, too, though briefly, the strange orange-brown layer of makeup that covered the acne on her cheeks and then faded to a yellowish edge halfway down her throat. He stopped for a moment, then conscious that she would notice he had stopped, wanted to start again, but where?, and then sighed and looked at her.

"I guess I can't work with you here, Terry." There, he'd finally said it out loud.

Her whole face fluttered. "Okay," she said, but smiled a little just the same, dark green eyes sliding away as he turned back to the piece.

He heard her get up to go. After the door closed, he felt as wretched as if he'd kicked an alley cat that had sidled up against his leg. Downstairs, the volume on the TV went up. Someone was cooking, grease spattering in a pan, and must have wanted to hear every waste-word that dribbled from the tube. With a sigh, Arlen got up and went downstairs. In the empty living room he tromped up to the TV and snapped it off.

On the stairs, he heard Steve call out in a singsong whine from the kitchen, "Go to your studio, Arlen."

He singsang back, "Locked up on Sundays, Steve."

"Get a contraband key--like everybody else, asshole."

Arlen stopped midway up. He was talking to an open doorway, to a jerk out of sight. "We set up rules, remember?"

"*You* set up rules."

He heard both members of the couple groaning in their upstairs room. Then their bed lurched in protest.

Back in his room, Arlen considered, as he routinely did, moving yet again. But he loved this room, loved its light, loved its old wainscoting and the wonderful walnut molding that jutted out a few inches at eye level, just right for propping frames and curios and bottles of thinner and brushes and letters he'd meant to read; and he loved the long, angled view from his tall window down the front yards of

several other old houses.

He turned back to his work, concentrated furiously on the boy's brows. He wanted to emblazon that short pale forehead with the inherited armor of the father's fatheaded narrowness. He worked up the brows, pressing and twisting the crayon to build up scumble. But it was not going well--too affected by his present fury, which mired the purity of his earlier visions. With a near sob, he threw the crayon onto the table.

He walked down the hall to Terry's door and knocked on it. He heard her call "Come in" from the far side of her room. He went in and found her sitting sideways on the low sill of her own deeply recessed window. She was still in her T-shirt and panties, her thighs glowing like Carrara marble in the overcast light. She looked at him, then out at the street.

"Hey, Terry, is it me? Tell me the truth." He came forward and fell flat on his stomach crosswise on her wide bed.

He had found her expression slightly miffed when he'd first come in, but at these words her face softened. "No, but you can't win with us."

"Us? *Us*? You used to work so fucking hard, I remember you sitting right on that sill and working, working, working."

"That's right," she said, looking off as if considering this thought as novel. "You were up all night, weren't you?"

"What? Oh, no. Just till one or so." He'd done some good work by the all-spectrum fluorescent lamp his father had brought down for him. Father Fixer, the family had named him.

Terry said, "I guess even though you're right about the scene here, you really can't win. You can't really change people." Her voice was high and thin, delicate as a bird's.

He sighed. He did not want to compromise his ideal of living where he worked, the joyful convenience of leaping up in the middle of the night with a sudden idea, or a sudden rush of energy to work--that, and still have people around to socialize with. Cheap, live-in loft space was hard to find, and usually only outside of town, far from friends and cafes.

Lying flat on the bed, he'd placed his face even with the lower sill, and there rested Terry's beautiful butt, snug in cotton panties. Higher, the chill from the window glass had rucked her nipples to points. They pulled a taut crest of T-shirt between them. He was certain that he could rise and by pressing his lips to hers with confidence, six or seven times with lengthening duration, he could reach down and slip those panties up to her knees....

"I'm fucked up," he said with disgust.

"Nonsense," she said, and he opened his eyes to find that she'd risen. The bare legs were near his face. She sat beside him and rolled him willingly with a tug on his far shoulder. His face slid onto her thighs, smooth, fragrant from the shower, cool from the window's breath.

With her fingers in his hair, he said, "What about you?" She would know what he meant. She was behind in all of her classes, still worked on projects left incomplete from prior semesters. The agile fingers that twined the short hair behind his ear had woven a dozen tiny baskets of long pine needles, the belled sides lashed in countless tiny knots of shining gold and royal blue thread, the bases and lids often fixed to round polished pellets of oak burl that she had walked in woods to collect, later sliced with a fine-toothed Japanese saw and then sanded patiently by hand. On any day he could have found her cross-legged in that very window, the baskets persistently emerging from a flurry of soft pointed spines, threads running from heavy spools and looping to her so that she appeared as a large she-spider in a spare web. Then she'd taken some heat from some feminist peers, gotten tangled in lots of late night discussions about art versus craft, and though she'd planned to flatten out her visions into denser "less utilitarian" weavings, her looms now gathered dust in her cubicle at the campus studio.

He was using them, he thought. Using her and the others by playing big fish in their little pond. There were plenty of productive kids--higher up on Benefit Street, a real hive of activity, and enterprising groups that made deals with the night guards at school and so worked all night every night, even Sundays and holidays, and real lone wolves who grew pale and lean in one-person makeshift spaces in Pawtucket and Cranston, slithering in to studio reviews with battered station

wagons full up. Those were the real ones.

He had to pull his thoughts back to catch up with Terry's response to his question. "He'd pay for a therapist, but I'm not sure that's what I need. I was talking to Missy about it and she said they all just work from conventional models, if you lose your uniqueness you lose your art. Know what I mean? Anyway, Norris says I'll work it through, not to worry--I think he's so nice, don't you? All the other teachers do this hard-ass push-through-the-pain routine, very male, very stoic--to just like hold the materials in my hand or even like fall asleep with the stuff around me. Very mystical, very..."

He'd heard all this before. He'd spent long late hours going over her "problems" with her, and at the end of them she seemed resolved and clear and so grateful, and swept up in their break-through triumph he'd almost kissed her more than once, despite the make-up, and then the next day he'd fall in step with her between classes and discover that she'd talked to somebody else, or thought about something somebody had said once, and all her resolve had come undone again.

He could smell a warm fragrance, wondered if it came from her sex. She did have a beautiful voice, delicate and clear, but it produced such predictable bilge. Even now he was using her; he did not respect her, found her "problems" pathetic and self-indulgent, her time spent at expensive RISD wasteful and silly, but still he drew off her regard for him like a current from a battery. He was weak. He had to flee this nest of constantly cheeping, gape-mouthed creatures who had no desire to fly.

At the first moment that could be construed as opportune, he slowly raised his head from her lap. "You're right, I'm in the wrong place. I'm going to get back at it now anyway, see what I can rescue. Is that the right word?"

"Salvage?"

"Right, salvage." He kept going and reached the door, got one hand on the knob and waggled the other by his ear to signal how crazy it all was.

"Good luck!" she whispered brightly at his back.

He smiled but inwardly winced. Like kicking a stray cat.

He would have liked to make more tea, but he sensed growing activity in the

kitchen. The clock on his bedside table showed ten thirty already. He blinked, looked again; he must really have been absorbed with the piece. He felt better. The time spent on production would eventually transform into quality. He dug his phone out from the back of the drawer (atop a sweater, so he could not hear it vibrate) and opened his mother's text. "I'm writing from my new Jeep!"

He blinked in surprise, and not really in surprise at the message itself but at his *being* surprised. Why could he never reconcile his automatic perceptions of his mother with this woman who repeatedly surprised him throughout his life? Was he, were all human beings, so helpless to alter their inherited algorithms?

For example, that time when he was seven or eight and he was playing hard during recess in the small yard behind his school and he noticed that the raucous activity all around him was rapidly quieting and looked up to see a woman charging down the four cement stairs with the wide double doors still flung open as she had undoubtedly just flung them. The woman kept coming, her raincoat billowing behind her like the wings of a mythical harpy. He caught his breath because the woman, he realized finally, was his very own mother.

She came to a halt and called out, "Where's Kevin Riley?"

Her eyes were sweeping the yard like those of a raptor. Finally, they settled with steely focus on a chunky kid who had gone much more quiet and rigid than every one of the four dozen kids in the yard. In two steps, his mother advanced to tower over the boy, the boy who found him every day, and every time without a figure of authority in sight, and punched the same place on his arm and then demanded that he display the bruise to see "how it's coming along."

The Kevin Riley in question had shrunken to a smaller creature with eyes at least twice as large as they had been half a minute before. As his mother bent down to the boy, his henchmates slowly melted away from him in all directions. "Listen, you little bastard!" she cried down at him, a finger nearly in his eye, "You lay a hand on my kid again and I will personally beat the living hell out of you, do you hear me?"

Kevin, who was bent backwards and holding the ring finger of his right hand in the fist of his left, could not manage speak.

“Answer me!” And maybe because she realized he could not, in his terrorized state, create a response to match the rhetorical framework of her statement, she rephrased it. “Are you ever going to punch another kid at this school again, yes or no?”

Kevin shook his head with vigor. “No. No ma’am.”

His mother poked Kevin in the chest, with only one finger, but the force of the poke knocked the kid back a step. She then stood erect and pulled a stack of small white cards from her pocket. All at once, the principal, Mr. Basely, came through the back doors and rapidly descended the stairs. “Mrs. Bill!” he called out.

She ignored him. And she continued to ignore him as he fluttered around and behind her as she made her way through the yard, handing out the cards to all the surprised children. “If this kid touches any of you again, you call this number,” she said. “You or your parents call this number. You don’t need to leave a name, just call and tell me that he’s hit you, and I’ll make sure he never touches anyone again.”

Mr. Basely now had a hold of her arm. “We can handle this, Mrs. Bill...”

She jerked free and turned to face him. “You have not handled this to my satisfaction, Mr. Basely, but any help you can provide in the future would be greatly appreciated.” And with that, and for the ages, she handed him a card. While he stared down at it, she strode up the stairs and out of the yard.

His phone vibrated in his hand. “Mom!” he called into it. “I was just thinking about you.”

“Hey, good things, I hope.”

“I was remembering that time you came down on Kevin Riley in the schoolyard.”

She groaned. “Oh, not my best moment.”

“Are you kidding? It was *one* of your best, if not *the* best. I’ve been meaning to ask for years, how did you get past the security desk in the front?”

She laughed. “I can’t remember. Maybe I said I had an appointment with the principal or something.”

“Brilliant!”

“But who cares about that? The important thing is that I have a car now!”

"Jeez, it's about time. What did you buy?"

"A Jeep! Isn't that perfect? But you know what? It's kind of a girly Jeep. It's lime green and it's got a decal on the back that reads 'Li'l Kicker.'"

Arlen laughed so loudly that he braced for blowback from one of his housemates, ever alert for when *he* broke the sacred quietness he was trying to impose on the household. "I cannot see you in that kind of vehicle. But hey, it must have been cheap."

"That's *exactly* it. No genuine cowfolk would be seen in such a car. I keep meaning to spray over the decal."

"Well, that would help."

They settled into the rich, catch-up chat that he found so consistently nourishing. Her new job at the gallery was going very well, and she was making a few friends and a couple of them lived out of town, so she needed a car to get to them. She had jumped at the chance to grab up the little Jeep that the sellers were very eager to be rid of.

Arlen noticed that Terry was peeking in at his door. "Oh, sorry, you're on the phone," she said. "I was going to make some breakfast and I wanted to know if you wanted me to make you some eggs or something."

"No, no thanks, Terry." He tried to hide his irritation, but the words came out clipped. "Maybe we can have some coffee later," he quickly added as she retreated.

"A new girlfriend?" his mother asked.

He was about to answer, but only a gruff breath escaped from his throat.

"What?" his mother prompted.

Arlen sighed. "She's this very pretty girl, she lives here, very talented in my opinion, but sort of lost. I think she likes me...and I have to say, she's pretty sexy."

"So, what's the problem, pardner?"

He inhaled deeply through his nostrils and rubbed his knuckles back and forth across his forehead. "I'm sort of wondering if we're going to end up in bed together, that is if I stay here."

"Would that be a bad thing? The end up in bed part, I mean."

Was he really going to be talking about sex with his mother? It seemed that

he already was.

“No, it would probably be pretty wonderful. But, like, you can’t sleep with a girl if you kind of know that it’s not going to last forever. Can you?”

Jane was quiet for a moment. “Well, you said she seemed lost. On a scale of one to ten, with Needy Nancy at the low end and Warrior Princess or something at the other, what would you rate her?”

Arlen considered the question thoroughly. “I would say a three.”

“Ah, well then, if you do sleep with her, you have to expect that after a few times she would be assuming that you are boyfriend and girlfriend and hoping that means boyfriend and girlfriend forever.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“But, you could be really upfront with her, completely honest from the start that you’d like to be physically closer but didn’t want that to mean you were a forever couple. You know, that you liked her but didn’t think you’d be life partners, or something like that.”

Arlen rubbed his knuckles harder. “You can *do* that?”

“Sure. But guys hardly ever do. Or girls, for that matter.” She sighed. “Just keep being completely honest, put the words out there in black and white, and then it’s up to her if she wants things to go forward.”

He inhaled very deeply and let out a long “Wow” on the exhale.

They were both silent for a moment, and then both started to laugh at the same time, and then Jane announced, “Gotta go. I snuck this call in before work.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, Arlen. Love your work, love your heart, all of it.”

“Still doing the automatic drawing?” he hurried to ask. She had told him that she was dreaming vividly almost every night and had started a journal of words and sketches to try to retain them. She was certain these dreams were important in some way.

“Yes, but gotta go now. Next time.”

After she’d hung up, he lay on the bed for a long time, just thinking and reflecting. All this talk about sex, and the lingering images of Terry in her t-shirt,

had made him horny. He was about to fish his penis from his pants, but the thought of masturbating just after talking with his mother on the phone doused his ardor.

Doused his ardor and brought on some conflicting thoughts. Terry's white thighs and the ease with which he could lift the hem of that t-shirt and explore her pliant wonders.

It wasn't so long ago that he and Eric had been gossiping about their households very own live-in couple. "Lucky shit gets it regular," Eric said.

Arlen had laughed. "Lucky *shits*, you mean. I have to say that one of the great revelations of my young adulthood was that girls like it too."

They clicked their beer bottles on that.

Eric had the final word, though. "But they still want you to marry them."

But married people had it regular, right? What could be so bad about that? His parents had had that, and yet his mother had gone off to live alone.

Six

Always a blessing.

The bartender at the Ramada Inn had poured her two free shots alongside her second and third beers, her last. Her companion at this moment, one Tim Something, a lad of no more than thirty, she estimated, had waved him off.

“Oh my gosh,” she said. “I just figured something out. That bartender was trying to help you with your luck getting laid!”

The room was mostly dark, but she could see the mild pain register on Tim’s face. He shook his head, cowboy hat still perched atop it. “I wouldn’t know anything about that,” he said. “That’s not the way I am.”

She laughed at the lovely guileless tone of his voice. “Of course not, Tim. You are the victim here.” She laughed again, more freely and breathily than she had in years. “And the proof, my young friend, is that I’m under these sheets without a stitch on and you’re sitting there on the edge of the bed with every one of your stitches still on.”

She burst into laughter again and actually raised her knees to double up. By then he was laughing at well, grateful to hear. “I’m not exactly sure how we ended up here,” he said with another shake of his head.

“At the Motel 6? Well, I think we took a right out of the parking lot...”

“C’mon. You know what I mean.”

“I do, I do! We couldn’t go to your place, with your mom still up, and I’m in an itty bitty trailer.”

He sighed. “No, I don’t mean the *place* we ended up, I mean...”

“Ah, in this situation. Okay, listen, for me it’s very simple. When you showed me that two step and had me gliding around the floor in about ten seconds flat, I thought to myself, I’m in the arms of a fine man here. The way he holds my right arm with his strong arm across my back and my left arm with my elbow just sort of resting in his palm. It was both strong and respectful. It touched my core, Tim.”

Finally, he turned his head enough to actually look at her, studied her face

closely in fact. "You're not making fun of me, are you?"

"Jesus, no! I'm telling you the absolute truth. Didn't you feel how we sort of took flight together?"

He nodded soberly. "It was something, I'll say that."

She turned on her side and wrapped her arms around his waist, nuzzled her face against the small of his back. "Things got very complicated for me a few years back, my friend. Well, probably long before that, but suffice to say I have not felt much hunger of contact of the sexual variety for some time."

She felt his back stiffen at this blast of honesty. But then she felt a giggle tremble up through him. "Must've been some two-step."

Then they were both laughing. Now ridiculously emboldened, she fell back and flung the sheet aside. "Hey, lookee, Tim. Not bad, huh?"

He could not help but look over his shoulder at this mysterious female predator. "Wow," he admitted. "Real beautiful."

"It's not such a bad body for over forty," Jane concluded for him. She rolled over onto her stomach, raised her buttocks and then slid her breasts along the sheets, bottom still up a little. "This is meant to be seductive," she prompted.

"You are certainly puttin ideas in my head."

"Well then, get outa them duds and get over here with me."

He snorted as he got to his feet. "Man, it seems like a dream. You sure you're all right about this?"

"Come over here and rub my back. I was on my feet all day and my whole body aches."

She turned her head away to accommodate his shyness as he undressed. In just a few moments, the bed squealed with his weight and she felt his hand lighting on the small of her back, felt its hollow cradle the stiff roughened pads of his palm. As he moved his hands up and down, the calluses soothed her. "The hands of a working man," she sighed.

For some time she lay, breathing and sighing, as he slipped his hand up and down her back, then over her buttocks and down the backs of her thighs. She moved from side to side to let her legs settle a little apart. When she did so, the bed

gently spun beneath her from the effects of those long lovely turns around the dance floor, and the shots of course. "You must do exercises or something," he said, though he had to clear his throat once.

"I used to swim. Then I did aerobics for a long time."

"Dance exercises, right?"

"Something like that. I liked the dancing we did, Tim."

After a pause, he said, "I was real pleased when you took me up on it."

"It's so much like old-fashioned waltzing, the two-step. Isn't it? We never do it back east, unless there are places I don't know about."

He was pressing his hand harder into the muscles of her back and thighs. She felt her skin goosepimpling, from his touch and from the colder October air. "You have a real nice body, Jane. Really."

"Thanks."

She turned over to let Tim caress her front and then she twined her arms around his neck and brought his face down to hers. She initiated their kissing cautiously, and as she might have predicted he only pushed back at first; but with some pecking and nipping on her part it wasn't long before the kisses evolved into the delicious variety she had wondered if she'd ever experience again--long and loopy and sloppy without an ounce of shame.

She got his boxer shorts down with her toes and that freed his hardened penis to rest on her belly.

He raised his hips with a tiny gasp. "Jane, I don't have any kind of protection with me."

"Oh, I do," she said. "A good Girl Scout is always prepared." She rolled out of the bed, rummaged through her purse, and came up with a condom. "This dates back to my child-bearing years, but it's probably still good to go."

Tim shook his head. "I'm a little out of practice, to tell the truth."

Jane got back into the bed and sat cross-legged beside him. He held up his erect penis as she rolled the condom down its length. "Tah tah!," she exclaimed.

The expression on his face conveyed such a deep gratefulness that she blushed. It was all there: He just could not get over this grown-up woman sitting

beside him with her breasts swinging free and grinning at him for ear to ear. A sneaky sob nearly escaped from her, but she covered it by sliding onto her back beside him. In the next breath, she ordered, "Here, check this out," and pulled his hand down between her legs.

"Whoa," he said with a laugh. "Lady, you're slippery as an eel."

The ache to his gratefulness eased her further. She felt her own breathing deepen as his fingertips pressed deeper in and she pressed back a little with her hips. Big as he was, he moved atop her with nearly weightless grace. Finally, she took his hips into her palms and guided him in.

Tim, her delightful man-boy, laughed into her ear. "I don't think I'm very used to this."

"What, women who want you?"

"I mean, want me like this." He kept up a percolating, giddy laughter.

"You mean, really want you?"

"Yeah. Direct-like."

"Well, it's all pretty simple from her on. Just ride 'em, cowboy. Be careful though. You're a biggun."

Ride they did, every thrust a surprise to her, because she was lost in it, surprised to be lost in it. Tears were coming now, out of nowhere, because a dead child had slid down that fleshy passageway and the event had rendered her with some kind of psychological butchery, a betrayal of one part of the body over another and forced her into complicity in a murder. And yet, here she was, on the verge of a second orgasm brought on by coitus with a stranger.

"Oh my God, what's wrong, Jane?"

His face was hovering far over hers, studying her carefully. She smiled up at him, let the tears slip and lie where they willed. Though he had stopped moving, she had him fixed with her woman's thighs and would not stop pressing up against him. "Nothing to worry about," she whispered. "Keep on with the loving. Please."

"Oh my Jesus!" he cried, and nearly pulled out of her, but she held his hips harder still. "Let it come, Tim. There's no harm, no harm in the world."

Her reluctant lover was ejaculating and, from all indications, mightily. From

his cries, you would have thought he was being tortured. Now he had to contend with the sight of his partner's laughing and smiling through tears.

"Are you really all right?" he asked.

She nodded, her body quieting as the room quieted around them. "For the moment," she said. "Truth be told, I'm pretty fucked up."

He rolled off her and laid a hand across his eyes.

"What?" she challenged. He was just lying there, absolutely still.

"You said you were fucked up." He laughed nervously.

"That's not what I meant. Well, not exactly." She pressed a cheek against her shoulder. "I know what I'm doing, just not always sure why I'm doing it."

"You mean, you do this...a lot?"

She raised herself onto an elbow and laid a hand on his chest. "God no, Tim. I haven't had sex in years!"

"But at the bar, you said you were married. With kids and all."

She sighed. "It's complicated." When he didn't look any happier with this explanation, she added quietly, "I've burdened you, Tim, and I'm sorry. You're probably feeling kind of used right now, and I'm so sorry to have made you feel that way."

"That puts it about right," he said and sat up. He headed to the bathroom. She simply stared at the closed door while he briefly cleaned up. When the door opened, she lay on her side to give him some privacy while he dressed.

She *had* used him. Unbeckoned, snatches of their early conversation slipped up from her memory--his mother's degenerative illness, the carpentry work he did for the getaway homes of movie stars, work on a cattle ranch. He'd just come to the Ramada to dance with a pretty girl or two and get back home and rouse his sleeping mother from the yakking TV and tuck her into bed.

"I don't know," she heard him mutter. Sounds of rubbing cloth, a buckle rattling. "You staying here?"

"I'll head back home soon. You go home, get your mama into bed. Being with you tonight was a wonderful thing for me. I hope you believe that."

When she lifted her head, he had just finished pulling on his boots but still

sitting on the chair and looking across at her. There was enough light to see a grudging smile crinkle up a few of the sundried lines on his face. "It was some kind of wonderful, I'll say that. Just not sure what kind."

She nodded. "Kiss me goodbye?"

"That I'll be happy to do."

When he leaned to her, he gave her a kiss that did not stint on ardor or duration. When he pulled his face back, she grabbed the hair at the back of his neck and said, "Man, the woman who gets you, she will have to know that she broke the bank."

"Ha!" He got to his feet and fixed his hat in place. "I don't know about that, but I do feel a bit more experienced in that regard."

"Ride 'em, cowboy."

He waved his hat at the door. "Yee haw!" And then he was through the door and gone.

She took a shower and dawdled to savor the luxury of enough hot water for far more than the five minutes that the tiny tank in her trailer provided her. And how alive her body felt under the spray! The good solid sex had reignited her neurons. Yee haw, indeed!

The shower was also making her drowsy, though; she could tell already that she'd sorely need the extra thirty minutes she could sleep before work tomorrow. But it was already tomorrow! When she was finally dressed and out the door, her lime green Jeep seemed to shout at her from its illuminated corona to get a move on. It started up right as rain, ready for action. Emmitt had gotten it for her from one of the garages he jobbed at, found it abandoned and ignored out in the back and got it up and running. She had only ten miles to drive, ten miles to the fourteen-acre patch that Emmitt had bought from a failed developer and now managed to hold onto despite continual new offers. A veteran of the Vietnam War, a man with mortgage-free property and a bungalow just outside the grasp of the city's tax net, a man who kept a few dollars coming in as the "tire man" for several local garages and put three out of every four of those dollars into seeds and binder and soaker hoses and plastic drums to extend a radial growth of heavy green grasses and swaying wildflowers

foot by foot deeper into his land. It was a kind of eccentric passion that she could admire.

She drove fast on the open roads, heedless of the interspaced wooden crosses that marked the sites of fatalities. Only when she reached the final narrow road to Emmitt's did she slow down, just to quiet the motor. The gate at the end of the road was marked with two posts armored with breastplates made from twin chrome bumpers. She passed one, negotiated the ruts, and then parked well back on the path to the trailer. Before her was a view always desolate at first sight. The flat field, the sway-backed house, the silent tractor parked in the front lot, and then the trailer's squat silhouette, off to the left some twenty yards from the house.

She walked quickly to the trailer, at a pace that she hoped would outstrip a growing confusion of feelings. She was approaching the sacred land of a man who held very strong religious beliefs, and the fact was that she had just become an adulterer. And why, why had she become one? To get back at her husband, to check out if she were still a woman, to escape from the rituals of service that she had become incrementally mired in until she could not feel alive without having something to do for someone in the next otherwise empty minute of her life? And of all things, that tin box perched out there in parched space was now her home. She lived in a trailer and worked at a gallery and had entertained notions of sleeping with a man who was not her husband, and how now acted on that impulse and with abandon. These facts exhilarated her for a few seconds and then in the next, saddened her terribly.

All at once, the two Great Danes danced out into the moonlight, both coming to greet her. They sailed through the chilly air, their heavy paws padding the hard earth with a gritty rasping. As they came on, they barked helplessly, but settled to whining when she shushed at them. They both overshot her at first, a phenomenon that always made her laugh. Delighted, she reached to them as they pranced about her with a grace surprising for their size. Lucifer nuzzled gruffly at her hands with his big, square head as she kept walking, straight and purposeful. At the door of the trailer, she couldn't resist kneeling in the dust and pulling their heavy heads against hers. Lucifer whined and Gabriel licked her cheek with a tongue as thick as her

wrist. It slapped at her face, and she welcomed its heavy touch. Finally, she pulled away.

"Go, go," she scolded them. They'd wake Emmet and then he might come out and confront her with his unbearable understanding. That he felt at times that he had "to see to her" shamed her; that she was drawn on her loneliest nights to invade his solitary parlor humiliated her as well.

She was already shucking her clothes as she stepped into the trailer. The cloth stank of cigarette smoke, always a mystery when no one was allowed to smoke in bars anymore. Moments later, she had plied herself into the narrow bed and worked the covers up around her. All at once she felt cold, cold to the bone. She waited under the woolen blankets, but warmth failed to accumulate in her body. The moonlight in the little windows was cold, penetrating, unmercifully unsettling. When the hair at the back of her neck began to bristle, she knew what was coming, but her strength faltered because it had been so long since the last attack that she felt she'd beaten those nights of paralyzing loneliness. Soon, she was gasping with her eyes wide open in the near dark and pressing back against a pain below her ribs. A thump in the metal wall beside her head startled her. The dogs, so knowing, were pawing to get to her.

She lay quietly, trying to make herself believe that something would come of all this. Wasn't she getting stronger? Hadn't she put up for weeks with these primitive conditions, the big spiders that scuttled down the walls and then marched fearlessly across the covers, the bats that sometimes whistled past her ears when her enforced evening walks lasted past dusk? She was no stranger to terror, either. The king snake laid out like a fire hose across the path that one time, hadn't she finally just stepped over it? She could take anything; she just had to keep things in perspective. The boys were grown, they didn't need her anymore. She could even die out here, but she would prefer to die trying.

She lay on her side in the mounting silence and let the terror come, let the spasms of it work up through her. It was a bit of a relief to be feeling it directly, without having to worry about its effect on some loved one. The oncoming moment might be the worst she ever experienced, and she let the panic of that prospect work

up through her as well, unimpeded. It coursed up under her ribs, made her rasping breath feel steamy against the sheet she'd pressed to her face. Outside, the two dogs made heavy, whimpering snorts just below the little window. Jane screwed her eyes shut, tried not to telegraph her suffering to those innocent creatures. She might go to her grave unwhole; still, that was a kind of life, one lived by all too many, she was certain.

What was the worst, the *worst*, that one could suffer? She started small, with the thought of pressing her tongue to a frozen pipe; then she imagined her live body tossed naked into snow drifts, or waking buried alive in a coffin. A cold coffin, a cold cell, cold was in all of these visions. She was cold now. She ached to feel Lucifer and Gabriel pressed up against her, like she had the night she'd returned late from a second job interview that had ended with bad news and had cried alone under the full moon because there was no human shoulder to cry on, and the two dogs had come slowly up to her in the dark and pressed their huge muzzles against her while she sat on the log pile. She'd hugged them both to her; later, she fell asleep between them, right there on the tarp, her arms around Gabriel's middle, and for hours the heat of their gently heaving forms had washed through her.

Poor Emmit. What if he'd come out and seen her like that? He didn't know what to make of her as it was, her silent walks, strange comings and goings, her prattling on at odd moments, the keen, cutting loneliness that sometimes drove her to his door to disturb his peaceful evenings. She winced at the nasty hypocrisy of her faked interest in the Bible, a ploy to make him speak at ease with her in his human voice. Well, it wasn't entirely faked, was it? Just more anthropological than spiritual in nature. "Be easy on yourself, for Christ's sake," she whispered aloud, but not loud enough for the dogs to hear.

She had to admit, though, that she felt less frightened with the dogs staying on outside, both quiet now. Sometimes, so sweetly, they sprawled like griffins in the dust outside, like guards at their posts. What was the worst, after all, but only death? If cast into a snowdrift, she would curl up and drift into permanent sleep. In the coffin, she would eventually beat back the searing panic and steal a few last moments while the air still lasted. They said it wasn't so bad, asphyxiation; like a

candle guttering. In the prison, they beat you, raped you, perhaps disfigured you-- and that was a trickier matter because feeling pain, physical pain, was fearful to consider, while it also had a strange attraction. That time she'd cut herself with the grass trimmer, the blades sharper than she'd imagined, back in the months after the miscarriage. She'd started up, her finger gashed above the second knuckle, but then become transfixed at the sight of the bleeding. She *could* bleed, she *could* feel pain again. Those discoveries had been, of all things, a kind of relief.

Now, curled on a narrow pallet in a tin trailer, she told herself that it was only fear she was experiencing. It wasn't physical pain, or the loss of a child, or sudden blindness. Like a blessing, her tears started coming fully. The sheet blotted each as it slipped cleanly from her in smooth, quiet drops that ran down the side of her nose. While she wept, she kept her hands clamped between her thighs and ached for her mother, who had become so strange to them all as she got older, a kind of younger sister more than a mother, but who had taken her often when a child easily into her lap and had such a deeply comforting way of smoothing her hair back from her forehead until any pain went away. Just the memory of her touch helped, loosing more tears. With the next gasp, she ached for Victor, the younger version, the sometime mother-man whose big body would wrap around her from behind and pulse warmth through her. She stretched and writhed as her flesh remembered the sensations of him, as if her nerves were coiling with addiction. The crisp, resilient brush of his body hair against her back, the hard clasp of his hands around her wrists, thumbs digging gently into the heels of her hands until they fell open limply.

She remembered when he'd lain with her that way after she'd spent a whole weekend making Halloween costumes with the boys, and a well-meaning but insensitive neighbor had teased Bobby that he looked more like a mouse than a bat, and Bobby had rushed back to the house where she'd found him weeping with shame, and his confusion and hurt that his mother somehow must have tricked him had hurt her too to a surprising degree, and she had lain in bed that night convinced that she was a bad mother, said so out loud to Victor with her back to him, and he'd closed around her so willingly then, gripped her wrist, and whispered again and again into her ear the careful words that had erased her pain. So why oh why had he

felt the need to hold other women in that same way, and whisper intimate things to them, and bring the scent of them into their home?

She heard the dogs rise up and trot away at last. Tentatively, she straightened her body. It was time to stop. Besides, the weeping while her middle was so keenly bent had left her with a sour stomach. The drinks, too, and chips and salsa--"You're a mess," she whispered. The words made her laugh, briefly, but that brought up a splash of vomit to bite against the base of her throat. The laugh sounded strange in the empty trailer, but already the fear was working free of her. The dark images began to evaporate into airy patches, such obvious products of the popular unconscious that now they appeared comical to her. Tomorrow, tomorrow, she could call the boys again. She would play pioneer mom to their innocent curiosity, though Arlen might ask, as he sometimes did, "Hey, Mom, are you really all right out there?" She would call her sisters, Charlotte or Babe or even Sara all the way up in Alaska. She had a job now; she could pay the phone bills. She whispered aloud, "Surprise!," as if to any one of them--but then it might be hard for her because it was usually their pains and confusions they'd talk about, the pattern that she'd developed over the years. Charlotte, though, Charlotte could get her to talk about herself. She would, definitely would, call Charlotte soon. "The sister from another family," she whispered in the dark, and then laughed to hear a familiar phrase even if it was of her own uttering.

She lived in a trailer and worked in a gallery and she talked to herself sometimes and now she'd slept with a strange man. But so what? Truth to tell, when she shared some of these facts with the boys, they were intrigued and never for a moment sounded scolding. "At least I'm entertaining," she thought, and smiled to herself.

The dogs were back. They'd faked a retreat, kept their ears perked for her madwoman's whispering and finally seen through the ruse of her alleged sleeping. Big paws clattered on the aluminum cladding, and she could imagine one or both of their faces peering at the curtains. With a sigh, she rose on her elbow. Her body resisted leadenly as she eased to the bed's edge, then got to her feet and gathered a blanket around her. Outside, the two enormous animals slithered around her in the

dust, and then pranced in place on either side of her, always just about to leap against her. "Come on, come on," she whispered. She started off for their shed with the two of them, black shapes, circling and leaping along the silvery ground beside her.

At the shed door, she shushed them both in the hope of keeping Emmit asleep. They were only yards from his window. "Come on," she urged the dogs, and together they bumbled through the narrow entryway into the low-ceiling shed. Straw tufts pricked and tickled her feet as she kicked together a nest for the three of them. She fell exhausted onto the pile, and the two dogs sank against her with intuitive precision, their lean torsos bracing her front and back. She got her arms around Lucifer's neck and shoulders and ignored the sharp ends of several blades of straw against her face. Behind her, Gabriel whined and edged closer, butting her with his haunches.

She lived in a trailer and worked in a gallery and sometimes she slept with strange men, and sometimes with dogs. So what? She took a dozen long breaths and sleep reached up at last and pulled her down.

Seven

Peacocks moving through high grass.

When she awoke many hours later, a shimmering glow of false dawn chinked the weathered boards of the shed. Good that it was still early, she'd be out before Emmitt could catch her. As she got to her feet, both dogs stirred but neither rose. Carefully, she made her way back to the trailer. It was only a little after six, she discovered. With her hair and blanket decorated with straw wisps, she set the alarm for seven and toppled onto the bed. She slept soundly until the buzzer roused her again.

She whipped on her clothes, worked her hair into place, etched and patted the bits of makeup whose proportions had decreased as the weeks had gone on. She was finished so quickly that she would have time for her favorite cafe before work.

A moment later she was stepping through the clean, chilly air--still an elixir to her!--with a long look around at the mountains. There were always mountains to look at, and recently their peaks had been dusted white. The sight was like a blessing. After she'd started the car, she spotted Emmitt at the back of the house, up earlier than usual. He was standing hunched and shivering in only pants and shoes. He sometimes air-dried his body after washing, a practice that he believed to be healthy. Both dogs were up and staring at him from either side as if they'd never laid eyes on him before. Jane started the car and rolled it in a circle to share a few words with him.

"Good morning, Lady Jane." He called. "Off to work?"

"Yep. You going into town today?"

"Yep. Booked at two places. And one of em wants me in bright 'n early." He danced a little, rubbing his stringy arms. "Gotta wake up. Didn't sleep too good last night."

"Oh really? I hope I didn't wake you."

He shook his head quickly and patted his chest. "Worried about my ticker again. Probably just in my head, and who knows why the Lord finds so many ways to test us the way He does."

"I've never been able to figure it out, Emmitt. I'm off to a pick-me-up breakfast."

He saluted her as he turned back to the house. "Peace go with ya!" he called over his shoulder.

The dogs came out of their trances and started towards her across the yard, their heavy paws pounding the dirt like the hooves of horses. Jane pulled away quickly and raced them to the gate, where they had been trained to hold up. In her rearview mirror, she saw them barking after her in the road.

At Cafe Tia Mia she found an open table, round and clean, right by the front windows for plenty of good early light on her fresh morning paper. While she waited for the coffee to arrive, she pressed her fingers gently to her eyes to massage away some of the puffiness. They ached at first, tearing at the pressure. When she blinked them open, there on the street was the man she'd slept with the night before. He was not looking at her, but she guessed that he must have seen her from the way his face kept away at an odd angle. The same high, tight jeans, though, the same denim jacket too thin for the season, and the unmistakable Australian-style hat. It was Tim, all right.

He was on the curb, working through a set of keys. Soon he would enter his pickup and drive away. Without thinking, she rose from her table and headed for the door. Out on the sidewalk, she trotted up behind him, and then stepped around to face him. His face stayed down, but with a frustrated smile that he'd been caught despite his attempts to avoid her. For form's sake, he executed some bad acting to appear surprised.

"Hello, stranger," she said. "Fancy meeting you again so soon."

He made a noise, something between a grunt and a laugh, and kept turning his keys on their ring. "How's your head, Jane? Mine's about to split."

She laughed. "Do you mean my hangover or my mental stability?"

He laughed and looked at her shyly. "I didn't mean anything. Not like that, I mean."

"I know, Tim, I know." She shook him by the arm.

"I was kind of a little worried about you, I'll say that."

"Oh, that's sweet." She smiled gratefully. "Come on; give us a hug so we can be buddies."

He made another noise, which started with a gasp and ended like a laugh. His eyes came around, openly appraising. Clearly, he didn't know what to make of her, of

her transformations from horny siren to emotional wreck to poised career woman in the space of twelve hours. He did manage to hug her briefly against his jacket. "We'll two-step again some time," he said, turning to his truck. By way of a final goodbye, she gave him a punch on the shoulder as he stepped in. She just caught the final small shake of his Australian bush hat as he drove off.

Twenty minutes later, she was hurrying for Tactile, the cozy, crafty gallery where she now worked. When she stepped in, her boss, Angela Salinas--not her real name, as Jane had guessed, but a southwestern affectation--looked up at her, then down again, and said, "You look more than a little roughed up."

"I know." Angela was a sage old hawk.

Jane stuffed her bag onto the lowest shelf behind the counter and then stood erect and hurriedly shucked her coat. She rolled it into a thick ball and stuffed it alongside her bag. "I didn't get much sleep, and it's your entire fault."

"Me?"

"You were the one who introduced me to that place." The Ramada Inn, with the dancing lounge where the men were usually gentle, with the tables of women where a lone gal could just plunk down and be part of the group, a gaggle of available hens for the rooster-boys to preen for and then quietly sidle up to. "But I feel all right. Ready for action."

"Good. So what are you going to do for me today?" Angela stood, as she often did, turning sheets in a black binder and pecking at a tiny calculator. It was a ruse, Jane had learned; the woman buried herself in that binder whenever the ineluctable elements of her business threatened to overwhelm her, which was often.

Jane prattled a spontaneous listing at her. "Finish the paste-up of Midge Sheehan's catalog, send Jason Beaufort back his whole stack of obscene reliefs, and try to reconcile your disastrous checking account."

Angela smiled slowly down at the calculator. "Jason's Apache porn?" She laughed at the phrase, a Jane Verdianne original. "She's coming in, by the way."

"Who, Midge? I know. What, did she call this morning or something?"

"No, last night. At my house. Kind of pushy, I thought." Angela clucked, head still down. "Tell me, don't dykes make you uncomfortable? I know you're friends with

her, but you like guys."

Jane perched on a high director's chair behind the counter. Behind her, beside her, and before her were the slatted wood shelves and hewn or mosaicked surfaces that held Tactile's special family of "built, burned, or blown" craftwork. "No, they don't make me uncomfortable. I mean, unless they're the fire-breathing, man-hating variety. Midge's just sweet. And she knows I'm straight."

Angela's seamed face came up. Her black hair looked especially lacquered this morning. When Jane knew her a jot better, she might risk telling her that you didn't have to drench gray hair in printer's ink.

"I think you're being just a little bit naive."

Jane made a frown. "Why?"

"You don't think she might be coming on to you, subtle like?" Already, Angela's face had gone back to the calculator. With a pencil, she prodded tiny buttons with the eraser end.

"Nope. We just talk well. She's cooking dinner for me tonight, in fact." She waited a moment, then whispered, "She told me not to wear any underwear."

Angela wagged her head. "Oh ha ha. Am I supposed to be shocked or laugh or something?"

"You sure look shocked, and you ain't really laughin'."

The two of them did laugh, and then quieted. Jane's breathing deepened and relaxed as she fired up the laptop and searched for the evolving Sheehan brochure. Just the thought of a good, long talk with Midge that evening was comforting. She talked so easily with Midge, she trusted her. A thought made her start: Had she actually made a female friend out here? She wanted it to be dinnertime already, though she'd probably drop off on her poor hostess in the middle of the meal.

Angela plopped down her pencil and cried, "Oh, let's close this damned place and go out for coffee!"

"No. This is *fun*, Angela. Remember, it's supposed to be *fun*."

"But I don't want to sell this stuff, I want to *do* it."

"You know what I've said. If you want to go out and do it, do it right now. I'll run the shop."

Angela sighed to herself, and then picked up the pencil again. "Someday."

Midge Sheehan arrived two hours later. More than a few browsers were in the gallery by that point, dreamily wandering among the ceramics and glass and weavings. Jane managed to wave to her above their heads as Midge headed to the back room to speak with Angela. Later, Jane helped her unload several boxes of her ceramic pieces. To be extra careful, they each took one end of the longest box. Jane looked down its length at Midge, who smiled back--a broad, brown face, prematurely lined by too much sun, and round brown eyes. As always, Midge's straight, brindled bangs pushed over a band of woven material--today's choice was bright red with zigzags and diamonds in contrasting blue. Against the sharpness of the winter morning, she had worn a gray woolen poncho.

"Jane, do I detect dark circles under your eyes?"

"Yep. Dancin' at the Ramada. My third time!"

"Did we have a good time?"

"We sure did!" Jane stepped backwards up the one step into the shop. Customers moved aside to let her and Midge pass. With a wink she said, "I'll give you the full report tonight at seven."

They laughed across the box at each other.

Later, after the shop had emptied for a while, Angela said, "She's a dyke, but I have to admit she's more pleasant than most."

"Most dykes or most artists?" Jane asked.

"Both."

In fact, Jane thought, Midge was about the pleasantest of the artists she'd been exposed to in Santa Fe. The countless galleries along Canyon Road and now the new Railyard Complex were pulling in more artists and buyers by the day, it seemed. Ten years ago, you couldn't find a Frank Stella in a Santa Fe gallery (though cynical locals claimed that what the Big Names couldn't sell in New York they shipped to Santa Fe.) Angela was quite pleased, however, to keep Tactile accessible but a tad hidden, and Jane was as pleased or more to be tapped to give the gallery a stronger Web presence, just enough to tantalize the kinds of folks who liked to hold art in their hands. Angela listened to her. She'd agreed, after some debate, to jettison almost all the paintings and

prints; the artists' asking prices unbalanced Tactile's promise of affordability, and too many of them were created to appeal to sentimental assumptions about the Southwest--pretentiously impastoed to look "tough" or pushed to the limits of whimsy--geometric landscapes in tan and pink, or somber "Indians" looking off into geometric landscapes in tan and pink. Jane had made a few enemies by landing the job at the gallery over several qualified locals and then, gradually over the following weeks, convincing Angela to dump the paintings and part with a few clients whose plain bad work was taking up valuable space in the gallery. She proved to Angela that Peter van Lassing's "weathered furniture" was so poorly constructed that it was, in fact, unusable. "He doesn't even use screws," she'd pointed out.

"He told me that flat-head nails gave his pieces the right look."

"I'm fine with the look, but does it have to be non-functional? Is that more artistic or something? Angela, look, the drawers aren't square, they jam when you pull them the slightest bit off center." She whacked a sideboard. "Hinges from a local hardware store. And these are not good worn woods, Angela--they're stripped from old packing crates. Doesn't this stuff depress the hell out of you?"

"It does. Let's dump it."

Van Lassing had fumed, gray ponytail flapping, while he'd loaded his truck with the unsold pieces. She'd made enemies of a few people in this town all right, and puzzled a few others, but she'd also made some very solid friends.

Later that evening, out at Midge's wide, low home on the edge of Lamy, a small town thirty miles from Santa Fe, Jane laid her legs across the seat of a director's chair identical to the one she sat in. "I love it when you don't let me help," she said. "My legs hurt. Dancing and then work all day, and walking everywhere on my days off. I hardly get a chance to sit on Saturdays. I should never go out on a Friday night, pretending that I don't work the next day."

Midge laughed, her back to her at the stove. "Any adventures? You know I have to ask."

"Last night? Yeah. I danced with a sweet young thing and then bedded him down. It was a mess though, Midge. I freaked, and that scared the daylights out of him."

Midge froze in place, and then turned slowly around with her spatula raised like a

semaphore signal. "Are you telling me that you slept with a man last night?"

Jane nodded. "I slept with a man last night."

Midge kept blinking, now with her mouth open. She turned back to the stove. "This is big, Jane. This is very big."

"Oh, it was big, all right."

The quip got them both laughing hysterically. Midge could not seem to close her mouth. Finally, she laid the spatula down and grabbed up her wine glass and stepped back to the table. "Was it good?" she demanded. "I mean being with a man, the whole thing." Her forearms were flat on the table top and she was leaning a good two feet across it.

Jane grinned up at the ceiling. "It was so...fucking...good." She pulled at her hair. "Jesus, I thought I'd never ever feel something like that again."

When she dropped her head back, Midge's expression had grown concerned. "Surely not, Jane."

Jane pursed her lips and nodded. "'Fraid so. Anyway, it's done, I know my body still works, now I just have to get my head screwed on straight."

She had gotten into the wine as soon as she'd arrived, and on an empty stomach. She'd never had a chance to eat lunch, the gallery was so busy on Saturdays. Now she was talking too fast, still wired.

Midge said, "You have to be careful these days, Jane. There's so many terrible diseases. And some of these handsome cowpokes have a nasty streak."

"You're right about that. This boy was so clean though. I feel bad. He was so nice and I scared him. I think he honestly wanted to just dance with me."

"Do I know him?"

"Tim something. Schelmer, I think."

"No, I don't know him." Midge returned to the stove and used the spatula to divide a casserole into even squares. She donned mitts and brought the dish to the table. "So, why did you freak?" she asked.

"Can't figure out love and sex, I guess. There was that weirdness between my parents, and then Dad needing me and my sisters so much and then dying so young on us, and then losing my daughter, and my husband going...cold, really." God, she was

momentarily astonished that she had already shared all that with Midge in the short space of their new friendship. She tried to toss off, "I'll never get my body and my soul in synch."

Midge intuitively stepped back from further questioning. "Well, it all sounds like a step in the right direction."

At an opening many weeks back, Midge had come up to her and said that she'd heard from Angela that Jane had been championing her ceramics at Arroyo Verde. "And not just there, all over town." Jane had been too flustered to reply at first. "I'm really grateful," Midge had added. "Not too many people appreciate my things."

"If they're placed anywhere in that crazy shop where people can see them they do."

They'd been meeting and talking ever since.

Jane sat up at the table and grabbed up her soup spoon. "Oh thank you, thank you, thank you, Lord, for what I am about to receive."

Midge seemed as hungry as she did. Jane knew, in fact, that on firing days the potter might go hours without eating.

Midge said, "You sound a little sad for that boy." When Jane said nothing, she said, "I'll bet he thinks of it all as a kind of gift."

"Oh that's right! I saw him again just this morning. And the poor kid--well, he's no kid but way my junior--still looked mightily confused."

"He'll sort it out."

Jane's thoughts had slipped off into another direction. "I do keep wondering why sadness has to be a part of it. I mean, I didn't hurt anyone last night, but still I felt sad later on, and even while we're going at it I found myself crying. Can you believe that? The sadness is what I have to find out about." She had been remembering that she sometimes wept after intercourse with Victor, even at the beginning; purely as an activity it generated an almost unbearable loneliness, as if that feeling were a natural part of it. "It's a pattern," she concluded aloud. "I just thought for a second how confused Tim looked when I saw him this morning and it reminded me of my husband, though not really in physical or sexual terms. Should I shut up?"

Across the table, Midge peered up from her plate. "If you do, I'll kill you."

Jane nodded and dug into her food again. With Midge, she had learned to talk away with her mouth full, no problems there. "My parents, my husband, they've impregnated me with their relentless unhappiness, and I wake up scared each morning that I didn't keep enough of those dark clouds away from my sons, which has just about been my life's work up till now. I can't feel good without feeling guilty, like I don't deserve pleasure or something. When men make love to me, I think they end up feeling ashamed rather than happy. Now, if that's not sad, I don't know what is."

Midge looked over at her. "You're so brave, Jane. How you take things on!"

Jane let her horselaugh rip. "Do *not* fall for my clever public relations, Midge. I need your clear head."

"I am speaking with a totally clear head."

"Okay, but why all this dramatic self-importance?" She swayed back and forth in her chair. "Doesn't it bother you that all we talk about is me and my problems and when it's time to talk about you I fall asleep? Tell me the truth." She gulped from her wineglass as she sat up and tried to keep her face straight, but a drop splashed onto her chin.

Midge considered the question carefully. "You intrigue me. I think you're brave, like I said--and honest." After a moment longer, she added, "And this business, this *important* business of getting to the bottom of yourself, it's not going to last forever. It's temporary. It's what's needed now. Later, you'll move on."

Jane clapped the table with a flat palm. "You're right, Midge. I'm going to get to the bottom of me. If I don't bore you and the rest of the world to death with it all first."

They laughed, and then they fell silent and only ate for a few moments.

"You want to know something really strange?" Jane asked. "Back when Vic proposed that we start sleeping together, I told him right off that I was non-orgasmic. My exact words were, 'Vic, I just think you should know, I'm a non-orgasmic woman.'" She and Midge laughed, stopped, and then burst into laughter again. Meanwhile, Jane was eating too quickly and, for a moment, coughed on a potato skin. She said out loud to herself, "Slow down," then to Midge, "That, you must admit, was a bit strange."

Midge shook her head and speared a broccoli frond. "Maybe not the text for an ideal date, but like I said, honest."

Jane tried, as she often did, to get the conversation onto Midge. Otherwise, Midge would let her talk all night about herself. "I keep thinking about your being an orphan."

"Yep. I've lived most of my life alone." Midge laughed with her lips closed to chew. "By preference, at first, and later with a kind of grudging resignation."

"Why?"

"I guess I never learned how to handle disruptions." She spoke airily as she ate, bit by bit, which was her way. "When I was married, my art gradually stopped. I got consumed by our pain, it just took up all my creative energy. Funny thing, though, I've learned that women lovers can be just as possessive or demanding of my time. I think I was born and bred to be alone, but you do get pretty set in your ways."

"Can I ask a personal question?"

"Pa-lease."

"When did you learn that you preferred women to men?"

Midge stirred the last remnants of her dinner around the plate. "I'm not sure there was a preference, so to speak. It was mostly that I did not like sex with men."

"But you were married, married to a man!"

"And that's how I found out that I didn't like someone, or something, inside of me. It felt...invasive."

Jane put down her spoon and sat way back in her chair. Midge's admission certainly required a full-fledged response, but all Jane could manage was, "Really."

"Yep. It just never felt right."

"But, I mean...didn't you already know that before you got married?"

"That's a fair question. Are you going to say no to dessert again?"

"I don't do desserts. Never liked them. Too rich. Now, back to what you were saying."

Midge got up and pulled a key lime pie from the refrigerator. As she cut a generous slice for herself she said, "I *did* know before I got married. That's the awful part. I thought it would change as a natural course of married life, but it never did. I trapped my poor boyfriend into a bad marriage."

Jane became lost in thought. "Me too," she concluded, but she realized that more

information was required. "I think I trapped Victor into marriage. I mean, to be absolutely fair about it. I can remember misgivings on his end, more than a few of them in fact, but I just kept rolling us along."

Midge was back at the table now. She brought a mug of black coffee for Jane, which she slid across the table to her. Jane came forward and hunched around the hot mug, gripping it with both hands. "With all my dreams lately, and all my daydreams too, I'm wondering if maybe I was innocent of charges I've leveled against myself."

"Wow. I'm all ears."

More words would not come at first. "From what I've read, we don't really pick our mates because they fulfill some kind of...rational criteria. We pick them for subconscious reasons, and mostly to do with how familiar they are to us."

Midge nodded emphatically. "I like that theory. I like that a lot."

Around the two women, the long candles on the wide table and up on the hewn mantelpiece sunk in the stucco wall had burned down to half their lengths. Occasionally, the windows glimmered with snaps of distant lightning. They decided to take their coffee cups into the studio where they could sit before the side door and face the open country. They opened a mismatched pair of lawn chairs just inside the door, where they could stay warmer. Once settled, the two of them stared out on the vast pastureland, watching for the silent lightning that frequently lit the horizon for split seconds. There was no breeze, so the cold only seeped in.

Jane kept her coffee mug close under nose. She savored the vapors. The fresh air was heavenly, engendering trust. She looked over at Midge. The woman had such a comforting face. The fine bangs looping over her hair band. A no-nonsense face, one that had seen a lot of life for certain. Midge's skin was uncommonly soft and moist, its wrinkling like that of fine leather. Normally, her round brown eyes were as implacable as a cow's, but Jane was convinced of a mental grittiness at work behind them.

She said, "I've been thinking that my marriage ground to a standstill years ago, into just a collection of habits. On paper I am married to a wonderful man. But gradually we stopped being a help to each other. We closed off."

"Out of fear?"

Midge had a mug of her own now. Two women sat side by side, mirroring each

other at least in posture. Jane shook her head slowly. "Yes, I guess fear. We hold back things we think the other can't handle. We suspect that we'll be judged if we reveal our deepest selves."

Midge clucked. "And what so-terrible thing would be revealed, in your case, I mean?"

"That I was not equipped to...complete Victor. For example, for years I noticed that Victor sometimes looked at me in a certain way, very strange, very penetrating. Then one day I realized that it was the same way that my dad used to look at me."

"Oh boy."

"I was assigned the role of 'completer,' if there is such a thing. And it was *not* a role I was equipped to play."

Way off in the darkness, a few lightning ropes snapped at the earth. Midge was nipping at the lip of her mug. "Man," she said, "Freud would have a field day with this."

"Sad but true," Jane added with a sigh. "Freud said that the problems of most intelligent people are blocked abundancies. What a thought. It kills me to think that Vic and I are like two storehouses of abundancies facing each other with locked doors. I suppose others in our situation start reporting to friends that they've fallen out of love with their mates, or that one doesn't understand the other, or that they've grown apart. The best thing we've got going for us is that we're both incredibly stubborn. We won't give up on it. Funny to think of stubbornness as a virtue."

She shook her head, closed her eyes. Surprisingly, she could hear that the lightning did indeed make a sound--a lower thump beneath the soft intermittent whooshing of an approaching wind. She heard Midge say quietly, "You give dark names to things. Why can't stubborn be brave?"

"Think so? Funny, but when I'm really being nice to myself, I believe that I've been right not to give up on myself. I see people cave into habits as they get older. I'll just never believe that there are forces at work beyond the control of Vic or me."

There was a rustle and movement in the tall grass beyond the porch. It frightened Jane for a moment, and then Midge's mongrel dog, Bliss, appeared in the doorway.

"Hey, girl," Midge called.

"Oh, Bliss, Bliss, Bliss," Jane crooned. She reached out for the dog.

The longhaired brown and white animal slithered between their chairs, turning back and forth within their hands while wagging her tail so vigorously that it kept rapping the chair legs.

"You gettin' spooked by the lightning?" Midge asked the dog.

"So beautiful," Jane mused. She ran her hands through Bliss's fur whenever the dog came within range. She put down her coffee and pressed both hands into Bliss's coat. "She's full of smells from the big world out there, aren't you, girl?"

All at once, Bliss collapsed between them. She positioned her head on her paws and sighed twice deeply.

Midge said, "Jane, you're so different from the other people who come out here."

Jane rolled her head toward her. "That's for sure."

"No." Midge searched for words. "Most think their problems--and so many come because they've had problems back where they came from--were caused by geography. They think a change of climates or towns or altitudes is going to do it. You came out to deal with yourself, face to face."

Jane nodded quietly, her chin just dipping and rising, though she did not truly believe that she deserved such praise. Outside, deep in the velvet black that saturated the pasturelands, the lightning continued to flick and scurry, mesmerizing. She said, "There's really a lot to like about my husband. When Vic and I first started making love, I would say to him, 'Just take your pleasure, honey. It'll be fine for me too.' But he'd frown and shake his head. My body became a challenge for him, like a machine that had a broken part somewhere. I'd be lying there, naked and scared, and he'd be all over me, fingers, tongue, the works, 'looking for it,' he said. He'd say, 'It's in there, Jane. What do you say? Let's go *get it*.' And his eyes would positively glow." She had drunk too much, she couldn't stop herself. "I'd open my eyes and he'd be smiling, looking over me like a big palpitating challenge." She rolled her head toward Midge again. "I was so grateful at first, but I should have known that his fix-it philosophy might mean a world of impatience."

Midge, facing the doorway, narrowed her eyes. "Men are, by nature, impatient."

She went on. "At first a lot of it was really tender and exciting. He had a way of hooking one of his legs behind one of my knees, and...well, Midge, I got so turned on

sometimes it was embarrassing."

"Stuff of life."

"Yes, but I didn't come. I kept getting so close. I'd say, 'This must seem ridiculous to you,' and he'd say, 'Yeah, it's hell,' and while I was laughing, poor guy, he'd try something else."

Jane looked over at Midge, who turned to face her and then winked with one round cow's eye. "What? I'm still here. So, you know I have to ask. Did you ever come?"

Jane smiled. She leaned way over to rummage a hand in Bliss's fur. A deep breath rolled through the animal. "It was a red-letter day, Midge. I was just about to have my period and worried about bleeding or something, and I remember going away into a kind of dream in the middle of it, of peacocks of all things. Peacocks moving through high grass while I heard the sound of his mouth on me. I mean, just hearing the physical closeness so clearly made me...I don't know, trusting?" Her hands had risen, drawing a picture in air. "In my dream, one peacock mounted the other and she began to vibrate with pleasure"--Jane shook one hand--"and I came awake feeling the pleasure flowing through me. God, it was so very, very lovely. That was the first time."

"With me, it was baboons."

Jane, and then Midge, howled at that. It took them a long time to stop laughing and settle back in their chairs. The breeze coming in through the back window had grown chillier, but neither of them moved. Then Midge said, "He sounds like a good guy."

"But it didn't last."

She sounded almost alarmed to herself. Some seconds later, she felt Midge's hand shaking her loose arm. What, had she fallen so silent?

"Why not, Jane?"

"Oh, it did but it didn't. It's almost as if once I'd felt that deep physically I'd made myself more vulnerable. I guess there was a novelty factor too, which faded, but the main thing is that every knock and shock of everyday life started to affect him. There were children in this story by then and one of them one dead--well, a miscarriage anyway--it's complicated. I don't think he ever realized how much work all of it would

require. What's the expression? 'I didn't sign on for this'?" She straightened up and waved her hands in the air, rattling her bracelets. "Okay, Jane, *stop*."

"Maybe we should stop talking about this. I don't require it or anything."

"No, no." Jane sat up straighter, breathless. "It's all right. My God, you're the first person I've told some of this stuff to. I think of the superficial, farcical chit-chat that I've been calling conversation for the last fifteen years...." She sighed and looked out at the porch, its single high bulb, unlit, the hewn posts that supported its stacked tile roof, then down at Bliss lying sound asleep between them. In the distance, lightning flickered again. "It's pretty weird to be out here in the desert, baring my soul." She had to shut up. If she told Midge about her nightmares, the recurring ones about doors and windows, then the woman would just conclude that she was too nuts for the friendship category.

"Did you ever get...professional help for all this?"

"Sure. The first therapist, a man, came onto me."

"No!"

"Yep. So then I switched to this woman, for quite some time actually. I hated the way she kept trying to position me as a victim. I mean, can't they let us be *agents* once in a while?" She sighed. "We explored the possibility of guilt from my resenting Bobby's gender, or over the miscarriage, or maybe my father's confused affections. She had all these theories. It's still abuse even if you aren't touched, sometimes worse, because then you're guilty because it's like you'd withheld something. We got quite a little list together. Oh, and she wanted me to sue the hospital after my emergency C-section, because they'd stitched my womb back in wrong or something"

"Ugh."

"Sue those young doctors who had saved Bobby's life! Can you image?"

"A lesser person would have sued."

The additional praise brought on a deeper feeling of sadness within Jane. Was she framing all these confessions to elicit some of validation or support? She clapped her hands to her head while stifling a deep yawn. "Oh, this is awful. I'm out here darkening your life. I talk and talk, and when I ask a question about you, you turn the spotlight back on me."

Midge snorted. In the distance, the lightning flashes had receded to short, random

blips. "You're not doing anything to me. Way back, I gave up on a man, because he gave up on you, or the two of you--that's what you're saying, aren't you, that your husband gave up? I can remember how that felt. I do know that when I was with men, I would feel them measuring and keeping track, and then I'd start to do that too." She paused here, her face frowning uncharacteristically, facing down and away. "You know what it is? Men don't listen to women, not really. They don't count as important things that they hear from women. If they don't hear the same thing from a man at some time, then they discount what we tell them."

Jane nodded slowly. "That is so true, Midge."

"It was a lot better with April, eight years of better, but then...." Midge stopped, then shrugged. She raised her coffee cup and swiveled her eyes over the rim. "Know what I mean?"

Jane looked over at Midge. Arlen talked like she did, circling a subject from several fronts at once. Artists. By nature, non-narrative. She stifled a yawn. "So what happened with April, anyway? I suppose you two broke up."

"She died."

Jane gasped. "No. My God, how?"

"Single car accident, happens all the time out here. The distances."

"Midge, I am so sorry."

Midge nodded slowly as she spoke. "Coming home late from work, just slipped right off the road not five miles out and rolled over. Stupidest thing, because she was not wearing a seat belt. I was almost as mad as I was sad. Now *that* took a couple of good long years to get over."

"Midge, that is so terrible. I feel so bad for you."

The two of them sat in respectful silence for a few moments. Then Midge sucked in her breath. "Listen, you're getting tired."

"Yes. I'm not trying to be cute but I was just thinking that I better hit the road myself while I can still drive."

"Tomorrow's Sunday," said Midge. "I usually get up real late, the only day I let myself, then read the whole paper--I spend five bucks for *The New York Times*, just to see how the art world out there is killing itself--and then, in the afternoons, I just sit around

and sketch or do watercolors. Any old thing." She smiled over at Jane. "Care to join me?"

"You sure you want me back so soon?"

"No, dummy, I mean spend the night here! There's a whole separate room. 'Cept you might have to watch out for April's ghost."

"Midge, how can you joke!"

"You kidding? It's a relief that I can. Anyway, what do you say?"

Jane widened her eyes. "I'm, I'm not sure.... I'm very surprised, Midge. I mean, after I've polluted your evening with my sordid nonsense."

"Oh, stop that ridiculous talk. You must not be very used to hanging around with grown up people."

Jane laughed sharply. "I'm not!" She should go, but her legs felt as heavy as iron. "I'd be glad to stay," she admitted. "I think I could sleep for days."

She barely remembered the next few minutes. She was ushered to a room and handed a nightshirt and a towel, and then the door closed behind her. She must have washed because later when the door opened, of itself it seemed, she smelt the fragrance of an unfamiliar soap on her face as she started awake. Before the spookiness had settled too deeply, she caught the gleam of Bliss's fur. The dog stepped deeper into the room and, after a few furtive snuffles against Jane's wrinkled nose, settled down to sleep on the rug beside the bed.

Eight

A hundred warning bells.

In the clear light of a newly dawning day she recalled that she had said out loud the evening before that she had trapped that poor man, Victor Joseph Bill, into marriage. Her tongue had been loosened by at least two glasses of wine, but had the wine been a serum of delusion or truth? Well, she'd traveled to the high desert to face facts about herself and there had been no clause in that spiritual contract to face only pleasant ones.

Both of them had been in California for exactly one year, just long enough to meet, it almost seemed, as if a clear sign of the hand of fate, if one believed in such a thing. He'd been brought out by Loma Linda Community College to fill a couple of temporary vacancies, and purely on the impressions he'd created over shared drinks with the faculty chairman at a national conference. (He'd always been good at making favorable impressions.) She'd been lured out by her siblings, a contingent of which had, at one time, envisioned a West Coast colony of Verdiannes. Several of them had wandered out there after their father's sudden death; later, a second diaspora would push a few much farther north, following their sister Sara's lead. Once on the new coast, Jane had found a job as a community outreach consultant (a glamorous euphemism for work without benefits) with the state college administration system. Then, one day, she was sent out to a small conference room at Loma Linda Community College to listen in as they strategized on how to maintain their accreditation and there had been this intriguing man in the room, leaning back in his chair and resting his head in the juncture of two walls as if the whole meeting thus far were merely a prelude for his first utterance.

It amazed her, continually, how things happened sometimes. It wasn't just that her job had directed her toward an entirely different building in an entirely different city but that their first encounter, hers and Victor's, would be one of the very few times in those early years that she would shine at a meeting of her peers. (More often she would fizz as an irritant.) Could it be true that she had been

jangling her bracelets, normally an unmanageable affectation, and gabbing on in that glib way to get the attention of the quiet, handsome man in the corner? "That's Victor Bill," someone had aimlessly whispered at her. Had she been staring at him? "He did a big article on local history curricula for high schools."

She'd been so shocked to be lonely back then, she who had craved to break free from her packed family of seven siblings and, later, the cloying company of cool friends she'd made in college who gradually revealed themselves to be mostly just glib and pretentious. The meeting at Loma Linda slowly worked through the agenda and finally arrived at the accreditation challenge, but the avuncular administrator chairing the meeting hadn't gotten very far before she'd jumped in on her own. He had started off by cautioning them about site visits by the accreditation committee at which they would have to somehow defend data that the committee was sure to find disappointing, when all at once she sang out, "Why do our community colleges always automatically feel that they have to apologize?"

Smiling uncertainly behind gold-rimmed glasses, the chairman peered at her. "I'm not sure I was talking about apologizing, Miss Verdianne." He'd laughed a little, perhaps to cover for her, in advance.

"But setting up on the defensive," she countered. "I don't think any of our schools should be ashamed of our performance." Had that been she making that declaration? She remembered actually looking around the room, as if to gather support. "How about talking points like how we've succeeding in recruiting all these super-qualified teachers and how lots of them, people right in this room, are publishing books and articles and presenting at conferences without having tenure guns pointed at their heads. They're in it for the teaching!"

The chairman had interjected, not unkindly, "You're talking about recruitment, Miss Verdianne, and that's coming up."

Such a comment, even such an inaccurate one, would normally have deflated her, but she had simply gone on. "No, I'm talking about the colleges' weak perceptions of themselves!"

From across the table, a woman with her head resting on elbows and fists put in, "She's right. I'll bet if we poked into the students' teacher assessments we'd find

a lot of good stuff to crow about."

An older man, someone high up in the faculty pecking order, addressed the chairman. "It's a good point, Harve. Maybe we should go on the offensive for once."

Harvey, the chairman, shook his head. "I'm not saying we shouldn't, but you have to be ready to explain something like a 40% graduation rate."

Someone called out, "If you attach that rate to the fact that 80% of the students are the first in their families to ever attend college, it starts looking more like a success rate."

The discussion took off from there, on its own, thank God, because she had lapsed into silence--although, embarrassing to recall, she posed as if she were modestly stepping back so that others could take the lead. She'd also laid one smooth, bare forearm on the table while forcing herself not to look Victor Bill's way. But then he spoke. He said only--and she could remember every syllable as if it had been etched in glass--"I for one would love to be proud of us."

Carelessly, she swung her head his way. He'd finished speaking. With a flick, his eyes swung to hers, and held. She turned away and her face felt tinged with pink. In her mind she had spoken to him, *"I'm sorry, but this is not me. I don't often speak like this. I don't often have good ideas. Sometimes, I wake up after dreams and cry."*

After the meeting, from the corner of her eye she had seen him heading for her. How frightening that had been; she knew that he would certainly say something supportive or congratulatory, and she would be saddened to hear herself fall into the modest honesty that was actually a contorted form of vain shamming. It was late in the day. She'd left her coat in the administration office, so she fled to get it and get out. But when she slipped toward an alternate exit, she found him just around the next corner, waiting to head her off.

She had turned the corner and he was there before her. If he had not calculated her trajectory correctly, they might never have talked again, and they wouldn't have married and bore and raised two children together. How strange and exciting that strangers meet, talk, talk more, and then touch and kiss and remove each other's clothing and in helpless, hungry trust press their genitals together. If they had not met in that hallway, she might never have felt, not even the few times

she had with him, the airy joy of foregoing the vigilant protection of her mind's and body's openings and trusting herself fully to another.

It hadn't only been what he said back there in that hallway ambush, it was his tone, and the whole look of him as he spoke. The quiet but eager desire to communicate a heartfelt thought to her, to her alone it seemed. There were real strengths at work there, she'd learn, but in retrospect there were strategies of the typical courting male as well. "You were so right," he kept saying, tensed, as if possessed by the possibilities of her ideas. "I mean, we could start professional journals, produce something hard, that people can hold in their hands, or..." She kept moving, hinting at a schedule of pressing engagements, bracelets jangling as she tried to shove a trailing scarf under her load of blonde hair. "These ideas should not be allowed to die," he said to her shoulder blades.

She remembered only that she replied with some enthusiastic gibberish meant to placate him. She just wanted to get to her car. He scared her. She had felt that he was actually attracted to her, mind and body, and she could not bear the thought of experiencing that moment (and that moment would come!) when he would realize his attraction had been unwarranted, that she would not measure up. As she half-ran, keeping several steps ahead of him, part of her mind ached for him to overtake her while the other sadly envisioned the day when he'd understand that a shifting pattern of moods commanded her heart and that her body would never respond with a deep enough hunger to his. Really, in those few moments it took them to traverse the hallways, she had plotted the rise and fall of a completely fabricated relationship.

As it happened, he followed her into the parking lot. "I'd be happy to form a vigilante committee with you," he was saying. She did slow down, but a hundred warning bells were ringing in her head. To stop and face him would be dangerous. If he hadn't already, he would soon at least notice that she was ten pounds overweight. Perhaps it had given her courage that he sounded as if he had history on his side and were begging her to join in. He seemed to possess special knowledge of humanness, and just a hint of that power brought an extra glimmer of hopefulness into her thinking. She had been tossing noncommittal comments over

her shoulder the whole while, but now she did stop, out there beside her car, and turn. She took in his large, squarish head with the heavy hair, its two strands of premature gray, and all of it coming over the cranium in deep waves, and the groomed stubble that taken hold in men's fashion. The broad trunk in the heavy cotton white shirt with the big garish tie swinging in the breeze, a notepad from the meeting still in his hand. In loose khaki trousers his strong legs were affixed before her, but gently, as if she could, if she chose to, swing him aside like a heavy door on efficient hinges.

When he said, next, "Hey, remember the Brook Farm people, Hawthorne and the Alcotts, those people didn't know that they were great when they were hanging out together," this appeal from history made her wonder whether there was a chance that she could be of help--to him, to his colleagues, to the thousands of lost, teen-aged and returning adult students across a dozen scattered schools. That must be why she said, "You're kind to be saying these things," and let her eyes move down one deep wave in his hair.

He laughed, reddened, rocked back an inch as if words were pokes. He coughed and said, "So, let's have dinner. And plot!"

But even then it was sex. That he did not seem to be considering her, at least overtly, as a sexual object; that he might, just possibly, come to loom as a clean pure slate on which to scrawl her awkward passions; that she felt at once, and primally, a deep desire to consider deeply what it might mean to explore the reality of bodies and desires with him before...what? Before those desires atrophied?

Why, *why* had there been such a hurry in her? Why had she concluded that he represented a kind of last chance for her while she was not yet twenty-three? Several months before, she had arrived on that remote coast with the unshakable sense that fate (fate had figured largely in her thoughts back then) had insisted that she move far from the scenes of her helpless college promiscuity. Certain kinds of boys seemed to need her, and with those certain kinds of boys she felt it was almost a duty to be caring and attentive. She had recognized the ease with which she moved from the first caresses to desire to what she was certain would be a regenerating upward spiral of even more desire. But it was always, every time, just

a matter of time before the foreboding welled to a basic anxiousness that thrummed just above a deeper terror. Each prospect would come to nothing, she always concluded, and long before there were reasons enough to conclude that.

It had been her great discovery that she'd been unequipped to love someone, but this discovery was only very recent. So, all those years ago when he made his overture to meet and eat and plot, she'd said, "Plot?" and managed not to look at him as he stood tree-like beside her little hatchback as her mind automatically prepared a romantic spin. She'd raised her eyes slowly and said, "I wasn't talking about something clandestine or secretive."

He blushed, looked perplexed. "I guess I've always assumed that the truly revolutionary has to be planned at the corner tables of cafes. I'm thinking of the Italian Fifth Columnists in Padua." He smiled then yanked at his hair as if searching for a pull cord with which he could stop himself.

She smiled at him. "Thanks for the support. But revolutionary? I really hope you're not patronizing me." She took an inward breath as she said this; she was still on automatic, and heady with the words she was producing. Frankly, she thrilled herself. She didn't sound nearly so passive as she had back in those college town bars--but that was different turf, where a woman simply planted herself and waited for the hits. Back in that parking lot with Victor, in the midst of one of her life's earliest flights, she must have wondered (sadly ironic to consider) if she was about to communicate, really communicate, with a man. But no, it was clear now that she had been talking so aggressively because she sensed he would find it attractive.

"No, no," he said, "I can see where I went wrong. I guess what you were saying touched off my own secret plans. It would be a major bummer to think that I've become part of a status quo institution." (How sad again! For his whole future career, he would never *not* be part of one.)

"You're a purist, then?"

His head snapped back as if she'd jabbed his forehead. "Miss Verdianne, that would be to discount something before I knew it. I believe, or I hope at least, that I apply only one criterion--that a person, or a group of people, be trying hard. I think that's so much more important than if they're succeeding or not, and that's why I

liked what you said."

Her brain took in the words with a rush of thought, and then she said calmly, "Maybe we should talk again."

"I'll call you," he promised.

She nodded, and then turned to her car and made what was supposed to be an elegant exit, but was really an outright dash to get herself away before she said something really stupid.

So off she went to wait for his call.

At the present moment, with her eyes fixed on a ceiling composed of narrow, roughly hewn tree trunks with gobs of plaster pressed between them and one hand scrunching the back of a sleeping dog's neck, she realized that what she was doing was "playing a tape in her head." In the weeks leading up to Bobby's final departure from their home, she plowed into dozens of self-help websites and books, many of which provided dozens of case studies. She'd mined this unevenly trustworthy material for clues to her own condition. And, in fact, she'd come away with some solid insights. For example, she might well be one of those women who were "bred to please." Didn't that explain why she spent so much time trying to look good, and why she first rehearsed in her mind every statement she made to any woman of whom she was envious and just about any man of any ilk whatsoever, and why she held back offering a professional opinion until she'd held onto it so long that when she finally let it fly it shot out like an angry missile? Just about the time Bobby actually left, she'd arrived at another conclusion, that she was a "chronic enabler," a person who existed to complete others.

If she'd known all this back then, perhaps when he didn't call she'd let the matter drop, instead of running after him and (so embarrassing!) in such a stealthy and cowardly manner. She didn't do that at first, truth be known. When his promised call did not come after days and then weeks, she kept herself alone and celibate in a small apartment, despite nights of wrenching loneliness and offered space from siblings. She had pretended that she craved solitude. She reminded herself that she had fled her college dorms and apartments because they were so reminiscent of the family pen with its strewn laundry and rumpled, fabricated

bedrooms even with half the family out and, later, with her father gone to his early grave. She had forced herself for a few years to stay unattached. At the same time, the truth was she was desperately hoping to connect with someone.

It was a mystery, that drive to get out of one brood and into another. With a keening need she admitted to no one, she looked forward to visiting her older brother David on weekends. She became a real aunt to Bethie and David, Jr., weathering the beach on several occasions and Disneyland for one long weekend. She dreamed about Bethie's round black eyes and could sit on a park bench for hours rocking little David, a stubby, packed little urchin who would hum in her lap. They knew that they could leap around her or dash off, no matter, as she kept moving on a straight plottable course with hands behind her back, instinctively waiting for the one clear word from her that would pull them up short at a curb. (She had always known the language of children.) And it was her deeper loneliness that made her sufficiently sympathetic to her older sister Sissy so that the period would remain the closest of their lives.

On several week nights at the office, when still unable to face her empty apartment, she would pull Victor Bill's file at the regional office and moon over it, meditating on the information--a BA in education and a Master's in history. A high school junior year abroad in Brussels. A sample curriculum widely shared on a bold new approach to teaching K-12 history, starting with the students' family histories instead of the dead and buried civilizations of ancient Greece or Egypt. It made her feel inadequate, though her imagination cracked with the conversational possibilities presented by her own art history minor and communications major, a degree which became trendy but which she had stumbled into because of her addiction to the kindness of particular professors. At her desk, after hours with the extra statistical work she cheerily invented, she might close her eyes and imagine late-night chats with Victor Bill about education theory, the higher degree glut, the hard clarity of Brussels' master painters versus the airy palette of the Impressionists.

After several weeks without a word from him, she rationalized that their failure to connect a second time was perhaps for the best. She had imagined a layer

of new virginity forming around her, an aura of innocence at least, like Eve before the apple, and the remaking, a process which she assumed was required if True Love were to happen, needed time to take. Actually, the time was working against her, spiking her with desperateness, as he must have calculated.

Face it, she'd been miserable that he had continued not to stride into view or sonically materialize on the opposite end of a telephone line. She had never so palpably recalled that aching hollowness at her center as she did now, lying awake very early in the morning in Midge's desert home. She must have felt just like this; so, while her head had been denying possibilities back then, somewhere else in her being, perhaps in her heart, she had been dreamily considering that his sketchily-described theory of "trying" might present encouraging prospects for love. If someone valued trying above succeeding, as he claimed he did, then would he not come to appreciate her? He would keep trying because he would see how hard she kept trying. (In fact, something like that was what had happened, but with important differences.) At the time, though, she had no idea whether he truly found her attractive or shared any of her dreams, or if he was even available.

He continued not to call. Then fate intervened in the form of a follow-up meeting to the one where they had met. And she was invited back; the chairman's email specifically mentioned her contributions to the last meeting and even hinted that she might lead the discussion when that agenda item rolled up. With 20-20 hindsight, it was clear that she could have, so she made the fatal decision to ring him up herself. Oh, if it had been *courage* or *self-efficacy* that had guided her fingertips to punch in that number (secured from snooping in his personal file), what a different life she might have lived for the next twenty years. And for his part, if he'd been honest when he answered, what a mighty bullet they both might have dodged. Instead, he lied. "I've been away!" he nearly shouted. (She'd overheard one of her colleagues talking on the phone with him the week before.) "Well, at first I didn't call before because I kept expecting our august leader to reschedule us at some decent point, instead of letting things slide." (What splendid diversionary tactics. The man could certainly think fast on his feet!)

"Well, that's comforting," she admitted. "I thought it was my breath."

"Ugh!" she gasped aloud in poor dead Alice's bedroom. She even startled Bliss, who raised her head from Jane's thigh and gave her a long look before settling back to sleep again. Perhaps it hadn't bothered Bliss that Jane was grimacing, and just as strongly as she had grimaced when she'd let crack about bad breath escaped from her Id. My God, why immediately put out a romantic reference (and why such a stupid one at that)? She nearly covered the mistake by declaring after her next breath, "You don't need to apologize, Professor Bill."

"Victor. Please."

"Victor, you don't need to apologize. I can't even think straight under all this continual California sunshine. I've been doing and saying the strangest things lately." Well, maybe she could be just a teeny bit proud of herself for letting her heart open a crack.

"It's not my element either, Jane. This state--it's actually more like a continent, isn't it?--has got me so spaced out. My pace is off. Do you know I almost came back late from the Monday holiday this week? I thought Tuesday was still Monday."

They both laughed but it was unlikely that either knew what they were talking about. They were on some kind of dreadful automatic setting that ordered their brains to produce words and utter them before any enduring silences could set in. But their attempts to connect at the meeting itself went badly. She had not foreseen that this time there was little place for her on the agenda. She had been invited back as the instigator of a new idea, but, with some embarrassment, she realized that in this particular meeting she really had no official part to play in the discussions. She might have disregarded that purely bureaucratic point and jumped in out of pure esprit de corps, but no, she clammed up, kept still in her chair to keep her jumble of bracelets silent. Stupidly, she avoided looking at Victor. Then, to make matters worse, the chairman announced a closed session for faculty and, with a final small smile, set everyone else free. She would have to wait for Victor in some hallway, with the others wondering why she was still there.

Worse still, she had to walk by Victor to get out of the room. With a terrible sinking feeling, she realized that she did not have the strength to manage the strong,

confident smile she would wish to be judged by. Hopelessly, she pressed a lopsided sort of grimace his way as she edged by him, and at first she received in return the wan, noncommittal smile she knew she would. But then, in the next instant, his smile changed, became an awkward laugh. Before she could completely pass him, he touched her wrist and said quietly, "That matter we wanted to speak about? Could you possibly wait for me in the library?" He kept his tone professional enough to quell the curiosity of nearby ears, and her own emerging blush.

She did not even know where the library was, but it was comforting to wander a few moments while analyzing what had just happened. He had written her off as a hopelessly needy girl pretending to be a determined careerist, and then in the next instant...what? Dug deeper? Decided to be fair? If he could be fair, then she could be fair. She would wait for him. (Now, twenty-two years later, she had finally stopped waiting for him. Amazing.)

She had waited for some time in the college's little library, working at a table in view of the glass wall that revealed the main hallway. In time she noted familiar faces from the meeting floating by, one or two noting her quizzically. But no Victor. Unwisely perhaps, she rose to search for him, but as soon as she entered the hallway she found him talking with two of his colleagues. From what she could see, they were having a grand old time, engaged in an eruptive, friendly debate. This final humiliation defeated her; leaving her to cool her heels like that, chatting it up with colleagues while secretly basking in the delight that he had a woman on the hook! She whipped her shoulder bag around and headed down the hall toward the parking lot.

She had meant to hazard only a quick glance as she ducked into her car, but on his distant face emerging from a far doorway she saw his unconcealed hurt and it cut into her like a knife. How different things would have turned out if she had not seen that hurt, but she had seen it and it affected her, strongly, so strongly that she muttered "Oh my God" to her steering wheel. She had tried to climb back out of the car, but one of her bracelets slipped over the turn signal lever and she ended by falling backwards and striking her head against the frame. Tears sprang from her eyes at the pain, but mixed with them were the bitter, saltier variety of self-loathing.

What a silly person she was, a theatrical figure hung with costume jewelry whose very hair, flung out in carefully composed disorder, had been arranged to signify, what, passionate disinterest? She couldn't even be sure. She barely succeeded in driving off as if she hadn't seen him coming at her across the lot. What must he have thought, of her flying off like that--and a second time? Well, let him see it. Let him see what he'd escaped from.

A day passed, and again that could have been that, but then he surprised her by calling, once and then again, both times only remotely apologizing for his part in their failure to get together. He suggested a surer, solider scheduling; the fault lay with the way they were going about it. On both occasions she begged off, lying about tiredness but mainly so depressed by life in general that she felt that she had nothing worthwhile to share with him. At bottom, she remained angry that he hadn't managed to get to her library table directly after the meeting. It had hurt her, his leaving her exposed to strangers that way.

Then he showed up on her doorstep! The sight of him truly there upon the small concrete porch of her apartment building caused her to gasp. It was dark, it was late on a chilly autumn evening, she heard crickets, a thinner chorus than the Midwestern hordes she'd grown up with, yammering in the grass beside the lit porch. He was speaking.

"Jane, did I offend you in some way? You seem to be trying to avoid me."

She stood there in her doorway, exhausted from reading one of those harrowing assessments of American public education systems, which she kept burying herself in "to keep up to speed" but mostly succeeding in making herself feel ineffectual. Now she stood there trying to determine if Victor Bill was real, and what generally was real, and whether feeling personal pain meant she was stupid. Under the porch light, he stood in his olive suede jacket and loose tie and serviceable khaki pants. His large hands were hidden in the jacket pockets. As he spoke, they rummaged like foraging chipmunks under the brushed leather.

In the present moment, she loathed leather coats, because they were the natural coats of animals that humans had forcibly and painfully removed from them. But way back then, she thought he looked quite snazzy. A breeze whisked past him

and into the front room, pushing at her hair and the folded corners of her loose cotton robe. "Victor, I'm not sure if you've offended me. I'm not having such a good time out here. I'm a different person one day to the next."

She *had* said that, hadn't she! She should give herself some credit once in a while--for honesty, at least. (In fact, she could not recall ever telling a lie, ever. And her knowledge that Victor could and did lie did not mean a great deal to her until some critical questions pressed to be asked in their second decade, questions that would never be posed.)

He shrugged at her confession. "Do you think you're the only person who's ever felt that way?"

She blinked with fatigue. "I don't know. You sound angry, by the way."

He scowled. "I just don't know why this has to be so hard. Look, come out with me. Just a cup of coffee or a beer...."

She shook her head, though he'd had to have risked a drive of more than fifty miles. "I'm tired tonight."

"Please." He waited. "You look great in that robe, by the way."

Ridiculous that a marriage would eventually be effected between two people who could never seem to meet without high levels of stress. She had nearly cut herself free from that gathering enmeshment when her heart let her down. Upon what was she basing her quick regard for this man?--for that's what it was, she now knew: regard. She recalled his gentle assertiveness at points in the school meeting, his consideration for her ideas, the confident set to his body. She recalled a peculiar quality to the expressions on the faces of the colleagues who had collared him after the second meeting. Two of them had been nearly crushed to him, eager, it seemed, for his opinion on how a discussion had gone on a particular issue. It appeared that he'd earned their respect and that they were fond of him. One of those two colleagues had been a woman. She wanted to be fond of someone too, to respect someone, to look up to a man.

She'd let the regard of others supplement hers. And for that and other reasons, she agreed to get dressed and drive off with him for a few hours. She hadn't yet noticed, as only time would allow her to, that she'd been manipulated into

wanting him: His not calling, a tactic to be often repeated, was purposeful, a way of making her anxious and wanting while, in reality, he would be gritting his teeth in his own empty apartment to keep himself from reaching for the phone. (His essential loneliness had never been solved, despite two decades of her loving.) His anger on her doorstep, the allowed manly reaction to not getting his way--and it would be years before she would allow herself to express real anger to him, and then more on behalf of the boys than herself.

At a little restaurant in Riverside, they talked little about issues at the school, but more about him, ideas he had. Even then she'd detected something of the self-advertisement to his knowledgeable chatter, his expressed passion for "life" and "truth." When his curiosity about the world so seldom extended to her, she begrudgingly concluded that he was taken with himself. She didn't yet peg his loneliness, could not even imagine anyone's wanting to hide it. By their second date, he had fallen in her estimation. She actually cooled toward him. She put him off, but then he simply stopped calling and after two weeks she began to miss him. Then, she was calling him, reconnecting, and more and more his stiff figure with large hands always shifting to pockets was beside her, and she let go her dream of escaping fully, for long deep years, the close, packed rooms of her childhood home.

Then, one night, twenty-two years later, they were leaving a party and their car wouldn't start. It had been like a signal, to take that final big step in her plan to change things.

Nine

Not without effort.

Ben Braverman yawned and pressed his wrists way back behind his head.

"Why do we have these first-thing meetings? I'm no good until ten."

"And Nina'll be late anyway," said Victor. "She always is."

"Privilege of rank."

The two of them waited in the conference room, sitting across the oblong end of a long maple table. Victor often worked in that room after five, when the phones had quieted, and sometimes during the day when he had a project to complete and there were no meetings booked. It was quiet and the heavy chairs were the most comfortable in the building. He looked around at the walls, at the framed covers of famous high-selling texts.

Ben followed his eyes. "Most of those are dated."

"What?"

"Those covers should be updated. Some have new editions now and a couple, the Welkins, the Piersall, are out of print. A couple are in digital only now. I think it hurts morale to leave dated notices and documents hanging around."

Victor laughed a little. "Why, Ben. Such passion for organizational dynamics."

"Like no one's keeping track or cares enough. It's sloppy."

Ben left off. He sighed and then looked over at Victor's shirtfront. "You still sending your shirts out?"

"No, I'm ironing them now. Why? Did I do a bad job or something?" He was leaning far sideways, resting his right shoulder blade against the chair arm. He glanced down at his shirtfront.

"No. It's fine. But you might want to push in the steam button next time."

"Thanks. I'll do that." He tapped his steno pad with the end of his pencil--automatic, with an oak barrel, a gift from Arlen. "You're a bit unpressed yourself, mood-wise. I guess you didn't get as much rest as you'd hoped from your extra

holidays?"

Ben snickered. "Au contraire. It's addicting getting away from this place."

Victor smiled to think how differently he felt about that subject. These days, he hurried to get to work, was reluctant to leave for an empty home.

Ben said, "You should have come to the party." He was referring to his and Nancy's New Year's Eve party. "It was great, very low impact. People just filtered in from First Night or other parties or family dinners." As he spoke, Ben waved his hands weakly in the air like a careless orchestra conductor. Victor smiled to see this wide man with his thick features and dense, curly hair trying to appear delicate.

"No prying about Jane," said Ben with a glance toward Victor, "no nasty questions. Nice people in little groups with little plates full of Nancy's awful pasta salad."

So, Ben was put out. Victor had made Ben and Nancy beg and beg him until he'd agreed to come to the party, and then on the night of it he just couldn't bring himself to go out, not anywhere.

"Yes. People asked after you--without prying, as I said."

"I get your point." Victor smiled, still tapping that pencil. The remark about no one talking about Jane he did not believe for a moment. "Of all things, I've been thinking about Janice Patrice a lot."

"Oh, please!"

"Not in the old way," he added, quickly and quietly. He had dropped his voice because Nina might suddenly appear. Ben's sharp response had surprised him.

"I'll bet. You've been thinking about her in that same old way and you know it."

Victor shook his head, calm without, but growing tighter in the chest. "I'm thinking I might do something radical. Maybe just call up and apologize to her. The way I just let it drop..."

"Vic, *please* don't reactivate that whole mess. I couldn't go through that again."

Victor huffed as if offended, but the truth was that he had managed to abuse just about everyone during that period: Jane in secret, Janice directly, of course, and

Ben by burdening him with so many counseling sessions. It had been a sicker sort of episode than he'd admitted before, on all sides; he guessed that Janice had secretly relished her victim's role and Ben enjoyed his vicarious inclusion, hearing the racy details. Under the false illumination of the conference room's dozen-odd fluorescent tubes, Victor closed his eyes to think how he might have weakened the bonds, however slightly, between Ben and Nancy by his phony penitent whispering about adultery.

Ben spoke up. "Really, do not."

"You're crazy, Ben. Such worrying."

"Okay, fine." Ben lurched forward and threw his arms heavily before him on the table. "You tell me what you've been thinking and I'll show you how it's the same old shit."

Victor took a breath to speak, but now of course the words would come out wrong. He only shrugged and said, "What difference does it make what I say? You'll just keep venting."

"You're thinking what you think you should be thinking, but deep down, in your gut, you are actually still glad you had that affair, so glad you got the chance to sleep with some smooth little tootsie and get away with it." Ben lowered his chin an inch. "It's easy to think something was a mistake when you've enjoyed all the benefits. Am I wrong? The St. Augustine cop-out?"

Victor's mouth came open but no sound came out. He had leaned still more to the side, feigning calm, while now pangs of something akin to anger pulsed through him. He identified the source of it; Ben had betrayed him, had once so willingly listened, often prompting more than a little, to each installment of his affair with Janice. He had listened to his self-recriminations, nodded knowingly, parceled advice about the large unwisdom of risking a marriage for a little nookie on the side, sighed with sympathy as Victor had let out short lengths of his twisted, guilt-ridden disengagement from confused, heart-broken, and ultimately angry Janice. He'd listened, and perhaps even fueled the whole mess a bit with his ill-concealed envy, and now had meanly pulled back.

Victor said, "I've just been thinking about calling her and..."

"That's a great idea. You'll be back in the sack in ten seconds, or, you'll hurt her all over again. What can you possibly say to her that she would want to hear?"

"That it was my fault."

"She knows that."

Ben's instant response disappointed him. He'd expected the admission to impress the man. He added, evenly, "I'm changing, Ben."

"No, you're not. Two weeks ago you were grinning because Enid Grace is going through a divorce."

"Who?"

"Don't play dumb. The girl in the white swimsuit, of last year's picnic fame?, whom you have discovered is becoming conveniently available."

Of all things it was getting irritating to fall short of Ben's hyperbolic assessment of his philandering. He raised an eyebrow at this alleged friend. "Do you think you can stop being an asshole for just ten seconds?"

"Sure. One, two, three..."

"I think that Jane was right for leaving me. How does that sound?"

Ben dropped his lids and let his head wag freely. "Good, but not really good. First of all, she didn't leave *you*. She went off to do something for *herself*, and you're still saying she left *you*. You insist on putting yourself at the center of it."

Victor shook his head. "It was just a way of saying the same thing." Anyway, Ben was wrong; he didn't know it, but Jane had, on some level, really truly left *him*. And at the moment it was getting very hard to continue to sound calm. There was a growing pressure beneath his scalp at points just behind each ear.

"No, it's not the same thing. The way you say things is important. Do I have to point that out to you? Are we not in the communications business?"

"What I'm saying is, what I'm *trying* to say is, that I'm beginning to see how I was *part* of Jane's going."

Ben looked back opaquely, and Victor realized he was waiting for more. When he didn't say more, Ben asked flatly, "How?"

He didn't want to answer, didn't want to go on. The setting was wrong. Definitely non-sympathetic. Someone might come in at any moment. And he

recognized now that Ben was saying things he'd left bottled up during all of those seemingly supportive sessions they had regularly fallen into. It was getting so that there was really no one he could talk to. Not a person on this earth.

He spoke anyway. "I should have..."

"Oh, God." Ben lurched as if he'd been struck. "Victor, Victor, this continual raking through the past, like a monkey picking through his feces, you're so damned empirical, so cause and effect, just a matter of the right word or act on such and such a date...." He sighed dramatically, his shoulders coming up and falling by inches. "It's getting so that talking with you is like talking with a tape recorder, or with a brick wall with a tape recorder in it. I mean, pal, there's like this *chorus* of people around you saying Do something for yourself, get into therapy, stop pretending like you've always had such awesome control over everything and just pressed the wrong button or something."

"This is great, Ben, very helpful."

"Oh, you want help, you? You should see yourself right now. Want me to describe you to yourself, I mean the way your body language is talking right now?"

Victor bristled, inwardly. At the wrong word, he might explode. Then again, so what? It might feel good. Anyway, he could handle it--and he certainly wouldn't let Ben think otherwise. "Sure, go ahead."

"Okay, you're sitting there kind of casually draped across your chair and tapping that pencil sort of casual-like and your mouth just kind of open. Mr. Calm, right? Except that you're wired into that posture and your insides are so tight you can barely get air in and out of yourself."

Ben watched him closely for a moment, and then let his own shoulders sag. "Vic, you've got people ladling advice over you. And you know what? You're enjoying it too much, you enjoy the attention but the words have no effect. It's getting to be like a drug or something for you."

Victor twisted away. "Oh, this is such crap." There was certainly no chorus of well wishers. Ben and Nancy, Nina, at odd moments, a few tentative, spaced inquiries from Arlen. Forget his parents, completely absorbed in tracking their various benefits and connecting with other Floridian transplants.

"It's like pouring water over a plastic statue, nothing penetrates. You go around saying 'Yes, you're right, I should do that,' or, 'Thanks, Tom, I'll give that a try,' but it's all just acting, just play. You really have no intention of taking any of this advice. And that's why you and me, Vic, don't see so much of each other anymore. Because you're embarrassed to own up that you didn't make that call you promised to make, or to admit to Nancy that you didn't call that therapist who was setting up that group for abandoned husbands or whatever. You didn't, did you?"

"Who's Tom?"

"There is no Tom. Tom, Dick, Harry, what does it matter?"

Victor nodded, looking away. "And this reference to not seeing each other so much anymore? What was last weekend, a hallucination?"

"That's true. Well, maybe I'm saying it *seems* like we don't see each other as much. Anyway, I'll bet you didn't make that call."

"What call?"

"To the *therapist*, the group one. And that's really why you didn't come to our place on New Year's Eve because you knew that Nancy would ask about it."

"Frankly, Ben, I forgot all about that."

"Same thing."

"I say let's give Nina thirty more seconds."

"You can sit there pretending to be seriously considering what I'm saying. Hey, I'm saying all this because I care about you. I do love you, you know."

"Good." Victor kept tapping his pencil, first on the tip and then on the butt, each time letting his fingers slide down its length. It was the only part of his body, from wrist to fingertips, that he felt he could move. Though he didn't show it, he was amazed that someone could talk as Ben was. Was that allowed? Could people talk like that, outside of TV movies? He was also thinking how it would serve Jane right if she woke up tomorrow and got a telephone call saying that he'd gone home from work and hanged himself. He envisioned himself hanging from a joist in the basement, head snapped to one side--hard to imagine, though, with the ceiling so low. He envisioned Jane's stricken face when the news was broken to her. Ugh, she'd mostly just feel sorry for him. Women left men when they couldn't bear

feeling sorry for them any longer; men stayed with women whom they felt sorry for because they could control them. So why didn't the truth help?

Ben was saying, "...at nine when I get here and at five when I leave, you're at your desk. Victor, I hate to say it, but your problem is that you want so bad for everybody to think you're different, but you're just like every ordinary guy in a bad marriage."

"A bad marriage. A bad marriage?"

"A *troubled* marriage. You know what I mean."

Fat Ben and squat Nancy, always talking about diets, and Kenny McConnell, who brought his lunch everyday and when he was finished wiped his mouth with the paper bag and belonged to a bowling league and a Saturday golf foursome so he was never at home. Those were the *good* marriages? Victor thought to flick his wrist, hard, and bounce the pencil off the steno pad. It would feel wonderful to see it fly off across the room, maybe ricochet off a frame and shatter one of the dusty water glasses arranged in a ring around the empty pitcher on the credenza. In the next moment, he felt near tears. Everyone was being so mean to him.

The door opened and Nina rushed in. Her broad, dark face was suffused with a glowing smile, one of such startling elation that Victor had to stare. "We got the contract," she gushed in a hoarse, lowered whisper. "That's why I'm late. I just got the call."

What contract?

"I don't believe it," said Ben. He was leaning forward eagerly now, a child's tentative smile easing across his face.

"Two point three million."

"No way! That's about one percent less than our bid."

"I guess they sure bought it, wouldn't you say?"

Nina had perched herself on the very edge of the chair at the head of the table. Victor was distracted by her clothing, as he sometimes was, by the serviceable polyester dresses she always wore. Business clothes. Jane, he remembered, had always gotten away with those long cotton dresses of hers, a lot of them from thrift stores. She had a way of looking professional in them. She wafted patchouli while

others pulsed with the sting of pungent chemicals.

He found his voice. "Congratulations, Nina."

"Congratulations *us*."

"Well, mostly to Dan and Kenny," said Ben. "Still, it'll put us in the black for the third quarter. And the fourth and the fifth. Jesus, this is amazing."

Dan McConnell's wife was in a twelve-step program. Once, a couple of years back, Dan had been called away from a conference because she'd banged up the car.

"And the sixth, seventh, and eighth," Nina insisted.

The Department of Defense contract, Victor remembered with relief. The codification package for the interactive video, processing reductions-in-force in the military. All of that had been going on, like a dreamy backdrop between rep scheduling, calls, meetings. Kenny had fielded the call for proposals and suggested dovetailing an existing book--*All Gain, No Pain*, on managing allegedly painless mergers--still in manuscript form, into their proposal submission. Victor had had to sell the idea to the author, Roger Stiles, who'd balked at first because of his lack of affection for the military. "This is so great," he said.

The words had gone out of him without energy. Ben said to Nina, "Maybe we shouldn't have gone in so lean, put more fat into the budget."

She waved a hand at him, her nails tipped with maroon. "No problem keeping to the budget with Stiles on the production team, thanks to Mr. Persuasive here." She laughed merrily. "I was listening in on that call. Brilliant how you calmly pointed out that the content was on *reducing* forces. Love it!"

Victor smiled back as convincingly as he could. *Mr. Calm, Mr. Persuasive*.

Ben giggled like a nervous teenager. "Boy oh boy oh boy. This is some leap, from ed to gov. But nobody's even got a concept on the video part yet and..."

Nina laughed at him. "Don't be such a worry wart! The one in the proposal will do for a start."

Victor said, "That's his job. Worrying, I mean." He gave Ben what he hoped was a significant look.

"Man, did I love getting the news directly from Bennington's own mouth. That bastard has been on me like a dog on a bone ever since we had to recall that

text." Nina leaned way back and lifted her palms like blades into the air. "Two point three mill-*yoan*. Wow!"

Victor continued to smile in a way to express, he hoped, a similar elation, but in truth he did not feel in the least elated. In fact, the events around him seemed to be transpiring on an alien planet and in an unknown language. There was Ben, sitting there with that kid's guarded smile on his face--which confused him further. How was he himself supposed to be feeling, exactly? And when was the last time Jane's face had looked as excited as Nina's now did?

It might have been when she'd helped push through a major revision in the merit system at Emerson College. He hadn't known how to react that evening, when she'd come at him the moment he walked in the door, then kept circling the table and dropping to that stiff-armed position with her palms flat on the table, like a bird of prey lighting on a table rock. "Isn't it great, Vic! Isn't it great!" she kept yelling, that bright penny smile that had kept drawing him back during their first days together. "And just a week ago they'd been threatening to formally reprimand me." And how had he reacted? He'd corrected her. "Not *threatened*, honey. *Hinted at*." He'd punctured her mood, all right, gotten the joy to leak from her smile.

Ben blew out a breath. "Well, Nina, are we going to have our meeting or what?"

"Fuck the meeting!"

"Control yourself, Nina," Victor said. "This is unseemly diction for a woman of your position."

All three of them shared a laugh. "I can't concentrate on listing revisions this morning," Nina cried. "I say we try again over lunch. Let's go eat someplace fancy. We can afford it, now. Ha!"

In the hallway near his office, Victor jerked when he felt Nina's hand light upon his back. "You all right, sugar?"

"I'm fine, Nina."

"Pale as a ghost. Pink as a roast."

She followed him into his office where they stood uncertainly in the center of the small room. If he sat, she might sit, as she once had done fairly often,

comfortably in one of the two leatherette chairs before his piled desk. When Jane had gone almost completely silent for weeks after the miscarriage, Nina had sat for long talks with him in this room, making sense of postpartum depression for him. Then she'd gotten promoted, and it always seemed strange when she sat in one of those chairs, as if it should be she behind the desk. And just because her title had changed. Life was full of stupidities like that.

"I'm fine," he said. "I just need to keep busy."

"Well, I guess that's one way. Let me know if you want to talk sometime."

When he turned, she was already going. It was probably what he'd hoped she would do, but now that she'd gone the room felt hollowed. All around, the many pinned charts, book covers, pictures, all seemed to writhe in sympathy. They crimped visibly, their corners curling as if the air had been sucked of moisture. It had always been a place to be, a place where he knew who he was. Up until two weeks ago, he'd kept the big family portrait propped by the computer monitor, where he could flick his eyes at it, the same in snapshot size he kept in his wallet.

Through the rest of the morning, time slowed until it seemed that his vision could detect the cycling of energized fluorescence. Again, the prospect of being dead seemed attractive, peaceful. He thought of calling Janice Patrice, despite Ben's mean remarks. He wondered how she might respond if he were to call and tell her that he felt very lonely and wanted to just sleep with a good woman again. In his imagination, he felt himself with her, in bed, pressed to her and her responding as she might, with sympathy, graciously allowing him her body as a respite. She had always been generous. He imagined the light in her wide brown eyes, the light of understanding; yes, a man could simply ask, and have, a woman's body for solace. Her flesh like warm bread, a kind of food; Janice wouldn't mind.

But then in the next instant, his own temporary secretary, a tall, blonde young woman from an agency, came in and looked at him so flatly that there was no mistaking that he was exactly what he was to her, a man like any other who had not earned any special place in her life, and he collapsed around himself until he felt reduced to something smaller than actual size.

At lunch, too, where he'd imagined he would sit happily restored among Ben

and Nina and Kenny, also along for the celebratory ride, he sat instead with the sensation that he'd slipped into another man's skin. This man was incredibly thin, with skin so taut and dry that his wrists rattled in his sleeves and his feet shuffled about within his shoes. When he moved his face to make an expression, he had the feeling that his hairline had crept another inch down his forehead. He could no longer be sure of the physical proportions and boundaries of his body.

Nina had again refused to talk about list revisions for next year, and instead she and Ben kept shuttlecocking names of instructional video producers they might hire for the new contract.

Nina grinned around at them. "Boy, I'd love to get that lady who got the Oscar for that film about those women in jail for killing their wife-beating husbands. What was her name?"

Ben said, "I don't know the name, but she works with her husband. They're a team. Damn, what is her name? Vic?"

"I don't know it either," he said, and then, before he could stop himself, a bit of moisture slipped up from beneath his lower eyelids. He blinked quickly. He noticed Kenny's looking away.

"Scuse me," he whispered and got to his feet. But then he was face to face with the waitress, their noses nearly colliding. He could not stop so she had to backpedal as the two of them briefly stepped left and then right to get around each other. There seemed to be no place for him to be, no place for him to hide, no category in the world for him in all this talk of murdering husbands and working as a team and the whole world comprised suddenly of happy couples or murderous ones, and didn't anyone understand that there were even worse ways to be?

In the bathroom, he stepped into a stall and surprised himself by weeping briefly and silently with delicious efficiency. He wept in exhaled breaths, taking in air and then shuddering out with a length of folded toilet paper held to his nose and mouth like a mask. Then, twice, additional sobs surprised him, particularly painful, as if his whole face were gripping around his fist. That awful Thanksgiving debacle, the rushed dinners out with the boys, one quick dinner each after he'd labored to intercept them on their holiday trajectories. And then to learn that Jane had flown

into New Haven for a weekend visit with both the boys over Christmas, Arlen coming over from Providence and Bobby up from Storrs.

With the weeping completed, he could return to his default anger with her. How had she afforded that round trip flight? Simple. She'd calmly persuaded him to merge her meager store of frequent flyer miles with his ample one, built up from years of flying out to conferences. And where would she get the cash for rent and groceries? No problem there. She'd get a job, and as a fallback she could borrow from Bobby's college fund, largely untapped because of his scholarship. Whatever she borrowed from it she would pay back with interest, of course. Plus, she must have been squirreling away stray dollars for months. Jesus, the ice cold strategizing of the woman was appalling. Maybe he was well rid of her!

He blinked into the men's room mirror and patted his face with a wet paper towel until his appearance seemed normal. Outside, he waited in quiet ambush for the hostess, a young woman who could not have been older than Arlen. "Do me a favor, kid. Tell my party that I'll join them back in the office. I'm not feeling so well."

"Of course." Her eyes knitted instantly into a pose of concern. What was she, twenty, and twenty-one? Women got their act together very early, didn't they? He patted her arm.

Back in his own office, much later, he was daydreaming about a brunch that he and Jane had gone to long ago, hosted by some couple whom they'd lost track of. He'd found her staring out the back window where the family's two dogs were chasing each other around and around the walls of a raised kids' pool. The younger dog, not much more than a puppy, would race around in one direction, but the older dog would chase for a while and then stop and turn around and wait to surprise it. The younger dog, a little tan boxer, would then yelp and turn around and race all the way around in the opposite direction, where again the older dog had simply turned and waited. Jane had laughed and laughed her rare big laugh, delighted as a young girl might have been to see the two dogs keep this game up. They'd watched together for the longest time.

Oh, and then she'd exclaimed, for the umpteenth time, "We should get a dog, Vic!" And he'd repeated that he was allergic to cats and dogs, which stretched the

truth because he was allergic only to cats, and really only if he rubbed his eyes after rubbing a cat, and what in the world had prompted him to lie like that. Sometimes, at odd moments, he could swear he smelled patchouli in the air.

The phone rang. It was Nina, back from the long lunch. She called him to her office. What could he do? He agreed to come right up. He hung up. He sat and stared at the phone. God.

When he stepped out of his office, sleeves rolled up, loose tie swinging; he tried to feel more powerful again. Eyes came up and took him in, a man with papers in his hand (grabbed up purely for effect) and a tie on and a white shirt with pale blue squares, and the people said to them, "That's Victor Bill. He came up through the ranks, hustling our titles at ed conferences, and now he's in charge of production for every title in history, soc, and econ. Must be on his way to an important meeting..."

Was that enough, to be good at production management? He'd spent the last eighteen years thinking, "I'm a history teacher who's temporarily employed in publishing."

He passed through Ben's section, where the surfaces widened and tilted everywhere to accommodate the stuff of book designs, where full-page color monitors glowed alone or with designers gazing avidly into their all-powerful faces. And there was Ben, standing over something with his overcoat still on. Sometimes it took him some time to get out of his coat. How pressed they were, the men of the office, no time even to shuck their coats. Victor nearly called, "Aren't you hot?" A joke, but with a little vengeful bite to it. All those mean words earlier.

He usually took the stairs, but lately his legs always hurt. He looked idly up at the elevator's floor indicator, and then Ben appeared at his elbow, coat finally off. Others were gathering now, sidling to the doors. Victor could feel the tension coming off Ben like heat. The man wanted to speak to him, but he couldn't help but pretend like he wasn't noticing that fact. When the door rolled open, Ben said quietly, "Call me tonight, Vic."

"Sure."

And then Victor stepped into the little metal box that took one smoothly up

and down inside a vertical shaft constructed to fit it. Couldn't Ben have just talked to him later? What time was it? Three, three-thirty? They certainly had made a long lunch of it, probably talking about Poor Vic. Ben had said "tonight" instead of "later." Did he know something, that the meeting with Nina would probably run to closing time? Christ, was he getting fired or something?

Nina ushered him in from the doorway in her office. Behind her, a pale marble cornice jutted across the window view, and then a straight shot up teeming Boylston Street with just a trace of the Public Gardens, spindly with winter. "Honey, I called you up because I'm kind of worried about you." (He wasn't getting fired. Funny thing, the fact was almost disappointing.) "Are you sick?"

"No, no, Nina. That was just a cover. I'm just...sad." There, he'd said it. It had come right out, and he actually felt better for having said it.

He fell into a chair before she even reached her desk. She was saying, "When I called down to see if you'd checked back in, frankly I was surprised you were even back." She turned away from her desk and sort of walked backwards to a side chair instead. That gesture was kind, he thought, avoiding the officious position. He looked closely at her. She was married and had four children. She was an African-American woman too, something different from him. She'd had to have had it harder, yet she'd managed. She'd gotten a second degree, late. How many changes she'd had to go through he couldn't even imagine. How many nights had she lain awake, wondering whether to politic around an issue or try to finesse it directly or maybe even file a discrimination suit? The whole color thing, it must always lie there like a nasty rug on every floor she had to walk across. He found himself wondering aloud, "How do you do it, Nina?" She'd think he meant only marriage.

"It's not always easy."

He thought, "She's strong. That's the difference. She's strong; I'm not strong, not so strong as I've thought."

"And it sure ain't easy for you right now, I can tell that."

He nodded. "No, it's not." He smiled at the back of a brown mug full of pencils on her desk, and then reached way out to turn it about. A big, slaphappy face came around to greet him, the crinkly gouged eyes and heavy strip of mustache

honestly cheering. "Reminds you of Mel, right?"

She was watching him, easily, giving him all the time he wanted. "Right. My family is my strength, Vic. I go home every night and recharge. But that's not a stick I'm trying to beat you with."

No. She was telling him to save his marriage. Ben had blabbed about Janice Patrice, maybe Enid Grace too. There were pictures of Nina's four kids everywhere in the room. It was a company joke. You'd think she had four dozen of them at first, but then you traced the chronology of baptisms, shy open smiles tilting up, and graduations, with ever more serious smiles leveled at the world.

Nina still used No. 2 pencils. Victor lifted one from the mug and pressed it into the electric sharpener, just to experience its automatic response. The steady rasp was comforting.

"I've been thinking about my dad, recently." He wished he'd used the word "father," but went on. What face was there left to save? "He was successful in everything he did."

"Not always."

He felt his head jerk an inch. He kept forgetting just how mentally sharp she was. Sometimes she responded so quickly to something that he could not believe she'd thought it through. She didn't know his father, but she knew very well that no one always succeeds. "Yes, well, there's the other half of it. He failed left and right at home. Once my mother and I left on a vacation ahead of him. He told us to go on, that he'd join us there. He called every day."

"But he never did show." Nina was laughing quietly, her hands calmly laced across her stomach.

"And he never...he never...." He looked to her for the word.

"Stopped?"

"That's exactly right. He never stopped. The old bastard is still out there chopping up golf balls. I don't think it even matters that he doesn't get any better."

Nina was smiling, somewhat to herself. "And these traits, I take it, are what you consider virtues?"

Victor wagged his head, still toying with the sharpened pencil. "Nah, I wised

up in my twenties. By then I swore I'd never be like him."

"You're not."

True, perhaps, but so what? He'd just discovered other ways to fail. He grunted. "But, Nina, I'm sure you didn't call me up here to talk about this."

She raised her brows. "Why not? You're hurting. Anyway, I thought you might want to get out of here for a while, go on the road again or take a couple of weeks off."

He tipped his head, lowering his brows at her. "This is a good time for me to be out of the office? Come on, Nina. What about the big new contract?"

"Well, it's true that we're going to need the decks cleared to make room for the new project, but nothing will start until they finalize things upstairs."

He smiled, blinking slowly. "Now, this is ironic. I've been trying to get you to slow up on half-a-dozen turkey titles for months, and now, suddenly, you're ready to play ball."

She sighed, a silent agreement with his hatred for all the rush in their work, purportedly to beat the competition to market. No field testing, again, or no time to review the carefully solicited feedback on galleys from professionals, moving to press with hidden typos still embedded in the print, like grit in salad, like flakes in paint.

He said for her, "I know, I know. If we make money, we can afford to send our kids to college." Where those ill-produced books were waiting for them.

Nina said, "Really, though. If you want to take a week, Vic, fly to Cancun or something...."

"No. Thanks. I've thought about it, believe me. But I think I need to be at work during this time."

She nodded, and with disappointment he realized she was not going to try to talk him out of it. With some alarm, too, he felt as if he'd just committed to buckling down to another series of pressing demands. He was going to reinforce the illusion that he was indispensable. The decision would translate into committed time, into a long segment of it; meanwhile, one's life stayed the same and one's kids grew up and one's wife remained dissatisfied with one's present character.

"Okay, Vic. It's your call."

He tapped Nina's No. 2 pencil against his thumb. So, he was going to stay, he was going to work, things were going to remain the same. How did this keep happening to him?

Ten

Peck through the patination.

Midge drove Jane and Bliss out to the spine of basalt shelves that cut the Galisteo Basin into two large green bowls, miles wide on either side. It was a cold January morning, though the month was nearly spent and perhaps spring would come early. Always a hope.

The sun, low and sullen, threw a shadowless light onto the open land, which rolled away on either side like frozen ocean swells. On all sides, the distant peaks of the Sangre de Cristo range were whitened with snow. Jane stared out at it all as Midge's Wagoneer took them up and down the low grades of a simple two-lane road that slithered like a blacksnake toward the far mountains. To the south, gray mare's tails marched slowly to the horizon in rows; but to the northeast, the sky stirred continually in a salt-and-pepper swirl of dust and fog as a passing storm attempted to edge closer.

"The impending storm," she intoned.

"I think the weather will hold off," said Midge. "Just wait until you see the Indian etchings. You'll flip. You might even start believing in God again."

Jane shook her head a little. "Unlikely."

Bliss began to whine in the back.

"She knows we're close," said Midge.

A moment later, she began to slow down and then pull over to the roadside. Jane looked out at the long ridge of tumbled boulders, most of them squared or angled. Some collision had heaved them up like that, or the earth had worn away and exposed this hard spine for collapsing. When she opened her door, Bliss shot past her and in a moment had bounded through the drainage ditch and slipped beneath the barbed wire fence. "Wow," she said aloud. Soon Bliss was a brown speck leaping, stopping, sniffing, and leaping again among the lower rocks. "She knows this place."

"She sure does. Right now, she's looking for rabbits."

"What if she finds one!"

"Don't worry. These rabbits can take care of themselves."

Outside, Jane fell in step beside Midge. Over the weeks since she'd moved in with Midge, renting the large room in the back, they'd developed a kind of mirrored walking style, as if Jane were copying her new friend, something like trying on an alternative psyche for size. In fact, at that moment she wore a pair of Midge's green fatigue pants (over leggings) and her shearling coat. The construction boots she'd bought on her own, and they were already well broken in.

On the other side of the ditch she raised her arms to the field. "I'm beginning to feel like a real Southwest country girl." Quite expertly, she thought, she stepped on the fence's lowest wire strand while lifting the center one to make a gap for Midge to pass through.

On the other side, Midge said, "I have a theory. All women are country girls at heart."

That immediately struck Jane as true. "Not men? No, you're right. Too techie." She sighed as they started across the open area to the first rocks. "Victor could have been a farmer, or a writer on a back porch somewhere, but he always gets lured off by industrial bustle."

She warned herself inwardly to make that reference to her husband the day's last. Once she'd invoked his name, she had a tendency to get stuck on it, and it had been very rough navigating a Christmas visit in Providence with the boys and Victor a potent missing presence.

Midge spread her arms, an echo of Jane's earlier gesture. "I come out here not to get lured off too far from clay and stones and gravels. Even in the so-called art world, which gets techie too, as you put it--fancy hole cutters and incisers and styluses--you can get seduced in two seconds flat by a four-color catalogue into thinking you need six more things to be a good artist. Now the Pueblos, do you know what they used for paint brushes?"

"Prairie dogs?"

"Ha! No, yucca leaves, with their ends frayed. For paint binders they used vegetable oil or blood or eggs."

"Edible art."

Midge smiled at her, but warily. "Are you in the...correct spirit for this outing?"

"Yes! I'm just being happy. Can't I be happy? This is such a great experience!"

"Just checking."

Jane pushed her hands deep into the coat's pockets, nestling into the exposed wool. Pleasantly, at odd moments, the wind would flick needles of sleet against her cheek and neck. Now she had to remove her hands to keep balance as they reached the first stones. Between them, tufts of scrub mesquite crackled with a stiff energy. She loved the single plants, their toughness. She loved the difference from the rainy East where the green grew tangled and dense.

Midge was saying, "I come out here to feel like a girl again. I don't mean young--well, that too--but more like my gender, I mean. You'll see. A lot of the paintings are done by Indian girls during puberty rites."

"They had puberty rights for girls?"

"Not like in Africa. No mutilation. The priests, or shamans, used to keep them together for weeks in special rooms, paint their faces and arms in special ways. The girls would weave together and hang out their weavings where roads crossed or where special trees grew. I love it, the whole idea of it. With some tribes, the girls raced together to rocks like these, to these very rocks I'll bet, and drew symbols together for a while and then raced back. Can you imagine?"

"Yes!" Jane affirmed eagerly. "Especially from the way that you tell it."

Rarely was Midge so voluble, and now, pressed with the exertion of climbing, her voice sounded even more breathy and excited. Already, they had reached sufficient height to gauge the full expanse of the basins on either side of the basalt ridge. When they paused, Jane looked out and imagined a band of Indian maidens racing toward them across the winter-dimmed land. Within her brief vision, she felt a quick pang of hope--for them, for their young lives, that those lives would open into beautiful futures. From what she knew, though, beautiful futures were rarely the case anymore for young Indian girls.

Midge was saying, "Back then, these were all grasslands--seas of grass. It's overgrazed most everywhere now, but there's still some virgin pasture left. I'll show you someday. In the spring, when the flowers come out."

"Which tribes came here?" They started to climb again. Now, Jane had to raise her arms to keep balance.

"Hopi, Pueblo. Apache and Navajo, too. The Apache and Navajo were drifters, marauders, and I can't remember which, but one of them unfortunately fell in with the Spaniards against the Pueblos. Later, they recognized the Pueblo as superior people, or I suppose they did--because they began to really imitate them."

Jane was crossing a cantilevered stone like a tightrope walker. She could be sharing this new experience with Victor, but their appetites for adventure had fallen off over the years. Shamefully, she remembered how many times she had resisted his plans to hike and camp; if she called him, as she had ached to do increasingly as the holidays had approached, he'd chafe that she was so willing to tramp across stones with a near stranger. There always seemed to be a good reason not to call him. It had shocked her when Arlen had told her he was heading for Manhattan for the holidays. A great unnaturalness must be settling on that distant home.

The stone she was presently crossing had an angled face smoother than she'd first thought. All at once she slipped down and her right foot wedged into a fissure. She tried to rise right away, but couldn't get her left foot under her to raise herself. "Victor," she whispered, a little like a sob. Midge stepped down and locked wrists with her and hoisted her up.

Jane steadied herself. "Some country girl."

"There's one." Midge was pointing at something. "You okay?"

"Yes, yes." Jane looked to the rock face not three feet away. She could discern nothing but rock. "What?"

"See? The triangle with the dots and hashes?"

"No. Oh, yes!" She stepped closer, testing her ankle. A residual pain ebbed with each new step. Up close, the design, about eighteen inches high, was still very faint, nearly obliterated by the elements.

"Isn't it lovely?" said Midge. "It could be a deity, maybe a Kachina mask, or

just a clan totem. I don't know enough about them yet. Nobody does, from what I read."

Jane nodded, taking in the figure. She was trying to feel impressed by it, but she was actually disappointed. The figures in the book had seemed brighter, sharper. This figure was crude and simple, scratched shallowly into the rock. It could have been done by a gang of beer-swilling teenagers.

Midge had leaned closer to it. She rubbed her hand on the rock around it. "You can still see traces of the red paint. They used iron oxide, just like we potters still use in glazes."

"Does it make you feel like you're part of their tradition?"

Midge smiled at her. "I guess so, come to think of it." She turned back to the carving and then came erect and walked off.

The two of them climbed farther, now along a ragged plateau made of wedge blocks. After a moment, Midge said over her shoulder, "Up ahead here."

Jane came around a boulder and found Midge tracing a long chain of joined diamond shapes with one finger hovering just above the surface. Each diamond was roughly a foot from point to point. "Puberty drawings. Each girl would join her diamond to the one before hers. Isn't that a nice idea?"

"Yes, it certainly is."

Midge looked at her more closely. "Am I being silly?"

Jane blinked at the question. "No, no." Her mood sank a notch. Since she'd moved in with Midge, she'd been feeling her way uneasily because she was so worried about bringing a dark pall into another's home. She needed to convince herself sometimes that Midge liked having her there. It wasn't always easy to read Midge; she remained quiet for whole periods, especially around her work time in the studio each morning, including Saturday, but then she might become suddenly talkative over lunch, only to lapse into silence again, retreating as if she too had imposed. Midge was *sweet*, Jane thought; that was it--but steely too. She was like a child, but one with a law degree in the back of a bureau drawer.

Jane asked, "Are the other figures more...complex?"

"Ah, I get it. You're feeling let down." Midge sounded relieved. "Everybody

does at first. Let them work on you a little."

Jane felt a little ashamed to have reacted, it seemed, like "everybody does." She didn't want to be like everybody, especially not to Midge, or to anyone whose opinion of her she valued. She would like to be among the immediately passionate, but she didn't feel anything sometimes. Back when she was pregnant with Bobby, her obstetrician had grown alarmed. "There? *There?*" he'd prompted while rooting around with his fingers by her cervix. And "No, I'm sorry," she'd gasped back at him, clutching the sheet like a child. She was numb, not even certain that a human being, her Bobby, was really forming inside of her. But then, while simply walking down the street or watching the news, cramps struck like stabs from an ice pick.

As she and Midge reached more height, the wind caught them at every open spot. The moiling to the north had fully advanced, and now it seemed as if they'd poked up into the edge of its underbelly. The sky was all sheer cloud, moist and cold.

They climbed on for some time, gradually moving higher. "My favorites are up ahead," said Midge.

"I'm ready for them," Jane called out, and they both laughed.

The next figures *were* impressive to Jane, and deeply so. They were a staggered series of human shapes, realistically portrayed, mostly warriors with round shields whose brightness was suggested by rims of little flame tongues. The arms and legs, which protruded above and below the huge shields, were muscularly graceful. She found the feet and hands charming, the way fingers and toes were stacked one atop the other.

Jane picked tentatively at a bright patch. "A bear claw?"

"Yes. Good for you! It's a clan totem. Each clan had a guardian spirit--an animal or a tree or something--that watched over them."

Jane turned to Midge. "Do you have one?"

Midge shrugged, her hands in her parka pockets. Jane noticed anew that the pattern of her headband was formed of diamond shapes. "I dream a lot about owls. When adolescents were isolated in puberty bands, they recorded their dreams--and sometimes painted them." She looked at Jane significantly.

"Like I said I would. I know, I will..."

Midge was quiet for a moment. "Should I be saying that I think you might be scared to?"

Jane stepped back and looked up at the group of figures. The sullen light made the carved patches shimmer, nearly lift from the dark rockface. "Well, you'd be right about that, but right now I want to hear more from Midge."

"The more could be relevant. For example, all the cultures that live with dreams, from what I've read, do it because they want to face their fears."

"And is that how *you* got interested in Indian girls dreaming and facing their fears?"

Midge was silent for a moment as they stood side by side, looking up at the carvings. "When you're interested in girls and women, not so much sexually but more as phenomena very distinct from men, you are way back in the closet."

The statement rocked Jane on her heels. "Oh my gosh," she said and shook Midge by the arm. "I'm so glad you made it out of there!"

They laughed together and bumped against each other on the uneasy footing. Then they fell silent, heavily, and Jane found herself staring at the figures again. Gradually, she became even more transfixed. The emblems on the shields seemed to dance in place. "What makes them so... bright?"

"That's the rock's real color, below its surface I mean. The darkness of the rock skin, they call that desert varnish. The surfaces oxidize and darken. The artists would peck through the patination, so what you're looking at is pure exposed rock--like a big woodcut. But think of it, this is a couple of hundred years ago and so the carved parts had to be even brighter when they were fresh."

Jane's gaze kept moving over and over the figures, and then in between them where small birds, dove-like, hovered and four-pointed stars shone and land animals, perhaps goats, grazed in a small herd, each with its four legs set in a row like porch stringers. She liked the warriors, their power; she liked the idea of girls bonding into a pack; she liked the relative purity of hovering animals. "It's magic," she concluded.

Midge sighed. "You feel it. Good." She leaned back herself, half-sitting on a

stone edge, and gazed up. "I don't share this with just anyone, let me tell you."

"I'm flattered. Honestly." Jane's own voice sounded as faint as a breath. "I'm sad, all of a sudden--not to be an Indian."

"It's our loss, all right. Imagine, to be so completely identified as part of nature."

Jane turned to consider Midge. "But you do it, in your art. Making things out of mud! And you know, I can recognize so much of this in your designs."

Midge shrugged. "An attempt."

Not much later, they both admitted to growing uncomfortably cold, and then Bliss appeared at their feet, ruffled and panting, as if eager to go. Jane dropped down to hug the dog around the middle.

"Looks as if she's seen a ghost," said Midge, her eyes dramatically wide. In fact, Bliss did keep close to them for some time.

They moved on, even though they were outright shivering at times. They paused at more figures hidden among the rocks--carvings and faint paintings, requisitions to the gods, or acknowledgments. "They're like thank you notes," said Midge. "Or maybe sometimes just plain doodling."

"Indian graffiti."

"With a big difference, though. It's not initials and nicknames, not egocentric and competitive like ours. It's communal."

"You've really thought this all through."

"Many times. The closeness to nature, the idea of nature gods and being able to communicate with them."

"That's not it for me," said Jane. "What appeals to me is the closeness of the people. You can keep all the talking to nature stuff, the prayers for rain."

"Wouldn't you say that that's part of it?"

Jane shook her head, looking back to the northeast where the storm still held back, brewing. "Nature is indifferent, numb, a set of forces. No gods in it, just energy shifts. And there's no God managing it or us. That's all just a comforting thought that keeps us going, but lazy and passive too sometimes. Longing for our lost fathers, that's what Freud called it."

Later, Midge pointed at a series of staggered squares, each extensively outlined. "Even the Indians graduated to the abstract."

"Now why is that?" Jane asked seriously. "Why aren't natural pictures enough? I hated it back in school when we left the Impressionists and the Expressionists and then we had to deal with cubes and color bands and splashes. I *hated* that stuff."

"I'm not sure why the Indians did. Boy, you sure have strong feelings about some things."

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's no problem. Just...interesting."

Jane shrugged, watching her step on the rocks. "My sister Charlotte and I, when we were about thirteen and twelve? Our father got very angry at Andy because he cried Christmas morning when he didn't get an expensive train set the family couldn't afford. Anyway, right in the middle of it, Charl and I said almost the exact same thing at the same time. We're supposed to be nice on Christmas!"

She and Midge laughed through their deepened breathing. "After Charl and I realized what we'd said, we made a secret pact that we would be as nice to people as if every day were Christmas."

"Really? That's so sweet!"

"But as you can see, Midge, I haven't kept to it."

They had begun to step more quickly back down the rocks. The cuffs of wind sent nasty shivers through them both. When they spoke, the wind sometimes drank up their voices, as if the sounds could not move beyond their two ears. Haltingly, Midge said, "I might agree that nature is just a set of forces, but...if you *invest* a rock with the quality of persistence or a tree with the quality of patience, you can...sink into the natural world. As into the arms of sisters and brothers, on the same journey or something."

Jane thought for a moment. "An inviting theory, all right." A moment later, she added, "But I'd maybe get the brain out of the way, just touch the rock and feel its texture, or listen to the tree's leaves in the wind. Take nature in directly through your senses and just sense the sensations and don't worry about what it all means."

"An inviting theory, all right."

They walked on. Soon they were stepping delicately through smaller stones, cleaved and heaped like shale. Suddenly, near the base of the ridge, Bliss bounded hard against Midge's leg, bringing them both up short. They looked after Bliss as she charged hard through the sparse grass and scattered stones.

Midge called out, "We must have flushed a rabbit!"

Now Jane could see the rabbit, long and skinny, sprinting ahead of Bliss. It cut left and right, each time sending Bliss into a hard turn, but each time Bliss, part Border collie, would emerge from the ruptured dust and quickly grab back the lost yards. Jane gasped. "No," she whined, praying for the rabbit. It might be vain to think so, but she couldn't help wondering if some god or other was punishing her blasphemy by presenting this spectacle. Meanwhile, the pursued animal cut deeper at each turn toward the rocks with Bliss holding to the inside to cut it off. Finally, the rabbit cut far right and succeeded in pulling Bliss wide. In the next instant, it had cut back in again and, with a few final frantic whips of its long hind legs, slithered out of sight into the rocks. Pathetically, Bliss pawed rock corners and sniffed at fissures. Gone.

Jane released a long-held breath. "Thank God."

Midge burst out laughing. "Thank *who*?"

Jane laughed helplessly. The laughter came again and again, deep and welcome and surprising in its endurance. She fell weakly into Midge's arms as they both caught their breath. After a moment, she drew back and tugged on Midge's arm. "Come on, shaman of mine. I'm fa-reezing!"

"Let's get back to the car. Thank *God* for heaters."

When they reached the Wagoneer, Bliss bounded up and slipped in as soon as Jane opened her door. A gust of wind rocked the vehicle. Jane gasped. "My, it's sprung up so strong."

Midge started the engine. "Ooh, come on, heat!" She looked at her watch. "Ah, we'll be right on time for Tim."

In silence, they waited as the air inside the cab warmed by the slowest of degrees. Midge said, "Listen, Jane, I have to say, it's really great having you out here

with me."

Jane, caught by surprise, stared off. "My goodness, that's a relief to hear. It's been good for me, especially to be able to just talk out loud about things."

Midge put the vehicle in gear and began to pull out onto the road. "That part's good for me too. I can fall into hiding, back there in my perfect hideaway house. You force me to break through the exterior of things."

Jane smiled. "Through the patination?"

Midge laughed, delighted. "Yes, exactly."

Jane undid her seat belt. "You're a good person, Midge. You really are." She patted Midge's shoulder, and then scrambled over the seat onto the pile of movers' pads laid out in back for Bliss. "Come here, girl," she whispered to the dog. Bliss snuggled up next to her and Jane scrunched to hold the animal against her. Beneath the vehicle's bed, the heavy tires thrummed rhythmically.

"You should come back here with us," she called. "We're warm."

"Somebody has to drive."

A mile or so down the road, Jane said, "I can see that art for you is working things out, Midge. I'm going to start drawing, like I've been saying I'm going to do for years."

Midge half-turned her head. "Go for it."

Jane lay sideways with one arm across her eyes. She mused about Arlen in New York, about Bobby's quick success in a strange new business he'd invented. Did he study? Did he read anymore? While Jane mused, Bliss lay with her head and one paw on Jane's outstretched arm.

When they reached the junction of 41 and 285, Midge called out. "There's Tim, right as rain. Hey, he's got a horse with him."

Jane sat up quickly. "What in the world...?"

A few moments later, the two women and Bliss scrambled out of the Wagoneer and trotted over to where Tim stood beside the truck cab. Bliss was already barking and scurrying around a tethered quarter horse, which seemed to barely register her presence.

All the humans hugged and then moved slowly toward the horse. It regarded

them with its large clear eyes while the wind tousled coarse wisps of its mane.

“Do we need a horse to get the wood out?” Midge asked.

Jane placed a palm on the horse’s muzzle. “Careful,” said Tim. “He just had to get his wolf teeth out. He was gettin a gum abscess.”

“Oh, poor thing. What’s his name?”

“Sheldon.”

“I don't believe that. Is he in pain?”

“I don’t think so, but maybe a little sensitive. I brought him along cuz the doc’s is right on the way.”

“Well, he’s mighty welcome!” Midge declared. Bliss had quieted down, perhaps puzzled by all the approbation the horse was receiving.

“He’s comin off some pain killin juice,” said Tim, “so we can let him get unwhoozied in the fresh air while we do our wood huntin. Oh, hey, I saved the teeth for you, Midge.” He rooted in his wooly vest pocket and pulled out what appeared to be two miniature horns that could find a place on the head of a Viking doll.

“Thought you might want to use them for decoratin one of your pots. I cleaned ‘em up pretty good.” He dropped them into Midge’s palm.

“Oh, Jeez, they wouldn’t survive the firing,” she said. “But can I just keep them?”

“Sure!”

“Can I keep Sheldon?” said Jane, behind them. She now had both arms around the horse’s neck.

Tim and Midge shared a hearty laugh. “Sorry, no,” said Tim. “Hey, let’s move. My behind is about to freeze up.”

Tim and Midge retrieved short chainsaws and several canvas log totes for Jane to manage. He led them into an area that he had described to them a few days before, the remains of the Thornton Ranch that had not yet been incorporated into the new Galisteo Basin Preserve. Soon, thousands of acres would be off-limits for the kind of helter-skelter development that had threatened to turn sprawling cattle land into a checkerboard of isolated subdivisions. In the meantime, it was still legal to pull dead wood, provided one had the equipment and stamina to do it. In fact,

they marched for more than a mile before Tim held up before an enormous pinyon pine, reduced by death to a remarkable array of long, collapsed arms. In its entirety, the dead tree looked like a course sculpture of a crushed spider.

“Oh sweet Jesus,” Midge declared rapturously. She laid down her saw and bent to pick up a hefty arm’s length of broken branch. She wandered around for a moment, seemingly without purpose, and then found a big rock to hurl the log against.

“Tree’s already dead, Midge,” Tim observed dryly.

“Hear that thunk? Pardner, this here is prime kiln wood. You sure we can’t drive in to get this? I can use every bit of it.”

“Sure we can, unless we get caught.”

Midge was already back to her saw. She pulled on a pair of safety glasses and had the saw fired up in no time and throttled down like a pro. Tim started up on the other side of the pinyon with his saw, and together the two of them raised a piercing racket. Black sawdust blew back and up into the air where it was swirled about by cold gusts of wind. Before long, they had scores of foot-long lengths for Jane to gather and stack. Meanwhile, Bliss roamed farther and farther from the snarling saws. When they had enough wood cut to fill all the totes, humans and dog started back to their vehicles.

The elation of the enterprise ebbed as the trek back wore them down. By the last quarter mile, Midge allowed Jane to carry the saw and then help her hoist the totes into the back of the Waggoner. “I guess we won’t get it all today,” Midge concluded.

“It ain’t goin anywhere, Midge,” said Tim. “I suppose I should get Sheldon back pretty soon too. He’s gonna need his next dose of meds within the hour.”

Midge collapsed onto the back bumper of her vehicle. “Tim, Tim, Tim,” she said. “I am going to cook you the best meal of your life.”

“Lookin forward to that already.” Jane was helping him waltz Sheldon back into the trailer. A few minutes later, she and Midge waved as he headed off.

With Jane and Bliss settled in among the pinyon logs in the back, Midge started the drive back to their shared home. A few miles up the road, they would

have heard her mutter, "Bless this day," but they were both asleep.

Eleven

Every secret crime.

Bobby waited outside of Joseph Borgasian's office. There was a post-holiday deadness to the place, something he might have expected but was nonetheless surprised to discover. He wrapped his long coat more tightly around him, though the waiting room was overly warm if anything. Before him a silent black phone with one of its four buttons lit sat on the edge of an abandoned secretary's desk. In the room behind him, he could just hear Borgasian on that lit line, his voice distant, forceful, monosyllabic. It felt as if there were only three people in the whole world: he, Borgasian, and the person on the other end of that line.

His cell phone vibrated gently in the breast pocket of his sports jacket. He fished it out and connected to his mother's call. "Did I get the time zones right this time?" she asked.

"Balls on accurate," he responded in a near whisper.

"It's an industry standard. Are you in Mr. Big's office yet?"

"Just outside, waiting to be allowed entry. But listen, he might call me in soon, Mom, so I need to sign off."

"Ten-four. Give him hell, kid. Love you."

"Love you too."

Bobby turned off his phone completely and let his head fall back against the dark Masonite paneling behind his simple office chair. He tried to relax, forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply, but he was still unnerved by his recent visit with his father at the tail end of the semester break. It had been an endless forty-eight hours.

They'd talked about his new tenant screening startup, the one he would pitch to Joseph Borgasian whenever the guy ever got off the phone. His father had been impressed with the product, made some useful comments, but time and again his attention would wander. His face would blank out strangely; in fact, he'd nearly shut down for a second or two, his eyes going flat and his breath stopping. Then, in

a few seconds, Bobby could count on their talking about Mom again.

"She's all right, Dad."

By that point he'd seen Arlen's New York trip for what it really was. He'd double-crossed him, Arlen had, claimed he couldn't pass up this big gallery crawl that a bunch of his friends had planned. So while he, Bobby, was trapped with his father, Arlen and five or six of his so-called friends were probably drinking rum and smoking weed and watching cable programs in their midtown hotel. Actually, Arlen had probably been planning his break escape since the disastrous Momless Thanksgiving, as he had christened it.

"I just hate to think of her acting so childishly," his father had blurted before the TV, as if they'd been talking about Mom all along. "What she might be getting herself involved in."

"It's just for a while, Dad. Relax."

"I am relaxed, Bobby, but I'm just worried about her."

"Then don't worry. I just heard from her. She's all right."

That statement had been a mistake. The gaze his father swung his way was very pointed. "You don't think that it's a little unfair that her sons can be reassured while her own husband has to go about in some kind of shell of silence?"

He'd become very confused at that point. They sat there in separate armchairs before the TV set. He'd convinced his father that *Cloverfield* was one of the coolest of the meta-video genre, but the guy had continually bristled at the "preposterous" premise. "Christ, nobody could keep recording in the midst of all that mayhem."

For years Bobby had been secretly proud that his parents were still married while it seemed that a lot of his friends' families were coming apart. From what he could see, the worst was the taking sides, the custody stuff, the dividing up.

"Bobby. You don't think it's incredibly childish, maybe dangerously childish, that a grown woman would..."

Bullying him, then. Just to stop him, but maybe to shame him, he'd just told him right out, "She's living in some small town outside of Santa Fe. She's renting a room with some woman she met, an artist. Okay?"

He wished he hadn't looked over at the man. Before his eyes, his father seemed to collapse a little. His actual dimensions seemed to shrink in. He was nodding, one hand up and fingers twisting the end of an eyebrow. "Christ, she's going lesbian," he muttered.

That had been it. From that moment, he'd planned his own escape. Every man for himself. If he stayed another day, his father might gouge her cell phone number out of him. As it was, he was seething inwardly at his sudden betrayal of his mother's confidences. When the movie ended, he found himself paying little attention to a nature show because he was terrified that his silent father, across the room in a chair with both his hands firmly cupping the ends of the arms, was plotting some sort of drastic action. Legal stuff, or an actual dash out to the Southwest to drag his mother back.

He'd sat there replaying over and over in his mind the exchange that had ended with his caving into his father and divulging that information. It had something to do with the man's intelligence, one of the family pride staples--his knowledge of the world, his trafficking in books, his assumed run for a doctorate, next year or month or day. Something to do with the family assumption that father knew best. It had something to do too with space, with the man's command over home turf.

The phone had rung, but it was not Mom. He could tell that from his father's simple, disappointed "Yes, he is" from the kitchen. "I'll put him on." It was a UConn student named Simone Rothstein, a writer for the student paper, and she wanted to set up an interview with Bobby Bill. He almost scheduled it for the first week of classes, but then it clicked in his mind that here was the out he needed, his instant escape opportunity. He'd set it up for the day after the next, last day of the break, so that there'd be no chance of his father's talking him into an extension.

The next night, his last night at home, he and his father ate from a pizza box. He still carried images of the laundry piled on a chair in his parents' bedroom, the stacks of newspapers so deep behind the front door that the hinges moaned when he pushed it back to get himself and his suitcase through. That was home now for his father, who used to mark paint can lids with dates and color codes and tape up

typed instructions on the water heater and fuse box.

Borgasian was still chatting away on the phone--probably a trick from the old school, letting a salesman cool his heels. Perhaps he should feel grateful that the man was willing to move up his appointment a week, though it didn't seem that he was that terribly pressed from the deadened look of the place. Bobby let his head roll easily on the paneling, musing ahead to his interview with Simone Rothstein. She was surely Jewish with a name like that. Jews were always more interesting than gentiles, in his admittedly limited experience. According to Ms. Rothstein, his financial doings had turned some heads on the campus. "I'd thought I'd approach it sort of developmentally," she'd said on the phone. "You know, the making of a business whiz kid. High school teachers, lifestyle mentors, parental influence, stuff like that." That night he'd had that dream about his mother.

He was chasing a rabbit through a woods of narrow trees, and when he cornered it near the mouth of a cave it suddenly curled up and lay down. Gradually, it grew larger, its fur dissolving away like tiny whorls of cloud, and in the next few seconds it had turned into his mother. She lay sideways in the dry leaves, her eye remaining round like a rabbit's and looking straight ahead as if fearful of what the next moment would bring but hopeful that by lying low and playing dead she could avoid whatever danger she was fearing. But he had only to raise the gun that had appeared in his hands and fire it. Her trick was so pathetically transparent that he felt embarrassed for her. At the same time, there was something playful, nearly coy in her expression, an expression that had delighted him when she played with him as a toddler. He'd awakened missing his mother so acutely that his eyes and nose had burned.

"I hate woods," he whispered aloud, fingering the edge of a *hot rod* magazine. Magazines were traditionally left out for clients left to cool their heels. The magazine's date, he noticed, was months old. "Typical," he muttered.

He hissed to himself and closed his eyes against a sudden stab of pain behind his eyes. "I'm lonely," he thought to himself. "That's what this is, Bobby-Boy. Relax, it's part of life, absolutely normal." He reddened a little, to catch himself scowling so dramatically. Sometimes he even talked to himself aloud. What did that mean about

him, psychologically speaking?

His father was pushing hard for, of all things, a camping or hiking trip that summer. He'd never known anyone to make more of a summer than his father did; probably a way of running screaming from all those high school and college teachers he'd had to shake down during his school years on the road. At the end of so many Junes, he'd be loading the car again and shoving off. Sometimes back then, before he got some promotions, he'd be out on the road for several nights' running. Had he had any affairs out at those splashy conferences? What about his mother, had she taken a lover or two while Dad was away? He couldn't remember her ever being out evenings, just there in the house and sounding a bit more no-nonsense, as if she had to step into Dad's authoritarian shoes at such times. And what about now? Had she really taken a woman lover?

Mr. Borgasian popped his wide, wiry head out of his office door and said, "Bobby."

Bobby rose quickly. "Yes sir..."

Borgasian was already retreating back through the door with a gruff, "Sorry, almost done. Can you hold on?"

Bobby was so distracted by the man's enormous hairy eyebrows that he almost forgot to answer. "Sure." Those eyebrows, like big caterpillars!

A few minutes later, Bobby looked at his watch and calculated that he'd give the man five more minutes and then stage some sort of protest, something aimed at establishing the value he placed on his own time. He could not simply leave because Borgasian did not know anything certain of his value yet. For the moment he just sat, and soon he felt creeping about within him the same feelings he'd had after the dream.

He wondered how his mother was really doing. She always reported that things were going well, though he'd never been completely taken in by her maternal insistence on seeing the bright side of everything. Her texts and emails surprised him, though, with some pretty interesting stuff--local color and chunks of Southwest landscape. "Blue-green chaparral" and cooking with "wild thyme" and a party at a big outdoor sculpture garden and how "shiny-blue" mountain jays were. She sure

sounded genuinely excited about her new living situation with that woman artist. Maybe she *had* turned lesbian. Was that what the separation was all about? So many girls on the campus were gay and there were a few bars and restaurants in nearby Hartford that they'd sort of staked out as their private territory. There was that whole town up Route 91 that was supposed to be completely full of them. He wondered if there were some opportunities to be had there--lesbian products, lesbian clothes, a gay and lesbian campus newspaper for UConn? He shrugged and idly picked up the hot rod magazine.

When he and Arlen had arrived on Thanksgiving Day, they'd been shocked to smell real liquor on their father's breath. What, did the guy need to tank up a little before seeing his own sons? He felt all the more unenthusiastic about his father's summer trip idea.

The truth was that he hated woods and nature and the great yawning emptinesses that others seemed to be so riveted by. He was firmly on record about that. The last time they'd made it out to the woods as a family, he was the one to point out the snarling sound of chainsaws in the mountains while his father waxed poetic about the "quiet." His mother at least would acknowledge the ugliness of that sawing sound, her pale head rising from a book, and she winced along with him whenever the high powered rifles cracked in the woods. Once, she had said quietly, "Run, Bambi, run." His father would stand, impervious--that's the word. Bobby could just see him, a montage of his childhood summer weeks on half-a-dozen different lakes, his father standing hands on hips at the water's edge. For all his alleged love of nature, one very dissatisfied dude, it seemed.

Bobby raised his hand to look again at his watch--heavy, expensive, consciously classic in design with a crystal humped like a cornea--and a memory came, swift and sharp, that he'd once killed a rabbit with a BB gun by shooting it in the neck. He felt his own breath slowing as he remembered it. It was so long ago, though, many years; he must have been only ten or so. On his first afternoon out with that stupid gun he'd winged a bird, a lucky shot from the hip. It had twirled down from the tree, small and green-gold, like a fat maple seed. He had pursued it--God, to finish it off?--but the little bird slipped under some fallen branches and

disappeared after a couple of sightings, just two fleet, bright flashes among the twigs. Probably some stray cat had finished the job. He didn't want to think about that.

The rabbit had been a whole other matter. Perhaps it had become too fat and trusting around suburban gardens to be very alarmed when he'd come upon it in the high grass at the edge of the subdivision. It just quieted a bit, its twitching mouth stilling, so large and deep brown with tiny spots of white sprinkled through its soft fur. As he raised the gun, it seemed to look at a point just past his knee, its mouth starting up again in tiny chews. He heard the BB strike the animal, hit and penetrate its neck, and then it leapt into the grass and disappeared. But he heard its quick, intermittent thumping come to a halt. Carefully, like a movie version of a big game hunter, he'd stalked through the grass--and there it was, now crouched in a thicket.

He saw its eye looking nearly backwards at him, round and brown, and decided the most effective shot would be at the back of its head. The BB would penetrate directly to the creature's brain, he guessed. A quick death, the true hunter's objective. He aimed carefully, surprised that the animal stayed so still, nearly complicitous, and squeezed off a shot, as they say. Again the creature leapt up and dashed away deeper into the grass. Again it stopped after a few yards. He followed and found it once again, crouched and still. At first he thought he must have missed, but then he looked closer and saw the viscous streams oozing from the animal's fur. He shot the thing again, into the body, and it lurched off. He had to keep shooting it, following it and shooting it, indiscriminately, painfully aware at this point that he'd committed himself to inflicting a slow, miserable death on the animal.

Each time he shot the rabbit, it moved a shorter distance away then stopped as if waiting, resigned, for his interminable approaching. The more he shot it the more he willed it dead. Though it made no sound, he knew quite well that he was doling misery to it in sharp, inefficient doses. Its innocence, its softness upbraided him. It had been calmly nibbling sweet grass stems before he'd stolen up; now, hideously, it was crawling up a bare rise, twitching its head in pathetic confusion. It did not know what was happening to it. There at the top it crouched, listing to one

side and bleeding from a dozen points, a tableau that he'd succeeded in submerging until now.

As he approached the final time, the animal lay there quietly, its breath coming fast and deep so that its ribs flared and sunk. With his own chest so tight he could hardly breathe, he shot it again. With a cry like a human child's, the rabbit jumped into the air, twisted about, and landed with a thud flat out on its side.

Even back then he'd known that the animal had not died of its wounds. It had died to escape torment, decided death was better than the hell its pursuer was putting it through. He'd looked at the dead rabbit for some time before grasping it by the feet and slinging it into the grass, the lithe inanimateness of the corpse so repellent. He'd never shot anything again, never even picked up a gun again. He remembered now that it hadn't even been his gun; he'd borrowed it from another kid, because his mother would have nothing around the house designed to hurt an animal.

His rage at that younger Bobby began to throttle his breathing. To clear his mind, he sighed and stood up and walked to the door to Mr. Borgasian's office and knocked twice. Then he twisted the knob and poked his head in. Borgasian was on the phone at a small serviceable desk at one end of a moderate sized office dark with the same cheap Masonite paneling. "I'll come back another time, sir," he announced with a smile. "Then we can talk about the services I'd like to offer."

In confusion, Borgasian spoke first into the phone and then, with a grimace, at him, waved a heavy forearm bristling with black curly hair beneath the sleeves of his unseasonable summer shirt. "No, come in, come in." He motioned to a chair before his desk.

Bobby slid his wrist free from his suit sleeve and ceremoniously consulted his watch. Then he shrugged and stepped forward to take the straight-backed chair. While the man finished up with his call, Bobby snapped open his laptop and refreshed the screen. Borgasian finally signed off with a few monosyllables and hung up. "Sorry, kid. This cold snap's breaking pipes all over town." He rose briefly and shot out his hand across the desk. Bobby lurched to take it but had to keep the laptop stable, so he executed more of a swat than a shake.

Bobby switched the laptop about and laid it before Mr. Borgasian. "If you don't mind, I'd like to walk you through a prototype of our product." He came around the desk and stood behind and to one side of the man.

Borgasian put on reading glasses and leaned toward the screen. "What's this? I have a website now?"

"It's just a prototype, not up on the Web. If you like what you see, my team and I would finalize it with your feedback, build it live, and maintain it for you."

Mr. Borgasian shook his head. "MBA all the way, I can see that." He was already trying out the drop-down menus and cascading pages. "Who are all these people?"

"Those are dummy accounts, but if you decide to use our product those would be your actual tenants. But, they don't get to *be* your tenants unless they pass the vetting protocol."

Bobby reached to the keyboard and chose a tab that opened to a registration form. As he scrolled down, he pointed out, "You get their names and contact information, of course, but there are fields here for grade point average, job history, permission to do a credit check, and even questions about driving record and any past legal problems."

Borgasian was peering very closely through his reading glasses and tugging hard on his chin. "So, you're setting it up so getting an apartment from me is just about the same thing as getting admitted into college."

"That's pretty much it, yes sir."

The man was a very quick study indeed. Well, Borgasian had to be a pretty sharp animal to own twice as many rental units as his nearest competitor.

The man had taken over the keyboard again and was cruising through the site. "Oh, I like the questions on this character exam, or whatever it is." He read aloud, "Which of the following are ways to show respect for fellow tenants. Keeping noise to a moderate level at all.... Ah, they're supposed to check all these. Cute." He read on. "You know I can't do background checks though, right? That ain't legal."

"Right. There's a bit of bluffing to some of the questions. We figure that they will scare off the less desirables from even applying."

“Could work. Wow, kid, this is something else.” He clicked on, scrolled, read closely for nearly a full minute. Bobby stood silently by, giving him space. “What’s this here?” Borgasian mused. “Some kind of online lease? They can’t sign a lease online.”

“No, right, but we took the most important clauses from the standard town lease and broke them down into separate pieces in plain language. So, when the applicant reads each clause and then clicks on ‘Agree’, we figure it has increased their understanding of what they will eventually sign.” He paused for effect. “If *you* decide to accept *them*, that is.”

Borgasian fell back in his chair. “I am one hundred thousand percent impressed.”

Bobby stepped around the desk and sat upright on the chair. He ran his hands down the front of his sport jacket and then raised them and made a circle in the air. “This is all cloud based, so you can enter an unlimited number of accounts, one for each tenant. And we can work with your accountant to tie in rental payments to track who’s delinquent. You can note infractions too, which I think would help to make an eviction stick.”

Borgasian flipped his glasses onto his desk and raised his hands in the air. “Stop, stop! I give up.”

Bobby risked adding another layer to the cake. “There’s another program we’re working up, where you can set up automatic rental payments from the tenants’ accounts as direct deposits to your accounts.”

Now the man was laughing with his head tipped down and his hands clapped over his ears. With a sigh, he leaned way back in his chair and smiled broadly at Bobby. “Okay, okay. This is very good.” He looked away for a few moments, musing. “I’d like to show this to a couple of my people, is that okay?”

“Absolutely.” A healthy bead of sweat snaked down the skin beside Bobby’s spine. “Hold onto the laptop and I’ll come back for it on Monday.”

“You don’t need it?”

“I have others. This one’s for demonstrations.”

“Of course.”

Bobby smiled at him. "Sir, you haven't asked me what we would charge to set up these programs for you."

Borgasian nodded. "Okay, what would you charge to set up these programs for me?"

The two of them shared a laugh. "For full activation, debugging, and a year's worth of maintenance, ten-thousand. After that, only hourly fees for maintenance work and design tweaks." He hurried to add. "We feel that this vetting protocol would weed out potentially difficult tenants and save you thousands in the first year and every year after."

The man took this all in, without any flinching that Bobby could see. After a few moments, he slapped his hands on the desk top and got to his feet. "Okay, Bobby, I got it. Thanks and I'll see you come Monday. Come in the morning."

Bobby rose too but spoke hurriedly. "One more thing, sir. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to document our relationship for school credit. It would involve a short report at most."

Borgasian raised his eyes and scowled. "I don't get it?"

"At the university you can challenge courses by doing substitute work in the public or private sectors."

"You're too much." Borgasian put the papers down and stood with a hand on each hip. "Sure, I'll write you something. Now get out of here." He laughed, shaking his head, but already he was reaching for the phone.

Bobby left the building, cautiously excited. It would be a good feeling to carry into the interview with the Rothstein girl. Would he have time to go home and change out of his coat and tie? Probably not, and still be on time for lunch with Ms. Rothstein. If he had bought a car by this point he could have zipped back, but the months had slipped by and he'd gotten used to not having one. At first, the court ban on his check writing had slowed down his car search, but then he'd found it sort of fit the image to use rider services and the occasional jet shuttle.

An hour and a half later he sat in the food court of the Student Union and spooned through a clod of macaroni and cheese. He'd grown steadily more uncomfortable in the nearly empty room until he'd concluded that Rothstein had

stood him up. Now he could just sit and enjoy the newspaper. He hardly ever ate with anyone anymore. They'd become bored with his habit of pressing them on everything, a relentless devil's advocate that had settled, in their eyes, into a simple devil. They resented his hotshotting (Arlen's word), resented hearing of his piled-up successes, though he always saw his alleged boasting as simple revelations of fact. When he'd persuaded an adviser to let him set up an independent study in his first year (a simple matter of deferring the grading until he had the required number of preliminary course credits--any bureaucracy could be worked), some jealous dweeb had called it a con job. Probably the biggest factor was that most of them, sooner or later, came to him to bail them out of some faltering class project, and when he'd balanced their messy budget sheets and beefed up their skeletal business plans, they resented having to pay him as agreed. He didn't care; he'd just been hanging with the wrong crowd: freshman, young and lazy. He ached to be out of the dorms and off on his own, but he'd worked a sweet rental deal with that housing director and besides he needed to stay close to his largest client pool.

He looked up and discovered a young woman standing before his table.
"Bobby?"

Awkwardly, he started to rise. "Yes. You're Simone? I thought..."

"I'm so sorry I'm late. Call me Sims, it's a family nickname. I had to drive my aunt to the airport and the traffic was awful. I just drove a hundred miles an hour from there." She was huffing as if she'd run the distance. Now she dropped a shoulder bag to the floor and began to pull off her coat and scarf.

"I hope you didn't, like, endanger yourself or anything?"

"No, I'm a great driver. Let me grab a sandwich. Do you still have time for this?"

"The whole afternoon."

She smiled briefly, but broadly, openly grateful. "That's just great. You want anything?"

"No. Yes! More coffee. Black, please."

"Right." She grabbed up his mug.

He remained standing. There had been a few snowflakes in her mid-length,

auburn hair when she'd appeared. In the second instant they had all melted away.

She came back soon with two cups of coffee and a simple turkey sandwich sitting all alone in the center of the white ceramic plate. She laid his coffee next to his hand and took the seat across the square table and bent to her bag. She pulled a notebook out of the bag and laid it and a pen off to one side.

"Thanks, Simone." He tapped the lip of his cup.

"Sims." As she raised the sandwich to her mouth, she asked, "Can we just start?"

"You're not going to take notes or tape or anything?"

"Nope." She spoke with her mouth full, but careful to keep the corners of her lips tight. "I've got a photographic memory."

"That must be handy in your line of work."

"Handy in *any* line of work." She took another big bite of her sandwich and spoke on around chews. "I think I explained the theme of the piece to you on the phone. But first, I'm curious about how your pitch went this morning. Did your team win?"

"Team?"

"Your development team, for the vetting protocol."

"Good memory, Sims. But there's actually no team, just me. It sounds better to say there's a team involved."

"Ah." She paused in her chewing to consider this nugget of wisdom. "Okay, so is my general approach okay with you?"

He nodded at his macaroni. "You want to get at the root of my so-called financial success. Your words, not mine."

"I also want to get at your motivation. I've heard that the administration is worried that you're using your courses as some kind of business platform." Her eyes, that kind of brown with a lot of red in it, regarded him brightly for a moment before her full lips closed over the edge of the sandwich again, her even teeth smoothly sinking in.

He shook his head. "It's no different from med students doing lab work that turns out to have profit potential. Except, when it's a business major, everyone just

assumes you're being a greedy asshole."

Sims laughed hard. "That is probably a very accurate assessment. But aren't you enjoying it? I mean, some people say you like the pushback...you know, like 'Bring it on!' or something."

He could feel her cool smile. He spotted a little speck of mayonnaise on her lip that her pink tongue presently slipped out to nip away. Confident women rankled him. And attracted him.

All at once, and certainly outside of his control, honest words issued from him. "Actually I hate all the resentment. It isn't fair and it sets me apart. Not that I mind being apart. In fact, I was just thinking lately that it's just as well that I'm getting pretty separate from things--friends, other students, even my family."

"Why?"

"I need to find myself--like everybody's saying these days. Figure things out." The words kept coming out before he could rehearse them; they startled him with their strangeness. He was consciously keeping his voice low in the nearly deserted cafeteria. He looked across at Sims, a stranger chewing evenly with carefully closed lips, a smooth face enlivened by reddish-brown eyes. Perhaps he was trying to *sound* honest, probably because that would move her and then maybe he could get to sleep with her. That's the way guys like him thought, right? No matter how fancy a label you pasted on it. "I want to see what you write before it goes into the paper--if it goes."

"I have no problem with that."

"Good." He finished the last few bites of his macaroni and cheese, took a swig from his coffee to dissolve its glueyness.

"So what about your family?" she asked. "Do you get your business sense from your father, or mother, or both? Is there any history to it?"

He thought for a minute, more at ease, at least enough to look at her consistently while he spoke. He thought, *I had a dream in which my mother became a rabbit that was running away from me.* He took a breath and said, "My dad's a pretty successful businessman--businessperson--a book rep, somebody who sells textbooks to schools? He used to travel all around Massachusetts, other states too

sometimes, but he's been kicked upstairs. His company keeps growing."

"Did you sit around the dinner table talking business strategy?"

Bobby winced. "No."

She had caught his expression. "What?"

"Well, I was just thinking how strange it was that, that we didn't. Usually he talked about history, or literature. He reads a lot about history, loves quirky facts."

"Tell me one." She demanded it very happily.

"He talked a lot about the Minoans, I remember that."

"The *Minoans*? That a culture or something?"

It bothered him that she kept interrupting. She seemed still very sped up by her dash from the airport. "From the island of Crete, I think, in Greece. I mean, not now, way back in ancient times. Dad was impressed because they had no military in their culture. They were totally non-competitive."

"But business is competitive by nature, don't you think? Your dad didn't like competition?"

Bobby sipped his coffee. "My business isn't competitive. It's a single, stand-alone resource."

"I don't understand."

He shrugged. "It's like whether to be part of a team or not. I like to pick up things and see them to a point and move on. I get bored, and I would, like, totally hate to get stuck in some kind of social tar pit." He almost volunteered his father as a negative example, but held up.

Sims said, "Was the pizza delivery thing an example of something you picked up and then saw to a point and then moved on?"

He felt his head snap back. "Whoa! The lady does her research. But yeah, it's a perfect example." He waved over at the pizza franchise in the food court. "I asked them to deliver a pizza to my dorm room and they said they don't have that service so I built them a site that students can order off of and sold it to them."

"That is *so* cool. Can you tell me what you made off that?"

"Pizza for life. The franchise owner kept everything off the books so he wouldn't have to get approval from corporate. It's a stealth site, but it's driven up

his sales a bunch.”

Sims's eyes had gone wide. The last third of her sandwich had now rested for some time, untouched, on her plate. She lifted her own coffee cup for the first time. Then a moment later she put it down with some force. “Wait a minute, you mean I could have had *free pizza?*”

He laughed, and then kept laughing because she kept up the same disgruntled expression. After a few more beats, she dropped the expression and exclaimed, “Hey, this is all great. Now, what about your mom? Was she an influence in some way?”

“She left us.” He came out with the statement so flatly that he reddened at once.

The young woman's face had not changed all that much, however. It appeared that she'd gotten down the journalist's placid pose: Never look shocked. He went on, deciding as usual by instinct when to trust and when to not. Based on his first and only phone conversation with Borgasian, for example, he'd decided not to ask for a non-disclosure agreement up front.

“What do you mean 'left'? Divorced your father?”

“We're not sure.” He told her a little about his mother's decision to live alone for a while, the details of her plan. After a few moments, it began to sound like boasting.

She laughed, a fast explosive giggle that surprised him. “That is so great!”

“Actually, I'm here at UConn because of her.”

“She suggested it?”

“No. Last year, when she learned that UConn was giving me a scholarship, she asked me if it was all right if she borrowed some money from my college fund. I mean, she and Dad paid most into it, of course, but I was putting in some chunks in my senior year.” Sims looked slightly confused, so he hurried on. “Anyway, then I got into Stanford but no scholarship offer. I was about to tell her, and Dad of course, but I realized that if I used the college money then she couldn't.”

“Oh my God, you clammed up about Stanford and came here so she'd have the money.” She considered her own words, nodding slowly. Her gaze grew harder.

"Did you know what she wanted the money for?"

"Not at the time, just that she needed it." He laughed. "Anyway, it wasn't that noble of me. Stanford is stingy because they think giving money to promising students will kill their entrepreneurial spirit, or some fucking thing. They want all their students to become startups now." He faked a shudder. "To me, that's just a new kind of status quo. Let's *all* be different now, and in just the same way."

They both laughed and then both fell silent.

Bobby broke the silence. "'Clammed up?' Wow, I haven't heard that expression in a long time, maybe never. Sims is a neat name, by the way. Is your family French or something?" His brow furrowed a little because he was wondering if the question were offensive; perhaps people couldn't be Jewish and French at the same time.

She shook her head. "Just Long Island pretentious."

"Oh. Anyway, I'm like being honest here, probably taking a chance, but it's important for me always to be super honest--I was saying that your questions are kicking up a lot of memories for me. I'm not sure they have a lot to do with your questions."

"In what way not?"

"Excuse me?"

"How are your reactions different from what you assume are the intentions of my questions?"

He smiled. "Are you sure you're not an English major?"

"No, just pretentious." She smiled back, but with her brown eyes clicking back and forth dead on his. Then she added, "For the record, I'm a business major like yourself, but with a communications minor."

"That sounds smart. Anyway, the fact is I had this dream about my mother and I'm wondering if she's, like, secretly a little nuts or something--I mean, worse than we ever thought. I get calls and texts and emails from a little town in New Mexico where she's living with a potter. She keeps talking about automatic drawings and keeping a journal, things like that, and she wants to get a horse." He laughed suddenly. "I can't even imagine my mother on a goddam horse."

Sims was looking at him carefully. "I'm grateful that you're sharing all this. As a communications minor, and an amateur psychologist--not really, just kidding--I can tell you that as long as a person is communicating, reaching out like in calls and such, then they're all right. I mean, you should worry if she *stops* communicating. So, can you tell me about the dream?"

Before he could stop himself, he told her the dream about the rabbit, going long, with way too much detail.

She listened carefully and then thought for a moment. "I wonder why she didn't run into the cave."

"I never thought about that. You're just like her. She would push deep like this." He looked away. "Anyway, she would have been safe in the cave."

"Or trapped." Sims sat up straighter. "Trapped, or maybe she didn't want to be safe. Maybe she *wants* to be found. Yeah, maybe you're dealing with the suspicion that your mom wants to be found in some way."

"Yeah. She's out there all alone." His voice had quavered unaccountably, so he added firmly, "Except for that new roommate, I mean."

"What do you think your mom's trying to do?"

Bobby shrugged. He thought to straighten up when a cramp in his side signaled how long he'd been holding himself in a tense slouch. "I wrote her once and asked her a lot of questions but she only said she's not ready to say too much yet."

Sims leaned forward and smiled. "But your dream says that you know that she likes it that you're pursuing her. She wants to be pursued but not trapped, safe and not trapped while out in the open. She trusts you."

Bobby thought to himself, *She ran from us--from me and Dad and Arlen. She knows that I'm an unfeeling being.* He found with every passing minute that he was missing his mother more. Face it, part of all the business pizzazz was keeping busy, staying away from his father and Arlen, pushing himself through the loneliness and trying to beat it. Beat it now and beat it for life. He found himself admitting out loud, under Sims' confident gaze, a woman's face peering out from a twenty-year-old body, that his mother was his best friend, but not going too deeply into it, just

that his mother could suss out his every mood, but not the memories of her coming up suddenly along the back porch or down into the corners of the basement and find him where he'd gone to hide, small and shrunken and sad, and within minutes, with him pulled close along her warm side, feel the sadness seep out of him. Nor how ever since he'd heard her crying, back when he was five or six, first a little while, then a longer while, and then awaking again and again to hear her still crying, his father's voice impatiently interposing at points, and then the crying again, he'd felt he'd done something terribly wrong to her. By three A.M. in that distant childhood morning, the windows pressed with a lace of gray frost, he had itemized every secret crime of which he was responsible, including Arlen's taking a grounding over a decade ago for a bike he himself had left in the driveway.

To break the spell, Bobby got up for more coffee for both of them. More caffeine would probably make him sing more, he suspected. At that point, Sims mostly just listened, occasionally nodding. Then she asked, Why so much energy devoted to making money? She had a lot of nerve asking a question like that, she with her own "pretentious" Long Island status. He had a hundred answers for her. It was all an experiment, he told her, a testing out of certain theories of human nature. His father, who was not his best friend, was nevertheless a source of critical information.

"The way I see it there's no god, no morality, and the trick is to find out what promotes the highest efficiency in people in that situation. There could be a practical basis for every so-called moral virtue; for instance, if somebody goes back on a business deal, call it dishonest or greedy or unethical, whatever you want, but bottom line they lose too."

He saw one brow cock in Sims' otherwise placid face, now heavily pinned to the heel of one hand. "Hobbes or Karma?" she asked.

That grated too, such fancy allusions.

"The idea is to get in control, to control forces. Oh, I forgot to say--those quote-unquote captains 'o industry are probably totally unhappy, headed for coronaries, most of them are completely gross, right? Weinstein probably wears a girdle, he's got no neck."

He was saying too much, opening like a burst sore, or a blossom; pus or perfume, he couldn't be sure, but he was connecting in some important way with this woman whom, strangely, he did not actually like--too studied cool, too icily entitled, too knowing, had it all too fucking easy and maybe pretending she regretted all that but liked to think "Here I am interviewing somebody" so that she was the real subject of her own attention--but he couldn't help himself. He'd help himself later, when he saw the draft.

He told her that he hadn't learned how love and friendship fit into his skeptical schema yet. On one of those camping trips he'd watched dozens of insects, mosquitoes and lacewings and moths, one by one fly against the hot lantern chimney and crimp and die, their mindless suicides somehow clamping to his father's enforced lessons of the holocaust--a diatribe that lasted several evenings after the man discovered that neither of his sons had been taught in their high-cost high school about the deaths of six million Jews at the hands of the Nazis. And when they got home, books full of the most horrible images he'd never hope to see again.

The Jewess across the table from him dropped her eyes. He went on being honest. "So, I guess I'm alone. My best friend ran away to find herself. In high school I fell in love with the most beautiful girl in the senior class--anyway, that's how everybody else described her--and I got to sleep with her all I wanted to, and you know what? I got bored. I got bored with her absolutely perfect body"--he kept talking, managing to keep his eyes on Sims--"the need to include her in everything, to think about her or--or include her in the picture or something whenever I wanted to do something. I think it's all the same thing but I haven't figured it out yet."

"What's all the same thing?" Now her tone sounded more challenging than journalist-neutral. He couldn't alter his own tone, though he definitely wanted to.

"Group think. Bugs baking themselves and Germans baking Jews and people discarding each other like tissues that they blow their noses in."

Sims' eyes went from one of his to the other, back and forth. "Well, that's strong," she said quietly. A moment later, she reached for the notebook, jotted down a few words, and closed it.

"Are we done?"

"I think I've got enough for now, thanks."

"I get to see a draft, right?"

"Absolutely."

In short order, she had gathered her things, got to her feet, put on her coat, and shot a hand across the tabletop in his direction. He was caught by surprise and almost upset his chair in getting up to shake her hand. A moment later, she was heading off.

Her quick departure unnerved him. As her figure piled through the heavy glass door that led to the checkerboard plaza, he believed that every indication pointed to the fact that he would never see her again. Without thinking, he took off after her, blushing deeper with humiliation with every stride. He caught up with her half-way across the plaza.

"Wait up!" he commanded. She stopped and turned back to face him with her bag clutched to her chest. "Look, what can I say, I'm an asshole."

Her eyes squinted at him. "What do you mean?"

"All that...tough talk. I don't know, I..."

She freed a hand to wave dismissively at him. "No worries. I think you got jazzed with all the attention. It happens a lot with guys."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. Great. He'd routed himself to the unenviable category of Guys, a group whose behavior was predictable and usually disappointing for women of a certain caliber.

"And I might have been kind of baiting you," she added. "Not consciously, but I wasn't...professional enough or something."

"You were fine," he insisted.

He could see that she had moved on. "I want to think this through a bit more," she said. "I'm not sure this approach is the right one for you." She looked off, thinking to herself, and he managed to say nothing to allow her the silence she seemed to need. "There's more to this story than Freshman Makes Good, and a lot of what you shared is really nobody's business. I think there are lots of interesting broader issues to explore instead that we could get at with a different approach."

"How?" he asked, gratefully.

“Well, you’re a prime example of the gig economy at work. You like to float and then kind of...pounce--but then you want to be ready to move on right away.” She turned her gaze more fully on him. “Do you know that weekly Boston Globe column, *Five Things You Should Know about...So-and-So?*”

“I read it every week, online.”

“Yeah, well I think maybe that’s the way we should go with this. It would mean that we’d be more like co-writers. I could give you questions, you know, about going gig rather than startup team, or private sourcing versus venture funding. Know what I mean? And then we’d hash over your answers and kind of shape the piece into more of a solid article than some kind of feel-good, look-at-this-whiz-kid kind of thing. Does that make sense?”

“That’s very...impressive,” Bobby managed.

“Okay, good, look, I’m going to go off and think for a while. I’ll call, okay?”

He waited for her brown eyes, with the curious reddish tinge, to soften, but they did not.

“Okay. Thanks.”

She nodded, turned, and started off at a brisk pace. His mouth opened to speak, because surely there was more to say. There was always more to say, wasn’t there? Like, they should set a date for the next meeting, or a nudge point where he should call her if he hadn’t heard from her. But a deeper voice within him told him to clam up. He ignored it, took a breath to call out, and then held it. Against every instinct in his being, he kept his mouth shut.

Twelve

Spirits, restless and unfulfilled.

With some reluctance, Jane handed over her sketchbook. Midge had insisted on it, though she was supposed to be getting back to a set of ceramic firings for a large commission. "Five minutes," Jane warned. The two of them stood together, side by side, leaning back against the kitchen counter, as they often did when they stopped to chat, en route.

While Midge studied the drawings, a workbook with additional loose sheaves tucked in, Jane took occasional sips from a glass of spring water and studied the different kinds of light in each window to distract herself. Winter was on the wane; the sun had left the January sky, but some of the windows still held tufts of fiery red cloud.

She let her lungs fill and empty, like slow tides of air. At the same time, her skin prickled from a tentative excitement. She purposely kept her eyes off Midge's face and gazed instead at the windows, all the while breathing easily and silently, as if a sound or sudden movement would close up the opened passages within her, constrict her sense that air and light moved easily into her. A new feeling, and one to be cherished--and, if possible, preserved. At the moment, it felt vitally essential to be in this room, this shell of pure white stucco smoothed up to the ceiling.

It sobered her to think that it had taken so many months before she'd gotten to this point--which, if pressed, she could not easily define. She felt that this precise moment, as she leaned against the kitchen counter as Midge, beside her, studied her drawings, was weighted by propitiousness, and not to be pushed but quietly accepted. The rose-colored air of the deserts was gradually bleaching the dark tinctures of her past. When she considered her days, she found them embroidered by her good work at the gallery, and Tim's occasional company, sweet and friendly now, and long walks with Bliss, and short, vivid chats with Emmet whenever they met on the streets, and the solace and nurturance of Midge's friendship and her small, spaced circle of intimates and their dinners and openings and the few gallery

visits, and always books, wonderful books, books by Margaret Mead and a biography of Dora Carrington and the works and words of Frida Kahlo. She swam through time these days like a long, shining fish in a clear blue world--easily, and savoring the ease, while tingling down its length at the dangers that might lurk in the depths.

Midge sighed beside her. "If these were just drawing attempts I'd say you had talent."

Jane turned her eyes back from the windows. "What do make of them, Midge?"

"Well. There's a busy kind of darkness around the faces. Dark presences, all sort of looking to the viewer. Uncanny, really."

Jane bent closer. Across the pages that Midge turned, figures swirled, all spontaneously drawn, some from recalled dreams, some massed to near obscurity in places, while here and there a solitary figure stood on a few hatch marks. "This one here." She pointed. "That's what they call 'the look'."

"Who does?"

"The shrinks. Except, Charlotte and I named that expression before we'd ever heard of it. Dad's look."

"Yes, here. And here." Midge followed several strokes with the nail of her little finger, the cuticle still inlaid with dried red clay. "And this one over here, the collapse around the shoulders and spine. It's not aggressive."

"I know that," said Jane quickly.

"Well, what I'm saying is that it doesn't seem...predatory. I guess what I'm saying..." She flipped through the pages quickly, and then paused. "I guess what I'm saying is that some of these figures express more despair than longing."

Jane smiled and said, "Perhaps," but already her hands, nearly of their own, had reached forward and now lifted the drawings from Midge's. "That's enough. You're supposed to be working."

Midge looked at her. "What do *you* make of them, Jane? Don't you find some of the patterns amazingly consistent?"

Sometimes Midge could be a little pushy. Jane shook her head. "Sure, I do. That's because I can't do that many different expressions."

Midge lowered her face to catch Jane's downcast eyes, until Jane laughed grudgingly. "You're supposed to be working, Midge."

"I've got time. Tell me what you're not telling me."

A silence gathered. "I guess it's that I've been thinking about my dad's death lately. That was a pretty bad time, and it's been coming back a lot lately, sometimes in dreams."

"I thought you said you missed it. And the funeral too, right?"

"I did, yes. I was away and no one knew where. The telegrams finally reached me and I jetted home."

"You say it was pretty sudden? His death I mean."

"He had a heart attack."

The two of them shared a glance. "We said five minutes, Midget, remember? You're supposed to be firing glazes right now."

Midge mimicked a shiver. "I hate doing it after sundown. Trotting across that dark, cold porch."

Jane laughed and said, "It's still light out! You need those commissions to pay the bills. Besides, I promised you a party when they're delivered."

Midge smiled but her eyes slid away. "Damned sweet. I guess I should agree to that just because you might eat something and put some decent weight on again."

When Midge smiled that way, Jane wondered at how she looked so girlish sometimes for such a strong, squared woman. It was her small Chiclet teeth that lent that impression. Jane needed to keep observing and learning like this. When she stopped learning about others it was because she had closed off to them somehow.

Now Midge put out her hand, still looking away. "Put it there, scout. Good work with the drawing."

They remained gripping each other's hand for a few seconds, standing side by side and comfortably linked. There was something else she'd wanted to talk about, a nagging fear about Bobby. He hadn't texted for more than a day, and now his phone wasn't accepting calls. Was he merely between phones?

After a moment, Midge asked, "It's not going to be vegetarian, is it?"

"The party? No, don't worry. I thought stuffed chickens, roasters."

"Ooh. How nice."

"You're stalling."

Midge nodded, then leaned away from the counter. She had worked for the past two weeks, around the clock it seemed. Her client's deadline was tied to a wedding and reception; Midge's commission was to provide the original settings and even one of the gifts. It was a very large order, and each piece difficult: thrown plates with molded edges and, more difficult by far, light thrown cups. Working inside was fine, but now she had to do the final firings by moving back and forth outside between her studio and the kiln. Jane had helped, though, mostly just by swabbing down surfaces, and Tim had stayed after supper one night to repair the lights in the side yard. And Jane had been doing all the shopping and cooking, a good supper to look forward to each evening, though often planned by the lean and mean menus of her new regimen.

"If you get going right now, Midge, I'll make a pot of coffee for when you're done."

"A deal!"

She stayed against the counter after Midge had left. She just stood there, staring, slipping deeper into herself. Lately, she had become attuned to the sensations of existence as keenly as an antenna to airwaves. From the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes, she felt at certain moments as if she were crackling like a lightning rod. She let her eyes drift across the fire's coals, then up the mounded stucco to the mantel, a short length of hewn wood burl, and then to the table half-cleared of dinner dishes where two candles had shrunk to their last thirds. The air was so still that the candle flames shone like small electric bulbs. Now she could hear Midge's clattering in back, near the kiln several yards off the porch and later, twice, the concussion of burst clay when she shattered a piece against the pile of discarded fragments.

Jane pulled the sketchbook open on the counter. The rough figures stood about, male, female, neither, both. Even the few smiles were laden with sadness. Midge was right, and the despair was in their eyes, she concluded. Did her father

have a soul to let wander? If so, where these days did it wander, her father's poor ghost?

The guilt had always cut like a knife that she'd been so completely out of reach when he'd died. Her family had been forced to bury him without her. The pain of that ignominy had never completely faded. At college, she'd been quite a hit with the other girls at first because of her stories of their nutty household. She had held the center of circles of open-mouthed girls with her stories of siblings sleeping on couches, in sleeping bags, Andy's long period when he'd burrowed to sleep each night in the laundry pile, Sissy's and her fighting over a blouse until a sleeve tore off and both of them landing on their butts. She could mimic her mother's implacable face perfectly, a painted balloon bobbing above the chaos. Sissy she cast as Wicked Witch of the World, and always got a laugh. It was so heady to be free of that melee.

But the new freedom and the distancing disdain eventually worked against her. Day by day, she got a little more lost, a little less self-defined. After several beers, her family stories often sounded hysterical and bitter. She studied the wrong courses, made the wrong friends, fell for the wrong boys, and too many of them, one right after the other. Looking back at that stranger who had been her younger self, she had always concluded that she'd been just like a million other coddled kids of her generation; she'd used drugs and alcohol to heighten an artificial sense of self but was under-equipped to control it all. But that assessment was never completed.

She felt chilled. She unfolded the cotton blanket on the bench beneath the northern windows and draped it around her before she again sat at the table. With her legs stretched out before her, she shook her head at how predictable it had been, in retrospect, that she would be hidden away in a hotel alongside Crater Lake, Oregon, shuttled there by a rich phony hippie who had just wanted to do drugs and screw her a lot--quite a different story from the spiritual journey he'd used to manipulate her far up into Oregon. (Years later, she'd discover his shaven face and formally dressed figure in a photograph in *National Geographic*. With champagne glass in hand, he'd been caught looking into the Hudson River valley from the granite veranda of his grandfather's mansion.) A proposed spiritual cleansing had become yet another physical polluting, and one morning, while she dully fed the

nearly tame chipmunks that she imagined understood and loved her, pausing only occasionally to confront the lake's utter purity which her excesses had inured her to, the rest of her family had been lowering her father's body into his grave.

So, muffled in her protracted and selfish "healing," she had lost the chance to grieve alongside her sisters and brother. Only their youngest, Andy, had still been around by the time she reached the family house. At the airport, her mother had flown at her from behind the other waiting people. The sight of her mother's face, seamed and wet, a wracking sob held back by grimacing, had terrified her. At once, her own grief and guilt slapped up through her body, and right in the waiting area she and her mother had fallen against each other and wept. She had hardly felt a thing until then, consumed mostly by the need to get back home and see to her mother. All around them, shocked others had drawn back by respectful steps. When they'd finally pulled apart, her mother had simply stood there with crumpled face and weakly raised arms.

"My God, Mom, *how?*" Jane had wailed aloud. So, that had always been the most important question for her, as lately it had clearly become. She got no answer then, and somehow the two of them mustered the presence of mind to start off toward the car.

Her mother rubbed her face, walking blindly, and said, "It came on so quick. Here then gone." The same words she'd said on the phone.

She'd bitten back her questions, though each pressed to her throat like a knife point. Instead, she concentrated on the task of guiding her stricken mother through the airport. With each step, she'd forced composure on herself. They passed a couple kissing joyously. Their actions struck her as crude.

Her mother was muttering, "I cannot, absolutely cannot believe it. Only now that I see you can I believe that this horrible thing is true. No more Charley?" Her words choked out through tears, then another terrible rush of chattering sobs.

"Now, now, poor Mom. Easy." She patted the woman's arm, took her by the wrist. They headed for the doors.

"I thought I was okay," her mother squeaked, "but seeing you, Jane...."

She had to drive the enormous station wagon, which her father had labored

to keep in action. It smelled of him, of motor oil and Aqua Velva. Then the endless ride back to the house, the streets empty as death. Time and again she looked at her mother's face for some trace of her irrepressible smiling. Without her broad grin, her life's beacon of bright teeth, her mother was reduced to cold, crumpled humanity. She looked so defeated, squinting over the dashboard. In fact, it had always surprised her that her mother had still been so openly grieving, now days after the ceremonies. She had expected her to be stoically cheerful by then, to sniffle, shake her head, then brighten by degrees until she could announce, "It's a terrible thing, Jane, but it's over. Now, tell me what you've been up to." But this woman beside her had been changed into a bent, aged creature that she could hardly recognize. She was stricken, there was no other word for it. She'd never seen anyone who so exemplified what that word had been invented to describe. The worst was the set thin line of her mouth, like that of a movie gangster plotting revenge.

"Mom, you look so awfully sad."

Her mother shook herself as if forcing herself to awaken. "I have not slept well, little sister. I cannot imagine what I did so wrong as to let him slip off like that."

"It couldn't have been your fault!"

Her mother's head recoiled. "You're shouting, Jane. Please speak more quietly."

"I'm sorry, Mom, but you sound like you're blaming yourself." When her mother fell silent, she goaded gently, "Maybe you should talk about it, Mom. Can't you tell me anything more? I really need to know everything."

Her mother's face had turned suddenly fierce. "You, *you*. Oh, I'm so sorry that you're having a bad time. Maybe I should have recorded all the phone calls I made, me and your sisters and brothers, to school people and police departments. Your brother David almost got on a plane to go look for you. I'll hand over the bills for the telegrams, Miss Priss, and you then you can thank me for what I've done for you."

The mysterious attack rocked her to the core. She could only gape at her

mother, speechless. After a few more moments of silence, her mother resumed her more customary straight posture and said, firmly, "He was unhappy, and I couldn't for the life of me make him happy. That's all I know, and you can pester until you're blue, but that's all I can tell you."

The attack had silenced Jane, and for more than twenty years. So, her mother had handed her a piece of the truth, a large piece, and the sheer mass of it had driven whole important matters from her mind. Nearly every memory of her father was accompanied by deep pity for the man, but she never asked herself why. Among her siblings, they had reduced it all to a few serviceable phrases, patly eulogizing: "He wouldn't put his own health first," or "You just couldn't get him to take care of himself," all vaguely referring to heart conditions and sacrifices for the family. None of them had had the strength to pursue these issues more deeply. In time, his memory had faded until there remained only an occasional image of the peculiar longing in his dark eyes as he looked at her during the last few years of his life.

Jane heard Bliss's rapid pawstrokes on the patio stones, and then the dog was before her, long tongue snickering and her whole body a-tremble with excitement. "Bliss, Bliss girl," she whispered huskily and reached out. The dog slipped up, her front paws padding in Jane's lap, her brown and white spotted face joyous. She licked Jane's face, twice, tentatively, then suffered more pats and strokes until, relinquishing the unmanageable sensations of whole acres of flushed birds, rotting dung, and high, pungent grasses, fell to the floor in a heap with a sigh.

Jane pulled the blanket around herself again, but let a hand dangle to scrunch through the fur along Bliss's spine. She remembered an interchange with her mother that kept returning to her at the oddest times, as it did now. It had been years before her father's death. She had been teasing her mother about all the kids she'd had, hinting in her aggressive teenager way about her growing knowledge of sex. She clearly remembered the way her mother had shyly smiled at first across the sheet that the two of them were folding. "Just hold up your end, Jane, and throttle those nasty insinuations."

"Come on, Mom," she crooned, snapping the sheet provocatively. "You and

Dad must be at it all the time."

"Stop that, Jane," but her mother was smiling and that goaded her on.

"Does he ever let you alone or what? I mean, look at all us *kids*."

Her mother giggled, but with an uncomfortable tone, and Jane had teased again, and again, and then stopped. Because she saw her mother turn away, and then turn back with an expression on her face that frightened her. The smile was still there, the bright open penny of a face, but her mother's eyes were glistening strangely.

"It's private," her mother said, in a tone meant to be joking that could not hide its pleading.

And that awful false smiling had held for eternity, and she, a young girl with so few resources, could think of nothing to say to make it go away and for an earlier moment to return.

Bliss mewled, a spooked, needy sound. Jane rolled from the chair to the floor and reached to hug Bliss to her. It was not an unfamiliar position for them; sometimes they fell asleep together like this. Jane dug her fingertips deeply into the animal's rippling fur. It felt so good to be touching a creature, loving it so primally. Again, she felt the effects of her strange sensory heightening, as if she could distinguish each separate follicle of Bliss's fur. She could have helped her father more, she knew. She'd always felt terrible that she hadn't spoken up more after her mother brought Foxy home from the vet with bad news. Jane hissed aloud at the thought that she hadn't piped up loud and clear that vets weren't gods. That old dog had years left, though he had trouble rising at times. So what if he lay about most of the day? She and Charl loved to pat his smiling head each time they passed him, big tail wagging away, and often she'd find Foxy laid out beside the car just watching her father work. If he thought no one was nearby, he'd keep up a steady stream of chat with the dog. *Think we about got it, boy. It's just about to come free....*

She fell into a state of near sleep, one peopled with soft images of her parents. Her father at the sink, scrubbing the sheathes of grease from his wrists, her mother standing hands on hips before the laundry pile. Then Bliss whined again, looking to Midge's closed studio door.

Jane came up on one elbow. "Do you miss Midge, honey? Wanna find her? Let's go find Midge," she coaxed in a whisper. "Want to, girl?"

The dog looked up at her, ears pricking up.

"Come on, let's find Midge."

They both rose and went out through the patio doorway. It wasn't the direct way to the kiln, but Bliss was often too excited to be allowed in the studio during big projects when so many pieces were in range of her flicking tail. Now, the dog kept bounding forward and then returning, ever closer to the wide, arch-backed kiln which now shimmered with heat and smoke, fire aglow in the seams between plates of the firebox. They couldn't find Midge out there, but then they heard noises on the porch. She appeared through the studio doorway with a bushel basket of colorfully spattered mason jars in her arms. With a yelp, Bliss danced around her in little leaps.

"Hey, girl. When did you get back?"

Jane hugged herself in the cold. She called up quietly from the yard, "How's it going?"

"Good, though it feels like I'm doing everything in slow motion."

"Can I help?"

Midge had put down the bushel basket and now leaned to Bliss. She shook her hands down through the fur on the dog's flanks. "No thanks. You must be beat yourself. Tomorrow's a workday, isn't it? Shit, I don't even know what day it is anymore."

"It is a workday. I think I need to sleep. And dream."

Midge nodded, preoccupied but alert as always. "That might be good. Wake me for breakthroughs."

The two of them shared a laugh.

"I'll make that coffee for you, okay?"

Back in the kitchen, Jane made up the small pot of coffee for Midge and then headed for her bed and a book on the painter Lucien Freud, one of the occasional freebies that publishers sent to the gallery. With each step she registered the pleasant anticipation of shedding the cold beneath her covers and opening the book

to reveal the bright, colored plates.

She dressed for bed and settled under the covers, but before she'd turned two pages a bit of sand spilled onto the open book. She brushed it away, but a few moments later more grains spilled, just a few in a thin stream. She looked up and scanned the butted ceiling poles. Nothing at first, then the tiniest flicker of a filament in the space between two poles. More filaments flitted into the crack, and again a bit of sand fell down. Then something slithered evenly over the crack. A centipede, one of those large ones from the area, eight inches at least, that coil beneath manure clods or roll silently along the edges of a stone.

She watched for some time, but it did not return. Her eyes grew heavy watching for it. It might drop down upon her, a heavy length of bristling legs, but that was unlikely. It might be an omen, its coming. There were no gods, but there might be a world of spirits, some restless and unfulfilled, troubled, in need of contact with the still imprisoned souls of the embodied. Animals and insects could sense their nearness. She closed her eyes, and immediately sleep crept near. She resisted--so many dreams recently--but soon it took her down in steep shelves.

In a dream she stood before a mirror in her bedroom, an unfamiliar bedroom, but one that her mind told her was that of her childhood home. It was too dark to see herself, so she leaned closer to the mirror. Then the light from the bureau lamp blazed up suddenly, hurting her eyes. There was someone in the room and he was speaking to her. He had a flashlight. "Are you all right, Miss?"

A police officer had come for her. She sensed the blue flickering lights of a parked patrol car just outside the window behind her. She shaded her own eyes further. With the long flashlight averted, she could make out the black eyes of the officer she'd seen so often hidden and watching from the chaparral. His uniform was strange, more like that of a soldier than a policeman. He'd come because she'd struck an animal in the road--a strange thing, half rabbit, half opossum--and left it there to die.

She could sense it laid out, bleeding, across the back seat of the patrol car. She could feel its terrible, deep hurt that she had left it behind, curled and broken in the road. She could feel its loneliness, its confusion at struggling for consciousness

in strange, cold surroundings.

She was led from the house to the patrol car. The officer marched behind her, one hand firmly on her elbow. Ahead, she could see the fork in the dark path that would lead to the car. Then the car was ahead. She stepped quickly on her bare feet, the sharp grit cutting into her soles. The car stood in the moonlight, soft and rounded, a strange molten design. With her breaths coming more quickly, she stepped up to it, and with a moan found it locked. Pathetically, she yanked at the solid handles of the doors. Panting with frustration, she moved around the car, peering into its coal black interior. Surely she was too late. Then, as she reached the back door one last time, the face of a child rose behind the glass.

Jane woke with a start. Hovering in the air before her, the face was still there. Without another thought, she rolled from the bed to the floor, startling Bliss, who lurched up and away from her with a soft whine.

The weeping came immediately, a gushing of easily flowing tears. "Emily." The soft moans that came up through her rode on waves of effortless grief. "You poor, poor thing," she whimpered as she made her way across the room on hands and knees. Before her, the tears fell onto the enameled planking and then onto the rug. Twice, she stopped and came erect on her knees. The mirror in the oaken armoire threw back a ghostly reflection of her.

The full, quiet sobbing made her double over, fall back once and then again onto her heels. "Emily, Emily," she whispered. The sadness was almost exquisite, almost a kind of dispersed energy sent out to warm the dead. "Be happy, be happy, please." It had never been so easy to weep, so extremely simple and correct. At the same time, there was a delicious selfishness to her grief, for it was, she knew, a disguised grieving for herself, a creature affixed to a body that rejected life.

Now Bliss, recovering from her strange awakening, sidled up to her with whining little gasps. By the window, with the sliced moon in view above the pure, perfect emptiness of the world, Jane collapsed beneath the sill and dragged the dog into her arms. Under her fingers, tufts of its fur dampened where her cheeks pressed. In the quiet, so many memories were crowding into her mind. She breathed more and more deeply, and let them come.

Thirteen
The dead eyes.

Charlotte said, "You can have your pick of these," and spread the barrettes one by one across the bedspread. Jane knelt on the rug and leaned onto the narrow bed with her chin on her fist. She gazed down at the parti-colored display, and then let her eyes peek down the top of Charlotte's babydoll nightie as her sister leaned forward.

"I'll never have breasts," she whined. Already her interest in the barrettes was fading. Kid's stuff, an older sister's castoffs.

"Yes, you will."

"Hips, that's what I have. I'm going to be pear-shaped, like Sissy."

"No, you're not. It's happening with you the exact same way as it happened with me. And you're going to be taller too."

She smiled at Charl, helpless to hide her pleasure while a bit flushed to be caught at feeling so hopeful at the news. "Will I be prettier than you too?"

"Yep." Charlotte had never stopped spreading the barrettes, and in fact was now adding hairbands, even the one that Aunt Stell had brought back from Paris, wound with a band of red lace.

"No, Charl, Stell'll be hurt."

"Say you borrowed it. If she even remembers."

"Okay."

Her father thought she was pretty. She'd catch him looking at her, as if at the tail end of a stare, never one of long duration--at least, not the ones she detected. His eyes would fix on her, and at the moment he seemed to become aware of how he was looking she might catch his eye. He'd make a little smile at her and maybe raise his brows a little. But those small smiles were not the kind of smile that could be shared, as if *she* had been staring at *him* and he had caught her at it and expressed by that smile that it was all right that she had been staring. Sara had once told her to just ignore him, that he wasn't a happy man. Her exact words, and shocking to Jane

when she'd first heard them applied to her own father.

Jane slipped on the Paris hairband for a moment, felt her hair lifting from her ears. When older girls got married, they stopped wearing these things; they had their hair cut and styled, and they had babies. Two years before, she'd overheard her Aunt Stell talking about her looks, just outside a screened window. She could see down where her mother and Stell sat facing the yard, two tumblers of iced tea on the little iron table between them. She heard Stell say, "Jane Marie's a little rose. Sara's tall and handsome all right, but Charlotte's got those glamour girl looks. Jane's got something special, though. She's fresh as a rose, that girl."

"A rose all right, with thorns," her mother had replied.

"That's growing up, Edie. She's prickly, but she's just finding her way."

"Just had her first period."

"Well now. A lady at last."

"It's sort of gone to her head, if you ask me."

"Let her grow a little, Edie."

"Lording herself, that's what I call it."

Charlotte sighed and leaned back against the headboard. "I love the house when it's like this. Quiet finally, thank God, and we can be alone and just talk."

"I know. It's great." Jane was flattered that Charlotte liked to spend quiet time with her. "How long before they get back, do you think?"

Charlotte shrugged, her eyes closed now. "Let's see. Sara running into friends, thirty minutes. Sissy bitching, that'll add an hour at least. Andy getting lost...."

Jane giggled, and then quieted. The references to sibling trouble made her cock an ear to the hallway; Baby was sleeping at the far end, in her cradle in Mom and Dad's room. Sissy and Sara slept in a double bed in an alcove off the kitchen. David and Andy had beds in the basement, though some mornings Andy would be found sleeping in the laundry pile because David snored. For several months now, Charlotte and Jane had managed to hold onto the only real bedroom besides their parents'. Soon, though, Baby would need to come out of their parents' room, and then Dad would push in a cot or find a castoff double bed and make them triple up.

It better not be Sissy in here with them.

It was always terrible with Sissy. The very worst night had been when they'd gotten drunk together, the first time for both of them, an isolated moment of chumminess, the two of them with the whole place to themselves, just as Charlotte and she had it now. It was supposed to be a fun sisterly time, but Sissy had lost control again, wanted everything all at once and so badly that she'd rushed their drinking, mixing in strange liqueurs, and ended up vomiting in huge splashing gouts onto the kitchen floor. Later, wrapped on the couch, her stomach momentarily calmed, her hair matted with sweat, she'd stared out of her puffy face at Jane from across the room and scowled.

"There you sit, little sister with hair combed and cheeks all pink. Me, big sister, stinking of puke."

She, Jane, had said nothing, just stared at this other stranger from her family.

"It would have been nice if I'd gotten at least *one* of their good qualities. But no, I get Dad's dark skin and his thick legs, and Mom's big teeth."

It must have been apparent from the way she looked back at Sissy, how pitiful Jane felt her then, how truly un-pretty and pathetic. Enraged, her sister had sprung to her feet, startling her, and then shrieked, "I wish you'd shrivel up and die!" Then she'd run off, and her sobbing in the next room was too deep to be anything but authentic.

"Let's dance!" Jane cried at Charlotte.

"Okay. Here, help me push the bed back."

They scrambled to line themselves on one side, and then together they slid Charlotte's bed against Jane's. The barrettes still lay displayed across the spread. Did girls who could have babies still wear barrettes?

"Close the door, or we'll wake Baby," said Charlotte. "No, wait, I'll check her first."

Charlotte dashed out the bedroom door, and Jane started to piece through the records...The Cars, Boston, Michael Jackson. She shucked out The Cars album, laid it on the pop-out turntable, and put the needle to *You're Just What I Needed*. She almost put on *Drive* but changed her mind because Charlotte would know that she

wanted to slow dance with her. She put it aside for later; Charlotte would understand. Charlotte never thought anything bad about her, always understood. The realization made her grateful. How she loved Charlotte, so good, so sweet. She promised herself she'd be a great veterinarian someday, just like she planned, because she wanted her sister to be proud of her.

Charlotte was back in the room. "Baby's out like a light. I closed their door and we'll close this one so we can crank it up."

Her sister was already dancing in place beside her. Jane switched on the phonograph. When the first cracking drum beats came on, she and Charlotte squealed and leaped to release a blast of held-back excitement, and then settled into showing off for each other. Charlotte knew more steps, because she was older, but Jane was a quick study, and innovative. "You have your own style, Jane," someone had told her at one of their school's silly all-girl dances. She did possess a passable moon walk, that could not be denied.

When the synthesizer chords of *Drive* first welled, Charlotte threw back her head and laid a limp wrist across her chest, and then sailed into Jane's arms. Charl was older, so she got to lead, but Jane had to admit that she really knew how two bodies were supposed to work together. If it was fun with Charlotte, what must it be like with a boy? She had been to only two junior high mixers, and Sister Labouré didn't allow slow dancing with boys yet. She had a year to go, unless she could crash one of Charlotte's friend's parties. Billy Shea had done some kind of throwback swing dance with her, but that wasn't anything like some of the slow clinches she'd seen.

"Turn out the light!" Charlotte commanded. "I'll check Baby again. Pick out more records."

"How about the same ones?"

"No! Well, some of them. I want to hear..."

She didn't hear the request because Charl had dropped her voice in the hallway. Jane reached for the lamp beneath the window and for some reason looked up and out into the yard.

She'd sucked in her breath and reeled back a step, the light going dark as her

hand jerked on the short chain. Suspended there in space, out in the dark yard, scrimmed to faintness by the screen, was a head, just a head, like something in a horror movie, the expression blank, drained of vitality, of interest in living. The dead eyes, staring at nothing, like a head in a jar.

When Charlotte came back, she found Jane sitting on the rug in the half-dark. "Jane, what in the world are you doing?"

She couldn't speak. The window was open. He would hear what she said, could see them both now, couldn't he? She had to say something, but her open mouth stayed silent.

"Jane?"

"Shh! He's out there."

"Who is! Jane, what's the matter?" Charlotte had dropped down beside her.

"Dad's out there."

"He is? Are they back?"

"They must be. I didn't hear the car, though."

The two of them held their breaths. There were no other sounds outside. Surely Andy would be dashing in, or Sissy whining about something or other, or her mother calling to some child or other to do something or leave off doing it. But there were no sounds at all.

"He must not have gone with them," said Jane.

"Well, what...."

Instinctively, they had both crouched beneath the sill. Now Charlotte slowly raised her head to the sill and peered out.

"Is he there?" Jane asked.

"Yes."

"Well, what's he *doing*?"

"It's weird. He's just standing out there."

Jane had not wished to look again. Her father's eyes were so often strange to encounter. At times, his gaze seemed to penetrate her, like a burrowing seed. For a long time after his face had turned away, a darkness would grow and spread within her. But now her curiosity overcame her sense of dread. She raised her head too

and peered out the window. She could see him out there, standing in the center of the lawn, now with his back to the house. He was looking neither up nor down, just standing and looking at the dark horizon, his arms hanging from his sides as if there were no strength in them.

The sisters watched him for a long time, neither of them speaking. Finally, Jane whispered, "What's he *doing* out there?"

Charlotte didn't answer her. In fact, her sister's continued silence began to spook her. Jane yanked on her arm angrily to make her speak.

Charlotte's eyes, furrowed, came around to hers. "What?"

"Answer me?"

"Answer what? I don't know what he's doing any more than you do."

"Come on, Charlotte. You're older and I'm scared. Look at him out there. Why didn't he go with them?"

Charlotte slid down and turned her back to the wall. "I don't know. Stop pestering, Jane."

Jane ducked her head. "Well, it's terrible. He looks awful."

"He *always* looks awful."

Helpless to resist, Jane lifted her head to peer out again. He was still there, just standing there as if nailed to an invisible post. Suddenly, she felt an almost unbearable pang of pity for him, a sharply cutting sense of his utter helplessness that moved down through her body like a metal rod. She should run to him, she thought, draw him from his solitary vigil in the night, and bring him into the house that their dancing and laughing had briefly made bright and gay. But the reality of her own helplessness weighed on her. When at last her father began to turn slowly around, she failed him terribly by only ducking down and huddling with Charlotte beneath the sill. And in a cruel way, it was almost fun.

As if she were miles away, Charlotte began to whisper. "Once, when he was twelve, he woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't breathe. He almost died."

"Charl, don't lie."

"Stell told me. Grandpa used to beat him all the time. She told me to be understanding. We have to be understanding, Jane."

"How?"

"I'm not sure."

Now they could just hear retreating steps, slow careful footfalls on the gravel under the downspout at the front porch's nearest corner, and then the scuff of soles on cement. He was walking back to the carport, or to the back door. Breathlessly, they waited, as if he were coming to beat them, as he had been, though he'd hardly ever laid a hand on either of them. They reached with their hearing for the sound of his coming. They heard Foxy's high-pitched whine of pleasure from his wide wicker bed on the back porch. "He's petting Foxy," Charlotte whispered. Jane could picture the old dog lifting the front half of its body painfully to receive her father's cherished pats. Then, the back door creaking and footsteps crossing the kitchen. It was her father coming, Jane knew, but still a deep fear, unaccountable and strange, grew with every approaching step. A man was coming whom she loved but did not know. Her and Charlotte's eyes were glued to the foot-wide space of the open door. And then he was there, a backlit shape, peering in.

Their father spoke. "What's going on in there?"

Charlotte got to her feet with a strange laugh and stepped to the lamp.

"Nothing, Dad."

"Having a little party?"

The lamp came on, throwing a good deal of light about. Now Jane got to her feet too. She could not look at her father yet. She sensed that the door had been elbowed open wider. He was standing there, rooted, in the hallway. His voice did not sound mean, just labored, breaths groping to make sound.

"Jane, you sick or something?"

She looked to the window. If she met his eyes, she would be forced to drop her gaze at once. If he saw her eyes drop, he would know that it was because of shame for him.

"Jane? You gone mute or something?"

With a strength that surprised her, she turned and raised her eyes and even forced a lopsided smile. "Nothing's wrong, Dad."

His arms were black to the elbows. Black as if he were wearing women's

evening gloves, except that light glistened at points on his knuckles. His shoulders, bare in the grayed sleeveless T-shirt, seemed oiled like some men's in the movies. He was small, smaller than she had ever noticed before.

"Did you think you might wake Baby?"

"We were careful, Dad," said Charlotte.

But already he'd turned in the doorway, as if on a pivot, and then moved off. Presently, she and Charlotte, still standing side by side, could hear the heavy sluicing sounds of the fully opened taps in the bathroom. He would be in there, running handfuls of jellied kerosene gradually up his arms until patches of the heavy grease softened into gray sludge and then melted and flushed away. When they used the bathroom later, there would not be a trace of grime on the sink; it would gleam from the scouring he'd given it. The air would be redolent, however, with the solvent's odor.

Jane felt Charlotte's arm snake across her shoulders, and then her whole head was pulled to her sister's shoulder. "Boo-hoo," Charlotte whispered. "Our beautiful party is over."

Now, more than thirty years after the close of that strange evening, Jane roused herself from the floor beneath the window of her rented room in Midge's house. She was chilled, and her left side ached from holding a strange posture. Bliss had slipped off. With a sigh, she rose and went to her bed. There, she lay in the dark and fastened on the fact that it was very late Sunday night and Bobby still hadn't called back after he'd left that strangely urgent message. It had been more the tone of his message than its content that chilled her: "I totally screwed up. Call me when you can, Mom." Of course she'd called, as soon as she noticed the message, but it had gone directly to his voicemail. Could she call again now? She checked the time and added two hours for the time difference and decided that he must be asleep by now and that perhaps sleep was the best thing for him at the moment.

All around her, the windows of Midge's house had filled with light. Outside, one of those gorgeous full desert moons would be floating across pure clear space, like a prop hung on wires. Jane huddled in her blankets, suddenly cold to the bone. She'd sat too long beneath that window. A few moments later, she fell asleep at last.

She dreamed that she was approaching a farmhouse, her feet in boots, purposefully stepping through the snow as if seized with a mission. Somewhere on the farm were the skeletal remains of the former owner, and she had staked some sort of reputation--as an investigator, or politician--on finding them. But the farm had been officially sealed off. Determined, she approached the fence around the distant configuration of buildings, a white farmhouse and small barn among sheds and silo. To get through the fence, she had to break through a windowpane that had been strung into the fence wire. She batted the panes with a stick until the glass shattered noisily. She could see people walking about on the snowy land, but no one seemed to notice that she had broken the window and had now entered the property by stepping through the shattered frame onto snow littered with glass shards.

She headed up the hill toward the farmhouse, ignoring the wail of a siren that she had evidently triggered. Firemen appeared, volunteer farm hands toting ladders and buckets, because somehow the alarm had started a fire. She perused the farmhouse rooms innocently, as if she'd had nothing to do with the emergency that the others calmly strove to address. The rooms were bare, the windows glassless, the doorjambs empty of doors. The house was a hollow box open to the cold outside elements. Through the various empty jambs and casements, she saw figures coming and going, heedless.

She became aware that she had special knowledge, and armed with it she stepped from the porch and headed for the small barn, faded and red like a smudge of dried blood against the snow. She strode across the icy crust on her strong boots and continued to ignore the distant siren, the smell of smoke, a flash of flame near the farmhouse itself.

She had to lower her head to get through a low doorway cut into the larger carriage doors. In the weak light that pried through the slats, she saw among the dusty bins and shelves what she had instinctively been seeking, a long mantelpiece of cast iron coated with chipped white porcelain and for some reason fixed to a wall of gapped planks with no fireplace beneath. The mantle was covered with a steel lid. Carefully, she lifted the heavy lid on its hinge to reveal a long, foot-deep trough.

She discovered a row of little piles of what she quickly recognized as the personal effects of a long line of descendants, now all deceased. Each little pile was nearly identical, a shallow stack of letters, small note-sized sheets softened by moisture into lumps with ink bleeding through, and atop each stack a faded velvet pouch, which she understood held a rusted pocket watch. The stacks were set exactly a foot apart, and each velvet pouch was a different faded color--royal blue, forest green, scarlet....

She stared down the line of small, separate piles and then picked up the pouch nearest her. Within it she could feel the corrosive rust that would forever freeze the watch's operation. This last stack, she knew, were the effects of her father.

Something was dragging her from sleep. A wetness, nearly a kissing. She awoke to find Bliss's face batting hers.

"Oh, Bliss, Bliss girl," she moaned. Her eyelids were still as heavy as lead shot. The room was too bright for her usual workday waking time. Evidently, she'd slapped the snooze bar on her alarm clock and probably more than once. She had to get up, to shower. Bliss bounded off, and then stopped and turned, a feigned departure meant perhaps to lead Jane to an empty food bowl. But Jane still could not rise. She continued to lie, breathing evenly. She was aware of simple, intense sensations within her. She could recognize the familiar bite of guilt, the pungency of fear--but these emotions, normally so prone to produce pure anxiety, were suffusing with a deeper, stronger sense of something else, something akin to joy.

She threw back the covers. Naked within her flannel nightshirt, she rolled about in the dim light, attentive to a pleasurable looseness in her limbs. She lay flat on the mattress, as if floating on a plastic mat in a pool, and let the feelings float through her as she breathed deeply. She could feel the attentive pin-prick of each nerve's registering, the sparks that leapt from synapse to synapse, or streamed in charged particles through the axon tubes that looped endlessly through her body. From her heart she felt a power like fire cutting through metal. The sensations flowed up and out of her, from the center of her body, out along her arms and legs and out through her fingertips into the universe.

She rose, finally, and pulled on her robe and heavy slippers against the cold early spring morning and then slipped down the hallway to where Bliss waited beside her bowl. She scooped out a meal's worth of hard nuggets from the bag under the sink, waited for a few minutes to ruffle Bliss's fur, and then stole off to listen at Midge's door. Midge was still asleep, no surprise; she had probably been at the firings until very late. Jane stood in the hallway, her fists gripping her robe, and willed Midge awake so that she could tell her the dream. When there was still no sound of stirring after several minutes, she hurried away to shower quickly. Later, she couldn't stop herself from tromping loudly through the hallway as she went to dress.

Ten minutes later, Midge trudged out into the kitchen, her nightshirt rumpled and her face puffy and creased, where Jane was now making coffee. "You're so noisy this morning," she whined.

"Hey, listen to my dream."

"Not me. I'm just up to pee."

"Oh, please...."

Midge did stay on after she returned from the bathroom. Jane described the dream, between bites of toast, while Midge sat hunched and sleepy across the table from her. Near the end, Jane exclaimed, "Oh, I remember one more thing. After I left the barn, I found that the scene by the house had really changed. There were lots of volunteer firemen about, and I had to act very innocently to escape getting blamed for the fire. When I headed back toward the fence, I had to pass a few women in simple dresses--you know, calico, gingham--everything's so clear!--and all of them were holding long thin logs, like clubs. They raised these clubs as if they were planning to hit me, but I could just walk past them without trouble. That was just before Bliss woke me up."

Midge had been listening closely, one hand rubbing through her hair as she let her head hang over the table. "The people in the dream are judging you. They're trying to hold you responsible."

"For what?"

Some time passed before Midge answered. "For the dead men."

"What?" Jane held a wedge of toast aloft. A flicker of fear cut through her like a distant flash of lightning. "What do you mean? Like I killed all those men?"

"Figuratively."

Midge's eyes came up. Poor soul, her eyes so red, but Jane couldn't leave off. When would she stop imposing her damaged self on people? When would she be able to give something back?

"But it's a bum rap," said Midge. "The blamers are parts of yourself, of course, that's how it works. Anyway, you're fighting the blame and that's good. The men in the dream couldn't communicate, or express themselves, and those are the piles of blurry letters. It's their deepest selves, unreadable to anyone else." Midge rubbed her forehead, hard, with the heel of one hand. "The watches are hearts, stopped hearts."

"Christ, you're good at this," Jane breathed. "I feel...God, I feel like air! I think this was an important dream for me." So why now did she feel more foreboding than relief? She returned to munching on her toast, hard and tasteless now. "Want some breakfast?" She reached out with both hands and grabbed one of Midge's arms and shook it. "Oh, you're so sweet to do this, Midge. I'm keeping you up. Let me fix you breakfast."

Midge waved her free hand weakly at her. "Your family is the farmhouse, the empty nest. You went back to it to prove the existence of a corpse--and then all that business about starting a fire and the clubs, that's all guilt."

"Where does it all come from?"

"I'm not sure. I guess we always feel guilty for the sins of our parents. This is an important dream, Jane, you're right--because it might be your first attempt to defend yourself against yourself. Know what I mean?" She leaned back slowly to stretch and yawn. "The important thing is that you went to find your father's bones but you didn't find them. No body, no crime. You're innocent, and that's why you could pass beneath the clubs. Oh, and fires can be purifying too."

Already Jane was nodding. She let her hands flop into her lap. A deep breath surprised her, in then out in a long release. Those dead eyes at the window, their strange power was fading. They were retreating into the face and the face was re-

treating into the past. When she locked her arms across her middle the flesh of her forearms felt like fine paper, soft and pliant fibers spun into a shell filled with the purest air. If a spark were to fall onto her sleeve, a flame would spring up and envelop her and she would burn down to a pile of fine ash.

Fourteen

Farther and farther out of reach.

On Monday on the road to Storrs, the sky came down around the Solara like a screen woven from fleecy gray remnants of the passing season. The sun, still consigned to its winter arch, glowered in these shrouds. Victor tried to think of Jane, but memories of Janice Patrice, of their lurid couplings, kept pressing in. During one of the full nights they'd spent together, during a book fair in New York City, he awakened in the middle of the night to discover her bare hips beside his face. The dark, mossed mound of her sex had simply appeared before his eyes, like a gift. An indelible memory--and a terrible distraction.

He had been unwillingly prompted to recall these memories by the surprise phone call he'd gotten from Jane the night before. The phone had rung and he saw with acute surprise her name displayed on the screen.

"You're calling me, using your phone."

"We need to be in touch," she explained, flatly. "Bobby's gotten sort of smacked around by that landlord he was working for. Or trying to work for."

"Really? Gosh, well... Hey, how *are* you?"

"Fine. Doing okay. But you need to get in touch with Bobby. He's been double-crossed by this jerk and he's taking it very hard."

"What in the world happened? Is he getting evicted?"

"No, nothing like that." She explained about the sales pitch Bobby had made and that the landlord had politely declined to hire him, which was no big deal in itself, but then Bobby found out by accident that the man had stolen all his ideas and was using them to vet prospective tenants.

"Ah, the poor kid," said Victor.

"It's plunged him into some kind of funk. I've told him to let the jerk marinate in his own evil juices, but I think we need both of us talking sense to him. Can you get out there and take him to dinner or something?"

“Absolutely. Are you coming out?”

“I offered to, but he insists that I not spend the money. But I think it would be good for one of us to sit down with him, face to face.”

“Absolutely.”

“That would be great, Vic.”

He couldn't help but exploit her gentler tone by asking, “So, does this mean I can call you now?”

Silence. He heard her sigh. “I thought about using someone else's phone and all that, but I think we should stay in touch on this one. But only for things like this. It's still important to me that I work in a kind of vacuum for a while.”

He bristled. “Jane, for God's sake, let's call a spade a spade here. I did some extramarital nonsense, I think we both know that, but Christ you have to know it's just...plumbing or something. It's not anything meaningful, or deep down. Can't we, I don't know, start again, reboot...” He stopped because he hated the way he was sounding.

Silence again. “There was a time when it might have done some good to talk about all this, but that time passed.”

“Wait a minute, don't you think you're being a little bit unfair here? I mean, is it really such a big deal?”

She made a sound as if she'd been jabbed in the ribs. “To make it a near-permanent state of mind that I have to compare myself to other women? To their tits and their asses, their unlined faces? Yes, it's a big deal, a *very* big deal.”

Her words hit him with force. His mouth was open, but only a mild sort of gasp escaped him. He did have the presence of mind to consider not escalating the debate. “Okay, okay, I get that.” he said. “And I would be very happy to completely apologize.”

“Apologize away. But right now I have to work on some more important things. Please give me a call after you see Bobby, okay?”

And that had been that. But, had there ever been a more harrowing discovery that there were “more important things” to work on than preserving their marital status? To be dropped to such a markedly lower level of priority in Jane

Verdianne's life was just about the most sobering prospect he could imagine. And how was it that this fact would be so surprising to him?

He tried to not think about his wife as he drove to see about their troubled son, but then he passed a miniature golf links and remembered an incident from many years ago, which starred Jane as the free spirit she could sometimes be. He couldn't recall all the facts, but he did recall that they had all been coming back from some outing on Route 1 the day before and seen that the place was still open so late in the season. Arlen was the one who'd spotted it, and he cried out in that gleeful way he sometimes did when he was taken completely by surprise. They swore they'd come back the next day, and Jane wouldn't let them forget that. They grumbled and shuffled around, but she forced them all into their big coats and hats and they kept grumbling all the way out there. But she was right, Jane was. It had been so much fun! At the eighteenth hole, the boys clamored for another round, and got it.

High eighteen-wheel trucks sailed by on either side while he kept the Avalon on cruise control. He remembered how she just kept rolling over all of their protests about it being too cold out to go. He conjured the image of her flushed face at the breakfast table, cajoling them. She could be so powerful. There was no one, really no one else like her. They had been practically the only ones out there at the miniature golf links. They had to putt with their gloves on. The owner kept grinning out at them from his little hut, from behind the dirty glass. He was so happy. He said, "I keep going till Veterans' Day, cold or snow, no matter what!" The boys were delighted to have a mother who stayed so young.

There was a true Jane and a make-do Jane, something she had gotten together to get through life. It was the true Jane who had run after the kids who were beating on Arlen in the school playground, and the same Jane who'd pinned back the ears of the patronizing assistant principal, threatened lawyers and press contact and then, while he, Victor, was trying to calm the waters, made good on both threats. Within forty-eight hours, the playground's gang of cruising bullies had been collared and dispersed. He had a few more quick, riveting insights before the Storrs exit rolled up on him. That the Jane he loved most, the Jane of the Miniature Golf, the

Jane of the Assistant Principal's Pinned-Back Ears, had a soul that peeked out from behind layers of scarring. That all people were like this, that it took patience, lots of it, and love, much more than he'd ever imagined, to draw that peeking into a full, trusting stepping-forth. That every time he'd had sex with another woman, even in his imagination, he'd allowed vital strength to be siphoned that he'd needed to coax Jane's soul out into the warm light where it could heal.

But if it was the true Jane who eventually came back, would she want him? Would he want her?

Managing the exit, a sharp one with a decreasing radius curve, provided a welcome break from his thinking. The voice of the car's GPS, which for some reason spoke with a British accent, rapidly directed him to Sims' apartment. It was just a little studio not far off 84--probably a condo that hadn't sold and been relegated to student housing until the market picked up again. He found the development easily, surveyed the deterioration of its original fast-buck landscaping, parked, trotted out in case his son was watching from some window or other. The door with the right number sprung open as if Bobby had been indeed been watching. Victor stared at him. The boy was paler, more bent, thinner than his usual thin self. Whole pounds were missing from him. His smile was half a self-conscious stare, incongruous and unsettling to Victor rather than reassuring.

"Hi, Pop!" he said with eerie heartiness. "I'm glad we got back before you." They hugged briefly, and Victor felt hard ribs through the leather of his gloves. He stepped in and passed the boy. He didn't want to look at him again just yet. His son said at his back, "Sims had a class, and then we got some lunch. You hungry?"

Victor slowly removed his coat. "No, I ate just before I left home."

"Where's your bag?"

Victor turned in the short hallway that barely separated a kitchenette from a single large room. "In the car. Listen, Bobby, how are you? Looks like you've been off your feed?"

"Definitely. Got one of those enormous Hong Kong flus or something about two minutes after Borgasian socked it to me. Sims says it's all stress."

Victor nodded, gravitously, as if the truth imparted by his son's statements

required deep thought. He took in Bobby again, more directly now that he'd stated his concern out loud. The boy's uncombed hair betrayed an uncharacteristic letting down. His button-down shirt was rumpled, though neatly tucked into slacks, but the belt seemed too tightly cinched to be comfortable.

Victor headed into the single large studio room. Bobby followed aimlessly, as if he were the guest. Someone had skillfully arranged the furnishings, Victor sensed, because he was drawn to a loveseat that commanded one corner, angled to confront a coffee table and TV and a recycled recliner. The loveseat segregated this small area from a closed sofa bed with an edge of purple comforter sticking out of one end. Victor heard a noise behind what had to be the bathroom door, and guessing further that Bobby and he might soon be joined by Sims, he took the recliner to leave them the loveseat.

Bobby started to speak before he had settled himself. "I feel really stupid getting you all the way down here. The big thing is that I've got six course credits tied to this guy. If he doesn't sign off on the independent studies, then I don't get the credits. I mean, I could lose the scholarship. I gave him *so much leverage*."

Victor listened to his son, but he became very distracted by the tiny sounds of primping in the bathroom, just two yards away.

"How did you get so many independent studies in your first year? Don't you have basic requirements to get out of the way?"

Bobby shrugged. "There's a lot of latitude for business majors now. I mean, if you can prove it's entrepreneurial, they let you go for it. And I challenged the math, remember, by passing a test?"

Victor heard the gentle clatter of plastic against porcelain in the bathroom, then the squeak of a cabinet door. Sadly, he monitored the curiosity rising within him about the young woman on the other side of that door, plain curious about face and body. He said to Bobby, "So, can't you just cut your losses and get him to sign and kiss his fat ass goodbye?"

Bobby laughed. Just as quickly, he scratched his head and looked down at the coffee table. "He thinks that if he signs for the credits that that'll be admitting that he's stolen my materials. He doesn't want any kind of trail leading back to him."

"And he says this stuff, like, right out loud to you?"

Bobby put a hand to his brow and pulled his hair back. "Sure, I mean, he's scary honest. Thanks for the stuff, kid, I'm not going to pay you for it and I'm not going to sign anything, but you sure have a great future ahead of you."

A shout came from behind the bathroom door. "He had all the cards!"

Victor looked to the bathroom door, which now came halfway open. A face appeared in the gap, a smile that piled shallow dimples to either cheek, one short plait of reddish brown hair. "Sorry. Nice to meet you. Be right out." And then the door closed.

Bobby said, "The guy's a genius, Pop."

Victor looked back from the bathroom door. "A genius? Maybe a good predatory instinct, but no genius."

Victor rose and went over to the couch. As smoothly as he could manage, he sat down beside Bobby and roughly rubbed the boy's scalp, then looped his arm around his head and pulled it to him. "You're the genius. He's just a clever thief." Bobby let out a deep breath. Then, the door opened and Sims came out and headed immediately for the recliner, in effect trapping father and son on the loveseat.

Victor began to rise, but already the young woman was waving him down. "No, stay there. Hello again. I'm Sims, as you might have guessed."

He waved back, but felt the shock rising in his own face to discover the instant effect of her sylph-like beauty. In the next instant, she had slung her short body sideways across the recliner, the far arm of the chair pressing up her bare legs in shorts. Her feet too were bare. Her skin was smooth, with a russet burnish, the thighs compact. The room was very warm; evidently, the heat was kept turned up so that she could lounge around in shorts and T-shirts.

Instinctively, Victor now knew that he'd have to escape from the apartment if he really hoped to speak with his son. He didn't feel the strength to fight back the little spasms that gripped his belly. Circumstances had laid out Sims like a delightful confection before him, skewering everything. He fought to keep on the topic, but his mind wandered through imagined sensations of her female flesh that were so powerful as to approach the tactile. His palms positively tingled with the prospect

of the young woman's rounded knees cradled one in each. Meanwhile, he writhed with self-loathing that his own brain couldn't manage such basic impulses. Did Jane's body stop moving him this way simply because it was available, or familiar, or older? There didn't seem to be a reason that was not despicable. Now, as he spoke, his own breath worked against speech. When he looked to Bobby, watching for words and planning his response, he marveled instead at strange scenarios that played out for him his own desperate state, the level of which had never occurred to him so accurately as he now felt it did. A thought rocketed into the future, a quick fantasy that even with him and Jane back together, a chance meeting with the right sort of lonely young thing and he knew, absolutely knew, that he'd topple back into adultery. Getting promoted had taken him off the road, winnowing his opportunities, but there were still plenty of available women around the office. As he groped back into the conversation, he had to contend with a series of sharp jealous pangs that Bobby got to fondle lovely Sims.

The process of making serious conversation failed to distract Victor, as he might have hoped. In fact, secretly within him, matters reached the proportions of panic. With each word from Sims, who by then was leveling shrewd observations and lawyerly counsel with a fluty voice whose quality seemed designed to humiliate him with its effortless attractiveness, he had to look up and attempt to direct his gaze away from the deep, heart-stopping arches of her soft, pale feet. One last time he batted from his mind the manufactured image of the soft wedge crisped with russet-colored curls that surely nestled just out of sight beneath the snug crotch of her shorts, then sighed and rose. His heart was pounding obscenely.

"Let's take a ride, Bobby. I want to talk family business. Sims will forgive us, I hope."

The maneuver might do the trick. From the quick rise of Sims' brows he could see that nothing but neutral surprise had registered there. She had quickly acknowledged the rectitude of privacy surrounding father and son. Together, they quelled Bobby's protests with a few words.

In the car, Victor wove his grimaces of real shame into the conversation, played them off as expressions of concern and concentration. Dimly, he recognized

a slight improvement over past episodes of dissembling; at least he'd grown to the point that he could be worried that he was talking about his son's problems while secretly imagining what it would like to screw his girlfriend. In fact, self-disgust as thick as phlegm seemed to press against his glottis, again making it literally hard to speak. It was probably just as well; he might burst into confession, talk rot. He might admit to jealousy of his own son, of anyone with a different woman, any kind of different woman, from the one he had at the moment--which happened to be no woman at all. He tried to blame this attack of pathetic desire on his recent celibacy, but he suspected--and let's be honest--his problem lay much deeper than that.

"She's been an unbelievable help to me, Dad. She's got a brain you wouldn't believe."

"Hold onto to her. Tell her everything you're feeling." He was almost shouting, but Bobby's head was nodding emphatically at the windshield.

"Definitely."

Victor started talking plans, using the neat logic of them to focus on the topics at hand. He said aloud, "I think you should cut your losses and steer completely clear of Borgasian."

Bobby sighed quickly, "No, I've got to sue him. Everyone says that, Sims says..."

"I understand the reasoning, I do, but we're talking about a completely toxic situation that will require time and money and lots of mental energy."

Victor had only to keep speaking to force the focusing, and he might eventually say something of use. He knew something about the Borgasians of the world from his own business dealings. "Eat crow, if you have to. And think about this, my smart young son: It's no shame to lose to the unscrupulous. He's a piranha, true to his species. Learn all you can from this so you can really know the enemy."

Bobby stared at the dashboard. "The credits..."

"Go to your professors, your counselors, or whomever you need to talk to. Ask for their help. They'll give it, it's what they like doing."

Bobby stared on. "They'll bring up no non-disclosure agreement, leaving the laptop with him.... I'll look like an idiot."

"You will and you were. And believe me, they will feel very useful, and grateful for the opportunity to point it out."

Bobby snickered. "Glad to help."

"And really, who cares? Does Sims think you're an idiot?"

Bobby snickered again. "Sometimes."

"But not always? Well, I'd hold onto her then."

Victor was surprised to discover that he might actually know the caste of the boy's mind, what that tipping of his dark head meant. It was good that he himself fought back deeply enough into the moment to recognize important signs. Genuine intimacy took concentration, and continually applied if that intimacy were to reach habit strength. He made a mental note of this insight, pressing back the depressing suspicion that he he'd soon forget it.

The afternoon settled around beers at a glitzy lounge, two pints apiece so early in the day, but both father and son ordered watery Lites. They sat in a booth near the corner, though the place was nearly empty.

Bobby fell silent after they'd talked the Borgasian catastrophe through and, surprise surprise!, he seemed very relieved to agree with his father's advice. Then Bobby took a breath and said, "Arlen and I talked a couple of days ago. Dad, this Mom thing. I know you keep saying no, but tell me the truth. Are you guys splitting up? It would be really stupid not to tell us."

Victor shook his head. "I'd tell you, I swear. We're not breaking up, not that I know of anyway. That wasn't the plan. But I think sometimes that I missed some kind of important opportunity back when we were first talking about it." He sighed, felt his eyes drop from Bobby's. It was so unfair when one's words began to route themselves along tried but untrue lines. He couldn't fully admit just how far back the trouble began; he couldn't summon the courage. He'd look like an idiot.

He could sense his son's confusion, but he was helpless not to go on. "I think it was a mistake to let her go off like that. I shouldn't have done it." But he'd been relieved at times too. It exhausted one to be with someone day in, day out who never really progressed with their issues. It was so humiliating to be kissing a woman, pushing into her, with so little pleasure being taken on her side.

"Dad, did you have any choice? I mean, wasn't it her decision to make?"

Victor failed to hide a trace of a smirk. Sims must be one of the liberated types for Bobby to be spouting that kind of rhetoric. He thought for a moment. "The trip could have come *after* we'd gotten to the bottom of her need to take it. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I think so." Bobby seemed to be holding his breath.

Perhaps he felt that his father's mood for disclosure would pass quickly if he challenged too much.

Victor heard himself speaking on. "Your mom and I have problems, I know that now. She got scared, I think, when she saw you leaving for college. Then she'd have to be alone with me. I mean, with our stuff."

The way the boy shuffled his arms around for stable placement betrayed how hard he was trying to measure up to this sudden candidness. "Not like really bad stuff, was there, Dad?"

Victor smiled at the less than subtle prompting. He shook his head by millimeters. "You mean fights or insults or beatings?" His mind flew past "adultery," a valid entry for such a list. "God, no, there was nothing like that. But the problem might be more complex, Bobby. There's so much good between your mother and me, but I think it just stopped... developing."

"But what about the crying, and her mood changes? Arlen said that she'd been to shrinks. I mean, Dad, isn't there a kind of...mental trouble with Mom?"

Victor started to answer, but his thoughts remained unspoken. *Your mother reached out to me for something I was not prepared or willing to give. When my efforts flagged, when my attention drifted, when I started to listen to the pop drivel of our age, she gradually drifted back into herself, farther and farther out of my reach.*

He did his best to smile in a way that might be interpreted as wisely reflective and said, "I'm hoping that we're not victims, your mother and I, of some great social mistake. We came out of strange times, and I think we were set up by unrealistic expectations of our generation."

He waved a hand in his own face. *I didn't love her. I don't know how. And I still don't.*

Bobby sat with both hands around his half-empty glass. "Dad, is Mom like still attractive to you?"

It seemed important to keep smiling. Victor struggled to do so. "Yes, yes, more than ever. And by the way, that was a brave question to ask." Perhaps there was a way to be honest without mentioning the truth. He took a breath. "Recently, I've been feeling like a baffled sort of cultural product. I've been bred; maybe we all are, to play a certain kind of game, a game called Wanting Something You Don't Have. It's driven by the pleasures of acquisition." Bobby was listening with a tentative smile, and waiting. "Now that your mom's not here, she's placed herself in the category of the not-owned. The not-owned is always more pleasing, according to the capitalistic pleasure principle, than the owned. The owned is marred by reality; it loses its novelty, its newness. Up close, it's always incomplete, bent, or scratched, and eventually needs some kind of repair. It needs *maintenance*. That takes acceptance, and sympathy, and work."

Bobby said, "And the not-owned is all just fantasy. You can keep it perfect in your mind." He sighed. "I have to remember this."

Really? Victor hurried on. "Me too. My generation can't accept simple humanness. It's too imperfect."

Bobby's eyes came up. "You sound like you're mad at yourself, Pop. Mom's not easy to live with, I know that. I think you should give yourself credit for putting up with some of it."

Victor smiled ruefully. "Some women maybe you just can't heal."

"Maybe now you can get into teaching, right?"

The change of topic caught Victor by surprise. "I think it's a little late for a career change at this point." He shook his head. "I do wonder sometimes--I mean, where I'd be now if I didn't have to spend so much time taking care of your mother."

"But that's a kind of noble thing, taking care of someone."

"Yes, I suppose."

Victor blinked, felt his eyes narrow. The words they were speaking seemed strangely disembodied to his ear. They came into him as if received from the airwaves.

He shook his head, as if to cut off the mysterious transmission. "Look, Bobby, in the final analysis, break-ups is failures. I mean, okay, if you discover that your mate is poisoning the kids, and then yes get a divorce. But Bobby, who's so imperfect that we have to *chuck* them?"

Bobby laughed nervously into his glass, "Well, I wasn't saying like chuck Mom."

"Oh, I know, I know." He groped to escape from this surprising tangent.

Bobby was nodding, holding onto his mug handle. "This is great. This is really helpful." His head came up a little, but his eyes stayed on the glass. "You know something? I was having all these fantasies about storing cash to get a girl. Don't tell *anybody* I'm telling you this, okay? My plan was to like sock away a hundred grand, then make a move on some super desirable girl. She'd have to like love me or something because I had all these funds behind me. Then instead, when I was flat on my back, Sims stayed by me. Strange, huh?"

Victor shook his head. "Not strange, Bobby. Beautiful. I'm happy for you. She's got patience, and brains. She's smart enough to see your qualities, and the strength to wait for them to come through."

Bobby nodded quickly, and then his eyes came up. The brown eyes of his father. "So. You think I should actually, what? throw myself at the mercy of the administration?"

"What's the worst that could happen? They cut back on your scholarship for a term? I can foot some of the bills, and I'll bet you have some cash in the sock."

The boy shrugged. "Liquidity. Most of my cash is tied up in long-term CDs."

Victor laughed. "You're too much. CDs!"

Later, they went back for Sims, and Victor took the two of them out for an early dinner at a steak house and talked about Sims's mother's costly attempts to decorate her house into a state of fixed happiness, and then Victor, keeping to safe subjects, gave a detailed account of the rewarding hours he was putting into the new government project, hours very available to him because of his enforced bachelorhood. It wasn't difficult to make misery seem like a blessing if the audience was innocent enough.

He managed to keep his drinking to one Manhattan, not easy with so many anxious topics churning. While he talked and listened, he noted a nagging discomfort at the classy way Sims had dressed for the dinner, the fancy logo on her little handbag. He'd taken in the breadth and gleam of the TV back in her studio, the stack of pricey stereo components. There were certain things that she would not do without. Bobby would have his hands full, all right.

Over dessert, they skirmished about Victor's staying the night.

"No, I'm going to get back on the road. I can see you're all right, Bobby, so there's no need for me to be underfoot."

"Sims, tell Pop that you're disappointed that he's going to just head out like this." Bobby patted her arm awkwardly.

Sims cried out immediately, "I *am* disappointed!"

"I'll get you two up for a few days over the summer," Victor promised. He needed, badly, to be away from them. In truth, he felt like a form of pollution. His glibness, supported by greater experience but no greater wisdom, was darkening the air around the young pair in a way that only he could see. Besides, he was not up to sleeping in that open front room with enticing Sims padding about in a teddy.

Back on the road, the hypnotic whine of tires on asphalt lulled him back to his affair with Janice Patrice. It was strange how nothing would let him deny the thrilling savagery of their coupling, the glutted hours that exploded at the end of their cars' parallel journeys from the Gardner high school parking lot to her studio futon. His eyes nearly rolled closed at the memory of pushing into her and how, with innocent ferocity, she would press back. If he could only manage to regret that affair, but nothing could ever dampen the memory of that ardor. Not even when he concentrated on the darker self-misgivings that she began to share after she supposed their intimacies had deepened enough. She'd cried one night because she'd learned that the meaner kids had dubbed her domestic economics class "dumb ec," and the casual cruelty had wormed into her, made her feel alone, unfulfilled...unwanted. He knew why she was really crying, but he kept to the subject at hand. Perhaps if he concentrated more often on the quizzical looks from Nina Johnson as her suspicions had mounted, when according to his travel reports

and reimbursement vouchers he was spending too damned much time in Gardner, Massachusetts, for the number of orders netted.

When he reached the Massachusetts Turnpike and headed east, he had an impulse to pull off the highway and call Bobby. Suddenly words had easily come to mind.

Bobby, son, I was just driving along and I had a thought. Listen, kid, we can't have it all. We're bred to think we can, but we can't. It's not in the nature of existence. We blame the ones we love for our disappointment and it kills every good feeling among us. The trick is to celebrate what we have.

Then, a few miles later: *Actually, Bobby, what I meant to say is that the strange thing is that we can have it all. We just have to want the right all.*

When he'd hugged his son goodbye back there, had he remembered to tell him he loved him? He sighed with relief when he remembered that he had.

An hour later, back in his empty house, he sat on the couch with phone in hand. He had to call Jane now, that he knew, but he simply sat there in a state of arrest. Many minutes passed. It would have been easier to call if he had not just then rediscovered a slip of paper that just the day before he'd happened upon. The slip was sticking out of a paperback copy of *Middlemarch*, which he'd hunted for because he'd never read it and it was one of Jane's professed Top Five. On the slip of paper, in Jane's handwriting, was a quote. The quote had deeply unsettled him; in fact, he'd vowed to ask her about it the next time they talked. Was this the right time, though? When he decided that it was *not* the right time, that decision broke the spell that had kept him from calling her to report on his visit with Bobby.

She answered right away. He described the visit, including his advice to Bobby, which she completely agreed with. He also shared his positive assessment of Simone Rothstein. The conversation was so easy-breezy that he ignored his decision not to ask her about the quotation on the slip of paper.

"Hey, you know, I was looking for your copy of *Middlemarch* and I found this quote you wrote on the bookmark. It's pretty thought provoking."

"Really? Could you read it to me?"

He knew that he shouldn't, but that knowledge was buried just deep enough

to evade his better judgement.

“Sure, here goes. ‘We realized that we bring to each other much more than the difficulty that the relationship creates.’”

“Oh, that. That’s one of my favorite quotes. But it doesn’t come from the novel.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. It’s from one of the pilots of that solar-powered plane that flew around the world. They ran into tons of trouble, big delays, sometimes months at a time, and so many arguments that the engineers and ground crews kept threatening to quit. But they never did.”

“Ah.” He took a breath. “I was hoping that you felt the quote described us.”

Silence. “No. No, I didn’t think it described us, Vic. I mean, I think that’s why I wrote it down.” He could almost sense her brain scrambling to change the subject. “I think I just had the book nearby when I was watching the documentary on TV and...needed something to write on.”

He clenched his teeth and decided he’d had enough flagellation for one day. “I never took you for a collector of quotations, Jane.”

“Well, I have three or four that have meant a lot to me. Listen, Vic, I’m not sure...”

“What’s another one?”

“What’s another quote?”

“Yes, what’s another one that means a lot to you?”

She was pausing, perhaps to think of one. “Well, I always liked what Charlie Chaplin said to the ballerina in *Limelight*. ‘We’re all amateurs, my dear. We aren’t given enough time to be anything else.’”

“Ah, very profound. And how did you find that helpful?”

She did not answer right away. “I took some reassurance from it. I thought it might give me permission to live an imperfect life, but still a good or useful one.”

He was about to say, “Well, here’s to that” or some such thing when she quickly spoke again. “I think what you did with Bobby was great, Victor. I’m really grateful. But I’m pretty bushed right now, two hours ahead and all.”

“Of course. Well, good night then.”

“Good night.”

After he hung up the phone, he encountered a silence so deep it was startling. Where was the traffic, where the overhead planes? What was the whole wide world waiting for him to proclaim?

Fifteen

Like the cries of children.

Early Monday, Jane's day off at the gallery, she was awakened by someone's cursing out on the back porch. The windows were already bright with sunlight, so she leapt up and padded out to the back in shift and slippers. She could have followed her nose; the morning air was sharp with pine smells from the fired-up kiln. She found Midge standing by the kiln with a length of cord wood while Bliss whined and circled about her.

"What's going on, Midge?"

"Oh, I'm sorry I woke you. I'm going to run out of wood." She dropped the length in her hands to the ground. "I thought there was that reserve under the tarp, but it was just bunched up. Damn."

"Oh, Jeez." Jane pulled her shift tighter around her shoulders. "Is there something I could do?"

"Well, there's that touristy wood they package up the gas station out on 258. It's not ideal, but..."

"We didn't pull out all that wood with Tim, did we?"

Midge turned wide eyes upon her. "That's right! Hey, that's right." She started off for the kitchen.

"Where are you going?"

"For my keys!"

Jane blocked her way. "No, no, you stay here! I'll go get the wood and you stay with the kiln. I'll just throw on some clothes."

It was not much later that Jane was in jeans and a flannel shirt and clambering into her Jeep with a couple of empty log totes and a pair of work gloves on the passenger seat. Bliss wanted to come along, but Jane shooed her back. "Keep Mama calm," she commanded.

Midge called out to her from the front porch, "You know where it is, right?"

"I do! Just a couple miles down from the junction."

“Right. But don’t kill yourself. Now that I know there’s wood coming, we can all relax.”

Jane headed off, and feeling quite proud of herself, in fact. It couldn’t be much past eight, so she had to contend with the ever-increasing weekday traffic that the locals complained about. She bit steadily through a muffin she’d grabbed from the breadbox on her way out.

And there was the dirt road into the soon-to-be-set-aside land, just as she remembered it. There were a couple of lengths of wire looped to one of the posts that she hadn’t noticed when they were there with Tim, but they were easy to set aside for her to slip through and then re-secure.

She parked where they had before, where the road gave up in a thickening jumble of basalt croppings, and hiked off with the empty totes. She half-expected that someone else might have discovered their wood cache and made off with the cut lengths they had left behind. The scene was just as they’d left it, though, and it did not take long at all to load both totes. Satisfied with the heft of them, she turned headed back toward the Jeep. Now that she was no longer concentrating on the task at hand, she became more aware of some distant sounds that had kept up all the while she was scavenging the plundered wood. The distant sounds insisted on her attention. If she could actually believe her ears, they sounded like the bellowing of disturbed cattle, but wasn’t it miles from the nearest working ranch?

As she tromped on, she tried her best to ignore the cries. Unless, she was mistaken, they were coming from over a ridge just to her right. She found her feet taking her catty-corner to the straightest way back to her Jeep, so she would eventually gain some height and maybe a vantage point. It was harder to hike along in this more difficult fashion, but she was powerless to stop herself as she pulled steadily to a higher elevation. When she’d cleared the nearest ridge, she could see way off in a weathered barn with perhaps a corral peeking out at its other side. Thin plumes of smoke rose over the barn’s roof. There were pickups and other vehicles parked willy-nilly around the area. The eerie lowings were wafting up and over that barn’s roof as well, sometimes louder when a mild breeze swept her way.

Jane roused herself to keep heading back to the Jeep, which she reached not

more than ten minutes later, but with every step her curiosity mounted. Back on the road, she kept an eye out for another roadway farther up and perhaps running in the direction of the barn she had seen. Within a mile, she discovered a graveled cut that led directly to a wheel-rutted road that had withstood some use over the years. At the last moment, she cut the wheel and turned off and then slowed down to creep up the roadway.

She pattered along at a near idle until she came over a knoll and then there was the large barn. It was so weathered, even sagging in places, that it was hard to believe it was still in use. She might have stopped--after all, wasn't she basically trespassing?--but with every yard a new variety of cries rose among the cattle bellows. They were higher pitched, like the cries of children. Now she could see around to one side where a corral, sturdy enough with tall sides composed of hewn cedar crosspieces, rolled out from the back of the barn. Some of the vertical posts were capped with horned skulls. There were about a dozen people, every one with her back to her, some sitting atop the fence and others pressing against the rails and idly leaning in and gazing intently into the corral. The animal cries were nearly deafening now, and mixed in was an occasional human hoot or spirited yip.

Jane parked and, with a boldness that surprised her, strode steadily but quietly toward the corral. She edged farther away from the onlookers until she reached the split, gray rails in spaced horizontals mounting upward, the whole forming a large rectangular enclosure which, as Jane could now see as moved closer, was divided into other spaces within it, pens and chutes. The lowing of cattle remained incessant and grew harsher as she approached. Gusts of searing heat broke through the farther rails and a sharp metallic clanking cut the wrinkled air.

She found an inconspicuous vantage nearly up against the barn wall. Now she could see through to where several men and women moved about quickly between groups of penned calves and a separate pen of full-grown cattle who raised their heads and bellowed to the heavens with their eyes rolled back to reveal startlingly pure whites. In the open space at the corral's center, a single calf lay on its side, its legs kicking out as a couple of rangy teenagers leapt back from it. A few yards away, an older man with a paunch cinched above a wide belt with a huge

silver buckle was twisting a metal rod in a heap of bright coals cradled in a halved metal drum. Surely not a branding iron, she prayed. As she watched, a lean man in tight leather chaps and vest strode up to the calf and lashed its hooves together. As the calf squalled and heaved in its bonds, the older man took up the branding iron and while the other man knelt on the calf's legs, touched it to the smooth brown hide. The calf screamed and Jane could see the blackened intertwined letters when he pulled away the iron.

"God," she whispered aloud.

Now a short, strong-looking woman came running to the calf while a thin boy in an enormous hat ambled up from another direction. The boy crossed the dirt yard on the long knobby legs of a colt, his whole body frail and collapsible. The lean cowboy had freed the rear legs of the calf, and now the woman reached between the hind legs as the boy grasped the calf's small horns. The woman came away with something in her hand, which she pulled until a thin gray line stretched from the calf's loins. Then, with a knife Jane hadn't noticed, the woman cut the line and brought whatever was in her hand to two girls standing by a camp stove hung to the rails at the far end. One of the girls, her hat bobbing against her back held by a lanyard, came halfway to take the twin, gray, plum-shaped pods from the castrater and hurry them back and drop them into a broad iron skillet over a camp stove. Behind the stove and fry pan, the two dozen cows roiled in a tight mass and continually bellowed in long, harsh moans. By this point Jane understood that these were the mothers of the calves, all of which had been separated into yet another pen, which she could now see fed in a narrow chute to the main open area. The heads of the mother cows were tipped back and between the rails their round eyes continued to roll, wide and startled.

Jane was shocked to discover that the torturing of the calf was not yet over. Another woman had appeared beside the boy who held the calf's head. With two quick motions the new woman snapped off each of the calf's small horns with a kind of clamp or pliers evidently designed for this purpose. As blood spat from the horn holes, she squirted powder from a plastic bottle in her other hand onto each wound. Then she ran around to the rear of the calf and squirted powder onto the bloody

wound where the testicles had been cut off. Now, like a spring, the calf came up between woman, boy, and man, shaking itself erect and running and kicking indiscriminately, its hooves sluicing in dust pounded to the creamy consistency of talc. Once it ran sideways into a rail and leapt back as if struck. Finally, it began trotting in broad circles, keeping clear of people, but calming by degrees, until it stood still and panted, its ribs heaving and subsiding beneath its glossy hide, two thin streams of blood running down either side of its head. A moment later, the thin boy shuffled up to it and herded it with awkward dancing movements toward the opening of another chute. This led back to the mothers' corral, and Jane could see the calf thread its way through the shuffling legs then disappear among them.

Gradually, she became aware that everyone but her was crying out in some exultant fashion. The onlooker closest to her down the way cried out, "She's a live one, Lyle! Watch out!" and then laughed giddily. Jane looked to where the lean cowboy was racing across the open space after a fleeing calf. Evidently, this new calf had been released by the boys, who had just reseated a chute gate and now started to run too. As Jane watched, the terrified calf dodged and leapt among the human males. The cowboy, his jeans and leather chaps so tight to his body she wondered how he could move, fell atop the calf and grabbed at its legs. The calf heaved him off into the dirt, and the onlooker cried out again, "He's a live one, all right! Come on and get 'im!"

Jane realized that it was all going to happen all over again. The grim, skinny cowboy in his fitted clothes would grab each calf in turn, and his young protegee would help, and together they would hold the calf for the owner to ceremoniously burn with his private mark, and then the women would rush up and cut off testicles and horns....

Jane stepped back and pulled her eyes from the spectacle. She realized that she could hardly breathe. In a kind of stupor, she stumbled along the fence and grabbed at the onlooker's elbow. "Is this legal?" she demanded.

The man was startled. He gazed down at her from under the brim of his very broad hat. "Excuse me? Is what legal?"

"This...whatever it is."

The man regarded her as if she were speaking another language. "It's a fuckin' branding is what it is, lady. Say, who do you belong to anyway?"

She shook her head and turned her back on the corral. She made her way back down to the Jeep, with her hands clamped over her ears. As she reached the door, she heard someone running up beside her. She turned to discover Tim trotting up.

"Jane, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Tim! What are *you* doing here?"

"I was invited."

She searched his face intently. "To watch animals get tortured?"

He face fell. "Oh, here we go. Jesus, Jane, it's traditional." He shuffled about in front of her, one thumb pinned in a belt loop, his free hand wheeling in air.

"Jane..."

"Those animals, Tim, they're so scared."

"It's kinda rough, I know, but it's the way of the cattle people."

Shocked and confused as she was, she could detect that his tone was less than enthusiastic. He was affected too, she could feel that. From what she knew, he was more carpenter than cowboy--though he might like to sound like one of the tough guys back in the corral. She shook her head, picking up the pace. "It's just so brutal, Tim. Does it have to be so brutal?"

Tim half-whispered, "My God, Jane, this is cattle country, cattle business. These people are dealing with animals."

"They can feel. The animals, I mean. Those calves will never trust life again."

He tried not to laugh but did anyway. "Life? You mean the whole two more years they get of it?"

She closed her eyes. "Christ," she muttered. "I'm on the wrong planet." She stepped up into the Jeep, but he held onto the door. "Hold up, a minute," he said. When he said nothing more, but just kept shifting about and looking everywhere but at her, she said, "Look, they've got ear tags now and those little microchips..."

He snorted. "Somebody could remove the tag and replace it with their own." He jerked his head, triumphantly, but so hard he had to resetttle his hat.

Jane said, "Paint then, or shaving the hair in patterns, or tattoos. And, by the way, Tim, what's the point? How many cattle wrestlers have you seen out here lately?"

"*Rustlers*. It's for keepin track in the *feed lots*, Jane. And yeah, we'll line up all of 'm and walk them through the tattoo parlor, one by one. That'll be nice."

She had to laugh a little at how silly she must sound to him, but as quickly she felt angry again. "Those poor little creatures, did you see how stunned they looked? The mother cows staring like that to see their calves? That's terror, Tim, plain and simple. And the women, my God the women! They get to cut the nuts off. Typical!"

"They're good at it, Jane. They're real precise. With the guys, the damned calves are always getting infected."

"Bullshit. Boy, Tim, you are way behind on your basic psychology. Don't you know how men can fake being bad at something to get women to do it?"

His face had gotten quite pink. "I'm not one little bit behind on anything. You think out here we're all stupid and behind, but we know what you easterners are into. We can see exactly what a big mess you're making of everything and we, good lady, do not want anything to do with it. We want things kept pure and simple."

"I'll bet. Women in their place, you mean. And men doing their possession bit, complete with pain." But there was something more, that her words hadn't found yet...

Tim was flailing one free hand in the air. "Hey, we got cowgirls out here can wrestle down a calf, can break a horse, it's a sight to see, believe me. But there's only a few dozen in the whole goddam state who want to be doing that. We don't think it's right to force the other fifty million gals to do something they don't want to do just because somebody had some kind of new idea." He waited before going on. "I've talked to Gail, Sonny's wife, the owner up there. She's *proud* of how good she is at castrating and horning."

"That guy in the tight leather? I'll bet he beats his wife."

"Lyle? He doesn't have one."

"There you go."

Why was it that people held on so fiercely to the familiar, held onto things

long after they no longer worked, held on even after they were proved destructive? Her father, her husband, those men back there with their branding irons, why couldn't they move forward? Well, damn it, she would! And she would be taking her boys along with her.

Tim had gone quiet. She stopped talking and pulled the door closed. "I'm sorry, Tim. Those are your friends and I'm screwing up your party."

He snorted. "Not so much friends, really, but long-time employers."

"Oops." She clapped a hand onto the forearm he rested on the window frame. "I get it, partner" she said. "I've got to get some of that prime wood of yours back to Miss Midge. Come on by for some breakfast."

He nodded but said only, "Take care, then."

Back on the main road, she gazed out to the immense rocky shards that broke the pale green-yellow plain as if a whole cliff had been shoved up by subterranean giants. Farther down, she recognized the notch where Midge had taken her to show her the flat, pink Indian etchings, old and darkening. But no vista or memory or other distraction could supplant the images of tortured animals that roiled through her mind. She did think to call ahead to let Midge know that she had the wood; given that so much time had passed, she might be worried.

Back home again, she did manage to distract herself by sitting on the front porch steps and jotting down notes for a party she wanted to hold for Midge at the gallery. The bride-to-be who'd commissioned the wedding pieces came in just last week to ask how things were going. She had just happened by and thought to get insider information from Jane about Midge's progress without bothering Midge herself. Jane responded honestly that she thought the pieces were among the best of what she'd seen of Midge's work. She added that it might be fun to display one setting in the gallery so that others could share the beauty. The bride exclaimed, "Hey, show it all. You can lay it all out on a set table, if you like." Now *there* was an idea!

She was just about to pack up her notebook and see about some lunch, when she spotted Tim's truck coming down the far road. What a sweetheart; he just couldn't stand to leave things bad between them.

She stayed seated and called out to him. "You too full of calf balls to have some lunch?"

"Very funny," he said as he strode up. He took a seat beside her. "What'cha doin out here? Writin a letter to the editor or somethin?"

"Nothing so revolutionary. I want to do a party for Midge at the gallery. I kind of opening, but more of a happening, or evening of appreciation or something."

"Sounds good."

They chatted on about that for a few more minutes, and then both fell silent. The two of them looked off; around them, the dry lands were growing more limber and colorful in the early spring days.

Jane said, "It's strange how out here fruit grows between spines. I mean, right in the middle of nests of terrible thorns, flowers and fruits grow."

"You said that same thing about the birds."

"Yes, yes." She nodded and looked down at her hands. "Even in the midst of cactus spines, little birds nest."

"Jane the poet."

They shared a laugh. Tim said, "You've sure got a thing for animals. Midge says Bliss sleeps in your room all the time now. Makes her jealous." He laughed a little.

She took a breath. "Maybe I really should do something with animals. Put my muscle where my mouth is."

Tim scowled. He was about to speak, held up, seemed to consider speaking again, and then did speak. "A lot of women come out here, just like you did. They hear it's safer here, just like you told me when we first met. Remember?"

"I do remember, yes. That was one of the reasons why I chose out here."

"This one lady, worked at the library, I was on a crew putting in an addition on her house. Anyway, she started that big library committee, got everybody collecting books and signing up for volunteer hours and set up this big thermometer with the red part marking how close they were to getting such and such a sum of money. And then just when things were heatin up she up and announced she was leavin town, goin back home." A moment's silence passed before he added, "Worse

than that, she had bought this old horse, one that she kind of just kept around to pat and watch graze, then when she decided to leave, she couldn't sell it, so she had to have it destroyed."

Jane rocked her head back as if slapped. "Damn, I keep hearing stories like that." She was scowling so hard her eyes hurt. "Couldn't she just give it away?"

"She tried. Nobody wants an old horse, Jane."

She fell silent for some time. She had instinctively steered clear of certain women in the area, sensing that they too had drifted out here to heal. She had been frightened of what their assumed solidarity might make her feel. It could go too far, disliking or distrusting mankind, or men in particular. You could end up hating life.

Tim was watching her closely now. He was leaning on an elbow, his hat brim cocked forward. "So how married are you, Jane? *Real* married?"

With a surprised breath she said, "Oh, I hope so. But I feel sometimes that I've taken too big a step coming out here." When Tim nodded and looked away, she could see that her answer had disappointed him. "You still want us to be closer."

He wagged his head a little. "I never saw why not."

She smiled and let her head fall against the side of his. "You're a hopeless romantic, Tim. You're still in your dreamtime. But me, I'm in my survival phase." She laughed at her own words. "But one thing's for sure, I can't tell you how good you've been for me."

She pulled back to discover that his eyes had crinkled nearly closed. "Have I hurt you, Tim?"

"No, no. It's all sort of confusing though. Sometimes I think you were sent out here by the Good Lord to help me make sense of why my mom is losin her poor mind. You're the only one I can talk to about it without feeling embarrassed."

"I'm flattered. Truly."

"Me too! I'm kind of flattered that you, an older lady and all, would spend the time a day with me." He flapped his hands. "I don't mean to say you're old, you know that."

She laughed hard. "Tim, your mother raised you very well."

They shared an awkward sideways hug, and impulsively she planted a kiss

on his cheek. He looked at his watch. "Okay. This is getting all too philosophical for me anyway. Time for this country boy to dip back into the world of Sawzalls and nail guns."

"No lunch?"

"Had it, thanks. And no it wasn't calf balls, or whatever you called'm."

After he drove off, she sat on the edge of the front porch, which she and Midge rarely used. She felt both resolved and confused. Tim's story about the woman who came, stirred everything up, and then left mildly terrorized her. She knew she was a complete flake, but being a complete fake would be far worse. But what about her job at the gallery? She had turned that place around, so everyone said.

She looked out over rows of blossoming prickly pears that stepped along the path that led to the road that led to the tiny, rambling town. Several yellow-splashed blackbirds were tumbling through the stand of salt cedars just beyond a low, stone wall that someone had once begun to build and then abandoned. The birds flitted off in some great hurry. Bliss was probably out there somewhere. A moment later, a horsefly fastened its attention on her, but it merely batted her hat. Unable to find flesh, it buzzed off. Not another person stirred at the dead noon hour, just she and a few birds and insects.

She reddened to think how she'd lectured Tim on the proper treatment of animals. His own father had been a farrier, she remembered. She had a confused husband and at least one hurting son back home, plenty of important things to see to.

The calves' painful squealing returned to her mind. There'd been that night so long ago when she'd come home from a school meeting and found marks on Arlen, actual faint bruises, three parallel shadows on that tender cheek. "Dad slapped me," the child meekly admitted, as if he were ashamed of himself. And instantly she had erupted in a dark rage at this knowledge, gone off to corner Victor in the yard and, damn the neighbors, impaled him with that rage. No one, ever again, would lay a finger on a child of hers if she had a breath left to prevent it. Victor had only gotten a sentence or two out, a meek accusation that she spoiled the

boy, before she saw the genuine shame steal across his face.

She'd been made to feel lonely by the branding, as if she didn't fit in anywhere, not out here and not back there in the East. She had learned that she could live equally ineffectual lives in two different parts of the country! Then again, perhaps she knew better who she *wasn't* and maybe build on that. She certainly did not want to be any longer that wife of Victor Bill as she had been when they'd spent hours planning how they would make an offer on an old couple's house should they die or get moved to a nursing home. She shuddered to think that she'd let herself go safe and dead enough to conceptualize living, breathing people as economic opportunities.

She thought of the double-letter brand seared onto the calf's hide, two rounded letters interlocked. Wife and husband, mother and child. Sometimes at restaurants or at dinner parties, she or Victor would be speaking, or listening, and he would slowly hook his ankle behind hers. She must face the fact, though--and it had never been more clear that at that moment--that the two of them had connected, and remained connected, more from raw need than from mutual strengths.

Sixteen

The planet Faith.

Because Midge liked candles so much, Jane had set them everywhere for the gallery party to showcase Midge's work. One of their artists gave permission for them to use a table he'd crafted from big-cone pine stump with roots serving as the supportive legs. The many candles that Jane set down in the center and among the six settings of the wedding commission made the table's grain come alive. And with the bowls, Midge's bowls, of guacamole and salsa and rolled corn tortillas and chopped cilantro leaves and tomatillo sauce, their light created an aura of pleasurable anticipation, as if guests would soon sit down for a wonderful dinner. No one would be sitting down to dinner, of course, but the many guests who'd made good on their RSVPs were noshing as if they did not know where their next meals were coming from.

More candles yet, high and higher still on the shelves, and all set in wide saucers to stabilize them and make them keep their distance from the flammables. There were so many candles, in fact, that the overhead lights could be dimmed to a dull glow. The happy jabbering made it hard to speak to anyone farther away than a yard, but the guests seemed to be managing just fine.

Jane had forced Midge to take a complete day off and not help with the party. Jane had been nearly shrill about it, and not only because she wanted Midge to enjoy one of the first totally free days she'd had in weeks, but also because Jane wanted to immerse herself in the preparations and reveal the results as a dramatic conclusion. The truth was, she was suffering. She had tried to deny it, just soldier on, as they saying went, but deep feelings bordering on some variety of terror invaded her dreams and stayed with her for entire days. Bobby's crisis had passed, he was back in classes, but it had forced her back into contact with Victor, which had opened some wounds she had mistakenly concluded were near to healing. Then the calf branding.... Clearly, dammed up forces were breaching the levees. How strange and shameful that cruelties that had never left a physical mark on her could so decisively

invade her little island, where she never went hungry and had a warm bed to sleep in each night.

As this day progressed, she decided that she could get through the evening in one piece by simply keeping busy and smiling pleasantly a lot. Angela saw to the customers while Jane steadily set up, so she had the psychic space to bat the demons back into their dark corners. But then the sun fell, and the candlelight bathed the gallery in dream colors that unsettled her even more deeply.

As the evening progressed, she kept moving, ducking from conversations to see about this or that. She fetched bottles of beer, opened new bottles of wine. Because it was to be such a special night, she had dressed carefully, but ironically made herself something of an object of attention. Her frizzed blonde hair was pulled back to reveal a silver ear cuff and the long brindled feather that hung from it. *An ear cuff, a feather? Who did she think she was?* She had pushed the season, gambling on the guests' body heat to keep the rooms warm enough for her heavy cotton dress of a blue color that deepened the hue of her eyes. Beneath the hem, her bare calves, firmed by her regimen of long walks, were wrapped in the thin leather straps of her sandals. Twice a strange new man appeared nearby and asked innocent questions. Once the friendly owner of a new gallery chatted about his past accomplishments and future hopes. Her attempts to be circumspect and peremptory were read as modest or mysterious, and either way seemed to be equally provocative to the man before her. Even Tim became a problem; he seemed dazzled by candlelight and kept sliding up to insist that they dance to the country-western music playing in the background.

"You are being very inappropriate, young man," she mock chided, then headed off on an invented errand.

She came to rest for a few moments beside Angela, just as the owner was stepping away from a conversation. "This is incredible," Angela whispered. "Even the guy from the Glass Alliance is here."

"They're here to poach our prodigies."

"And make room for the next ones," Angela laughed. It was a special source of pride to them that Tactile was a recognized stepping off point for new artists.

Later, Midge caught up with her. "You're a cruise missile."

"The party's going pretty well, don't you think?"

"Don't change the subject. You haven't met my eye in twenty-four hours. I'm worried that I said something to hurt you."

The thought that Midge had to suffer even a twinge of innocent guilt was wounding to Jane. She wanted to explain on the spot, something quick and efficient, but she suspected that she'd end up spilling her dark self across the gathered glow of Midge's event. She was learning too much about herself too quickly. For the moment, she managed to manufacture a smile meant to communicate that Midge was being ridiculous. The maneuver bought her a few moments, but her plan of avoidance felt more hopeless with every passing second; the truth was boring its way out of her from the inside.

Tim slipped up beside her and pulled her into a tiny, private dance in an open corner.

"Patsy Kline," he whispered. "Remember?"

She did not, then did. They had danced to *Sweet Dreams* the first time they'd met, on the Ramada Inn's parquet dance floor. But she hadn't been out dancing in months. She could hardly remember who she'd been back then, not so long ago. Tim wheeled her in small circles, his knees bent, his Australian hat back on his head so that a lock of blonde hair flopped across his forehead. For a few grateful moments, Jane let her head nestle against his chest. But in her present state, his physical nearness eventually irritated her. Tim had needs, he wanted her, or so he thought, and she felt as if she was the least likely person in the universe to turn to.

She pulled back, shaking her head. "I'm a wreck, Tim. Truly screwed up these days." She tried a laugh, which came out like a gasp.

He smiled and nodded, eyes softened by a third or fourth beer. "Hey, Jane, why talk like that?"

She tried to smile, but instead a wince betrayed her rising panic. Back in the corner, a pair of eyes briefly fixed to hers. Sam Kressler, the manager of a successful gallery on Canyon Road. Clearly, he'd been watching her for some time, one hand in his chinos pocket and the other holding a glass of wine. His look meant to

acknowledge something. That they were a common breed? The members of a secret society composed of people with bottomless, unfillable needs who engaged in the doomed and eternal enterprise of failing to satisfy each other.

She patted Tim on the arm and left him, stepped to the door, gasped harshly once, and went outside. But she would not be alone; there was a man there, in jeans and a sports jacket and smoking a cigarette. "Jane," he said.

She remembered him: Joe Something.

"Hey, Joe. How are you doing?"

"Good. Hey, I was just thinking about you?"

"Really?" She remembered that she had pinned a shawl around her neck. She unclasped it and pulled it up around her shoulders. "Do I owe you money?"

He laughed. "I wish." He took a drag and blew smoke out through his generous mustache. "No, I was talking with my wife this evening and she does work at a shelter and she said that a lot of the wealthy short-timers end up dumping their temporary pets, and that made me think about you."

With relief, she recalled that they had talked somewhere once about her animal fantasies. "The shelter's full?" She would need to escape soon.

"To busting. But the thing is now a lot of the pets are goats and alpacas and other exotics. They are damned hard to adopt out." He looked more closely at her. "'You okay?"

"Yeah. Just thinking I should get back, seeing as I'm supposed to be one of the hosts."

Joe stomped out his cigarette. "Hey, should I have another margarita?"

Jane felt her breath go away. She backed toward the front door, found the door blessedly ajar, slipped around knots of guests, found the bathroom somehow unoccupied, and stepped into it. She moved to the window and wondered if she could climb out--but it was too small, unlike the window she had nearly been drawn through by her first breathlessly empty view of the desert so many years ago, while her mother cheerily unpacked their bags and her father read the paper on the bed. Her father, who was keenly aware behind his stolid wall of newspaper that his daughter was showering on the other side of the wall. She turned from the window

and moved back to the door, her plan to take ten steady steps across to the back door and out, but when she opened the door she found Tim standing there. His male width was enough to nearly shield her from the party.

"My truck's right out back," he said in a lowered voice.

Without much thought, she took his arm and they headed down the back hallway to the rear door and then out to the truck. The two of them were caught in a silent cube of space after Tim climbed in and closed his door. "Something's wrong," he said. "I can tell."

Jane sat looking straight out through the windshield, her arms thrust down between her knees. "I think my father committed suicide."

She instantly scolded herself for being unable to simply keep her own mouth shut, instead of releasing yet another toxic cloud into the lives of others. But Tim seemed only to be watching her with normal intensity, though his lips were slightly parted and his breaths shallow.

"I see," he said. "And that idea came on you very sudden?"

"A bolt from the blue, as they say. Oh, I've been feeling something pushing up for days, lots of little things connecting and gaining strength."

Tim wrapped one large hand around the bicep of her left arm. Jane tried to keep her breathing in control, but the air felt acrid and harsh. Her nose had blocked, she couldn't breathe, she might die. Tim said, "I think we need to get you home."

"Of all things, I keep thinking of my poor husband."

"Why's that, Jane?"

"What a mean trick," she hissed. "I drew him in. I kill men."

"Jane...."

Her face was hot. For the first time she noticed that her cheeks were wet with tears. "He didn't have a clue what he was up against."

"But, neither did you. Right?" When Jane said nothing, he asked, "Why did you say that about your father?"

Jane stared ahead. Strangely, it felt better to breathe fully through only her mouth. The compulsion to sob sputtered and passed within her. "The dreams keep coming now. I hardly close my eyes and they rush up."

"I gather that all this has been comin on for some time, Jane. Let it come is what I say."

"Want to know something else, partner? Sometimes the whole thing makes me glad. Like it was flattering or something. Isn't that sick?"

"I'm not sure I follow you, Jane. What was flattering?"

"That he fell in love with me."

"Your husband? Well..."

"No. My father." She looked to Tim to see how badly she might have shocked him, but his face remained smooth, answerless. A moment later he said, "Should I be askin just how serious all this is? I mean, are we talkin about...somethin physical or..."

"No, no, nothing like that. Just stupid, misplaced love." She lifted her face, her nose so uncomfortably stuffed. "Oh, I hate this. I'm ruining Midge's party. My life is ruining things."

"Just sit. Midge's flyin high in there. We're okay here."

She grabbed tissues from a box on the dash and blotted her face. "Why does a cowboy have tissues in his truck?" she asked with a tepid laugh.

"Aw, they're for Mama. You know, after a doctor's visit."

She nodded. "Bless her."

"What about this bolt of blue you were talkin about?"

"That man Joe out there wondering about a second drink, it's just the way Vic used to act at parties. Vic and my father, both so childish, you think they're not because their grown men, but they're not grown. They're *not*." She took a breath. "A lifetime isn't long enough to grow. We're still children when we die."

Tim gripped her arm the smallest bit harder.

"That shy look to me, that silly impish look on his big face. Vic, I mean. 'Do you think I should have a second beer, Jane?' It got to be such a silly game between us, but wonderful too. Or maybe not so wonderful, oh, I don't know. I'm feeling really guilty, Tim, because I think I made him work hard. But, you know what it is? When was my body ever mine? When was I ever my own self?" Nearly pleading, she added, "I didn't even get a chance to know myself before I had to start

representing something to others. And I did it all over again with Vic, I picked a man who saw me as a something rather than a just me."

"What do you think you represented to Victor?"

Jane laughed harshly. "Hey, you're good at this! What did I represent? A challenge! A challenge with a nice ass."

She felt Tim exhale raggedly as he slipped an arm across her back and pulled her against him. She let her face rub against his shoulder. "So what do you think of all this mess, partner?"

"Jane, it's heart-breakin is what it is."

"I'm ruining the party for you! Oh, this is hateful. Stupid and selfish and hateful."

"Whoa there. Hey, if I know you, you're going to just sit here and beat up on yourself. I should just drive you on home."

"I can drive..."

"Yeah, well, and maybe in your present state right smack into somethin." When she remained silent, Tim took out his phone. "Give me Angela's number. I'll text her that you're coming down with a bug or something and that I'm taking you home. She can tell Midge when the time's good."

"No, I want to drive myself, Tim, and I think it would be better if you just sashayed back in there and let her know at some point that I didn't feel well and decided to slip off home."

"But..."

"And I don't want you taken from her party. I don't want to deprive her of you on this special night."

He was about to speak again, but then dropped his chin in surrender. "I'll let her know, and don't you worry about it. She's a tough bird."

Jane laughed, rubbed her face. "I could walk across hot coals for that woman."

"Or you could just crawl into that kiln of hers, right?"

Jane laughed again. "You are a funny man. A funny man and a good one. And now I'm off."

She planted a quick kiss on his cheek and then hopped out of the truck. Her keys were in her Jeep; Midge would find her handbag and bring it home with her later.

With the roads nearly empty, she sped with ease through the pitch darkness. As soon as she entered the house, there was Bliss to greet her. Jane slid right to the floor and held the warm animal to her for several delicious minutes. She wasn't going to ruin Bliss's evening in the bargain, she decided, so she rose to her feet to leave a carefree-sounding note for Midge on the dining room table and settle herself into bed.

When she opened her eyes again, the room was dark and the house was completely quiet. She lay on the rug beside her bed with her left arm crooked across her eyes, though the moonless night had inked the air of any light. At the edge of Jane's hearing, there then gone, was the distant chugging of a late train from Lamy. Her consciousness of it kept her mind skittering just inside of wakefulness. The train seemed to roll on forever, dozens and dozens of heavy cars. In fact, it seemed as if it would never end. Five minutes passed, then six, then seven, and then Jane lifted the arm from her eyes with the realization that no train could be that long. The sound still continued.

Then she heard Bliss whining over by the window. She raised herself to see Bliss watching at the window with pricked ears, listening to that interminable soft clacking.

"What's that sound, girl?" Jane whispered.

Bliss slithered over to her, and then lurched to the bedroom door.

"Yes, let's go out. See what's up."

Jane moved through the house quietly in her long shift, light on her feet as a ghost to keep from waking Midge. Up ahead, Bliss was already through the back door, which Midge often left partly open for her. With the door swung back, Jane could feel the tufts of deepening spring air, redolent with new fragrances: mesquite resin, cholla blossom, cattle dung, rain water.... Outside, she stepped across the gritty hardpan with her bare feet, hugging herself a little beneath the immense dome of star-drenched black and pricking her ears to the far off sound that by the second

began to soften into a heavy chirring. It saturated the night, that sound. It rose and fell like the chanting of countless small voices.

Bliss stood ahead of her, planted evenly on four feet. She switched her head about, her ears cocked and twitching. Finally, she seemed to fix on the south pasture, which had recently filled with rainwater to form a temporary lake. In the daytime, it streaked a familiar view with a strange new band of silver-gray.

"Frogs," Jane breathed.

Of course, frogs--and there had to be, what?, thousands of them? Tens of thousands. The warm days and spring rains had dragged the frogs from sleep, and one by one, they'd kicked up from their mucky holes into the air and swarmed to the newly created ponds to breathe and eat and spawn.

She gazed out as if she could visualize them, a teeming carpet of heavy frogs ringing the acres of shallow water and, drifting out into the ooze, a second band, thick as kelp.

The chirring was a mass courtship, a rhythmic primal chanting from the belled throats of countless bulls. She'd read about this phenomenon. Ahead lay days of orgiastic coupling, and then feasting that would increase in gluttonous intensity to the point of cannibalism. A few weeks after the fray, every pond and shade pool would be teeming with wriggling black commas.

She listened on to the mesmerizing chant. She could feel the distant energy of these deep, shared urges penetrating her being. The sound moved through her like an invigorating breath, tingling through her flesh. Unabashed, she reached awkwardly to the earth to get down onto her knees. Her cotton shift was just heavy enough to keep the grit from cutting her kneecaps; she could even straighten and lean back on her heels without much pain. Resting in this way, she closed her eyes, listening, breathing deeply.

Normally, the immensities of open land and fathomless sky made her feel singular and unimportant, an organism hardly worth considering. But at that moment, she felt plaited to an animistic web of living things. What difference was there between her and the courting frogs? How great was the separation between humans aching with love and lust and those soft, fist-sized amphibians teeming

miles off in the watery basins, each writhing from the nearly unbearable ecstasy of gorged vesicles and ovipositors? Their webbed hooks would grip with blind need. Hunger would transform them into living maws; gaping, ravenous socks.

She could remember when she'd come fully into her own ripening. As her body had swelled inside and out, hormones pinging in her blood, the strange, gorgeous era of fecundity had opened around her. Every thought and sensation seemed so intense back then, as if she and her young friends had reinvented smelling and touching and listening. She could feel, there on the sandy earth, how she herself had participated in the human version of whatever had been unleashed in that froggy basin. She had mated. A male of the species had approached her, hooked no webs into her shoulders, but had with some conviction mounted and penetrated her and fertilized the eggs she carried. She'd borne two sons, and nearly a daughter. The whole process made a lie of the psychic separations imposed by the mind. She wondered if frogs mated for life; she supposed they did not. They cared nothing if their offspring were sons or daughters. Sometimes, in fact, they ate them.

She opened her eyes and looked about for Bliss, but the dog had been lured on to explore, was probably at that moment stepping and sniffing quizzically along the periphery of slick, lurching creatures.

The ground's chill had worked upwards through Jane, and she shivered suddenly. She rose and brushed off the dust and stepped quickly back to the house. She had mated, for life she thought. For life she'd hoped.

Back in the kitchen she jumped a foot and cried out when she ran into Midge. Midge cried out too, just as startled it seemed. The event made them laugh until they bent over and then awkwardly fell into each other's arms, two ghostly figures in baggy night gowns.

"You scared the absolute bejesus out of me!" Jane exclaimed.

"And you me, sister!" Midge caught her breath. "Wow, did you hear the frogs?"

"That's why I was out there."

The two of them quieted and settled into chairs at the table in the dark. "Well, I'm glad I didn't find you hanging from a rafter when I came home," said

Midge.

Jane beat the tabletop with her fist. "I'm going to see some of my sibs, and my mother or something. I've got to give you some rest. I am *so* fucking high maintenance, a black hole that sucks..."

Midge hooted, "Oh, the vanity of the woman. She thinks she's got the power to ruin lives twenty miles in all directions."

"You know what I mean. It was inexcusable at the party..."

Midge interrupted again. "Oh, stop. The whole damned thing was a total success from start to finish."

Mollified a little, Jane said, "I actually do think I should do some exploring out in California, to get to the bottom of some things."

"Your father."

"My father. And more. And I don't think it would hurt to give you a little bit of Midge time for a while."

"Whatever. It does sound like a solid next step, Jane. Sleep on it, why don't you."

Back in her room, flat on her bed with her face to the ceiling, Jane's mind teemed with the mysteries that had accumulated within her life. Her father's sudden death, her mother's secrecy, her own faltering marriage.... With the frogs' chirring still echoing in her ears, she thought of the first night she had slept with Victor Bill. What blandishments, what deep caress of trust had released her desire, or her permission for him to slake his? For one thing, he'd first listened all the way through a rambling description of her family. She'd cooked spaghetti, they'd drunk red wine from a double, and she'd lain back on the couch with her head in his lap to obey his well-intentioned command to tell him all about her family.

"Give them all to me," he'd said. "We've got all night." He'd smoothed back her hair, again and again, while she looked straight up, past him, feeling a pleasant heaviness upon her chest as if the air in a towering column directly above her were denser.

"But it's so self-indulgent. Nit-picking about my family, as if I'd been raised a starving orphan or something." She sneaked a glance up at him, though she had to

lean her head back in his lap to catch his eye. Her short couch scrunched them together. It brought up her legs in snug shorts, their bareness startlingly apparent to her, and perhaps to him as well.

"Who says you have to nit-pick? Just describe."

Her hands came up and fell back down upon her middle. "You're right, Vic. You're so right. Isn't it funny how we always assume we have to criticize? Why do we do that?"

"We can unlearn it. It's all social conditioning."

She laughed, and then her head jounced as he laughed too. "I guess it's all right then. I mean, it could be natural too--to our species anyway."

"So tell me about David. He's the oldest, right?"

She nodded, conjuring slowly in her mind. "David is the oldest. I don't really know him because he's twelve years older than me, so he was away in college when I reached my aware years. I don't think he's really knowable anyway, kind of hidden in his shell." She stiffened her own shoulders to demonstrate. A moment later, she felt Victor's hand slip under her neck. His fingertips combed up through her hair and hooked into the juncture of nape and skull. There they stayed, digging in deep while her head rested in his palm.

Her eyes fluttered closed; she went on, more softly. "I remember that he always used to wear suits, like to Thanksgiving dinners, back when we still gathered for them. He's still really angry at me because I was against the Iraq war."

"Too bad more of us weren't."

She went on. "It must have been hard for David to have all sisters. He'd always drift near Dad on visits, pour himself a whiskey and sit down and cross his legs and start some important-sounding conversation with him, like whether Obama was too much of an egghead. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd pulled out a couple of cigars. The two of them together were a stitch because Dad would always stare at him and scratch his head--as if he were thinking, 'Where did this guy come from?' Dad was a much softer sort of man, you know. More sensitive."

Beneath her, she felt a tremor of a laugh move from his belly to his thighs. "I love to hear you talk."

She scowled. "Too much?"

"No! It's so...real." She saw his free hand hovering in the air above her face, as if gripping something. "It's so wonderful that you always want to get things just right."

She sighed. "Where did you learn to massage like this?" There, she'd managed to give him permission to touch her more.

"From a book. *How to Rub Girls' Necks*. Have you read it?"

With her head slightly bent forward, her laugh came out in a sharp snorting sound before she could control it. Laughing was a rush of trust, an exposure of teeth and tongue, an acknowledgment of the delight of delight. The spasm brought her thighs up another few inches, so bright and white. For a second or two, his free hand brushed along the upper curve of her right leg.

"Sara's next," she announced. "She's a grade school teacher in Alaska, but I don't know her much better than David. She started traveling everywhere even in college, and eventually she just dropped out. But she did finish later at some sort of alternative college in Northern California. I was the first to finish."

Beneath her head, his massaging had become sort of fixed in place. It began to irritate her, the tugging at the same hair roots over and over. She might have to tell him to stop. But then he might stop the touching entirely.

But about Sara. "When I think of my oldest sister I think of a wide, mad smile, and a lot of dark hair piled on her head. She looks more like my mother than any of us, but a kind of weird version of her. She has the same relentless cheerfulness, puts a big shine on everything. When you tell her news she's liable to yell back at you, 'Why that's great! Just *great!*' She was married for a while, but she got divorced pretty soon after. I think Alaska suits her wildness. She's become a really progressive teacher, sets up these social media networks among students because there's hundreds of miles between the schools."

Victor's fingers were becoming positively annoying. Perhaps if she just twisted her head a little...

"Sorry," he said. He arranged his hands so that one propped her head from the side and the other rested on her nearer shoulder. "Go on, Jane. Sara sounds like

a very good egg."

"She is." She leaned her head back to grin at him and felt her breasts rise with the movement. With that grin she meant to communicate that, despite the overmassaging, she felt good with her head in his lap, good to be speaking to him and being listened to by him. The ease with which she had laid her head in Victor Bill's lap was the product of a recent string of gradually solidifying dates that was drawing them closer to sex. She could project this deepening intimacy into a genuine future, the kind fortified by the conventions of marriage. She had envisioned many nights like that one, already set by a pattern of her cooking and their doing dishes together and then the rest of the evening full of free and honest conversation, then kissing into protracted silence, then, beginning tonight perhaps, sexual intercourse progressing in alternating moments of boldness and shyness. It had all made her wonder if Sara's solitude was such a good thing, was it really the free-spirited independence she had envied.

"I hope she really is happy," she went on, more quietly. "She certainly is busy."

Victor had prompted, "Who's next?"

"Sissy! My nemesis, the Wicked Witch of the World."

The light around them seeped in from a dozen candles: sand candles and marbly egg-shaped candles and twisted candles with multiple wicks, part of her signature decorating even back then--and each one of them scented with something, vanilla or patchouli or bayberry. The air must have been fusty with vying fragrances! It was a good thing that Victor did not suffer from asthma.

"As far as I can tell, Sissy was born miserable. I try to put it all behind me but I have to say that she just about single-handedly wrecked my childhood. One of my first memories is of her glaring at me. Just about the first words I remember are 'I got all their bad parts, Dad's dark skin and short legs. You got the best parts, Dad's eyes and Mom's skin and Mom's legs.' All these ridiculous inventories, as if we'd been stuck together like potato dolls."

"Looks like she was right though," he said, and ran a hand along her side and over her hip.

So, she'd half-consciously found a way to direct his awareness to her body's proudest parts. In fact, beneath her head, she sensed the stirrings of tumescence in his groin. Sometimes it shocked her how fast a man's penis could fill and harden--flattering, in a way, but off-putting and shameful with the mindless uncontrol it betrayed.

She retrieved the hand beside her head--it had begun to grip her ear in that same irritating, repetitive way--took the fingers from her hair and lightly bit one of his knuckles. They would certainly have sex that night, but why did the thought make her feel ashamed? But Victor Bill would make her willingness seem less shameful to her with all his persuasive talk about how healthy sex was, how the physical connection strengthened the spiritual one--though he would prove damned slow to acknowledge a spiritual bonding on his side. And she would not feel as close after sex with him as she did after one of their long conversations. It would evolve that he would find it easier and easier to announce his horniness and that was the way their last few long talks would end--sooner and sooner. As if once the secret that deep talk was foreplay had been revealed, one could never use that delicious stimulus again. As if it were a naughty trick they'd discovered and now must swear off, the power of language, so potent in the human animal, to ease the body with trust.

"Are you all right?" she asked. She hoped that he would understand that the question really meant, Would it be all right if we just kept on talking for now instead of making love?

Whether he understood, she went on. "I don't even mind saying bad things about Sissy, because her...*thing* against me was so stupid and cruel. She actually stole and tortured my dolls! I'd be missing a doll, and then it would turn up in some strange place, like behind the garbage can under the sink. Once my Dad found one of my dolls all melted in the dryer. I remember him peeling the poor thing from off the inside, face molten and bubbled, while I cried and tugged on his shirt." She shuddered. "He gave all the kids the third degree about it, but Sissy just stared back innocently and said, 'It probably got mixed in with the clothes.' We actually fought too, and I mean physically. She came at me like a cat, nails bared, and I would fight

back like I'd seen boxers doing on TV." She jabbed the air above her with her fists. "Poom, poom, keeping her away. Whenever she realized she was losing the fight, she would suddenly explode into this ridiculous wailing and beat on her own face with her fists, hair over her eyes, screaming and even rolling around on the floor sometimes."

Victor whistled quietly. "You should have put *her* in the dryer."

"I thought about it."

She registered a slight stiffening in his legs beneath her, though the tumescence had by then subsided. He had to realize by this point that there were some rough spots in her family history; strangely, these stories, which she had once used to entertain her friends, struck her now as more than a little incriminating. But if Victor Bill intended to love her, then maybe he'd better be fully apprised of the nuttiness of the Verdiannes. Steadily, she'd begun to take his listening as a sign that he accepted her, faults and all.

"What really amazes me, Vic, is that I'm not the next youngest, Charlotte is. Sissy skipped over a whole other kid to get at me, and Charlotte is the real beauty of the family, the one to be jealous of. Charlotte, the Creature from Another Family. You should see her, see our family album pictures. Her face jumps off the page at you. Thick raven reddish hair, enormous blue-blue eyes, cheekbones..."

"What's 'raven reddish hair'?"

"...generous lips..."

"You mean she's generous *with* them?"

They shared a laugh.

"You're sounding a little jealous, by the way," he put in. When she didn't laugh, he added, "You have generous lips too."

"We're talking about the real pouty kind here, like all the big models have? She could have been a model, except her body isn't skinny enough." She paused.

"Go on," he prompted. In fact, he'd panted a little, hadn't he? Theatrically, as a joke. For whatever reason, the tumescence had returned. His left hand slipped up to just below her right breast.

"I've been scared for you to meet her. I keep thinking you'll just fall for her,

kerplunk."

She'd always, always had it in her to be honest. What a relief to remember that. It would save her, that quality.

He said, "Kerplunk is the way I usually fall, that's true. Sort of face forward."

"You know what I mean." Her voice had dropped. A blush had stolen up her neck.

He snickered gently. "I'm not going to fall for her, Jane." Down below, his hand closed lightly over her breast. Her nipple went taut, a point of sensation to pass an answering current to his fingertips.

They both remained silent for a moment. Then his hand came away and gripped her side while his right hand smoothed her hair. The more intimate connection parted, for the moment. It had been such a beautifully tender gesture.

"Where's Charlotte now?" he asked.

She laughed to think of the answer. "Cruising through a picture book life. With 'Brad the Lawyer,' as we call him. A decent guy, really, but a little scary. He seems to have planned out his whole life in advance, all very establishment: job with good firm, upper class clients, big house, new cars, good private schools for the kids. I have nothing to say to the guy; he *loves* the Tea Party, always talking about 'the courage to make hard decisions.'"

"Ugh."

She had laughed hard, and then took Victor's hand and squeezed it and held it between her breasts. "So, do you want to hear about Babe?"

But she didn't get to say much about Babe before he'd gotten up for more wine and come back and they'd started kissing. Poor Babe, who always got shortchanged in so many ways. Babe and Andy, they were special. Like the honey that oozed down to the bottom of the family hive. But poor Babe. Still just a plump little dumpling, a little dab of butter, as their mother used to say. Blonde, blonde to the roots of her eyelashes, and just so *sweet* as she could be. Jane's heart still ached every time she remembered Babe at the table, passing bowls of this or that and always having to be told to take some for herself. She'd just get knocked out by the *passing*. Like it was just so much fun to hand bowls of food around to her brothers

and sisters....

Babe always wanted a boyfriend so badly, but whenever Jane would call and ask Babe about her love life, it was always the same. Some boy so totally unworthy of her, asking her out like it was a favor, some nerdy senior with a need to reject a girl to settle his own score at being rejected, and Babe would just think the world of him, come up with some arcane good thing about one or the other--such nice eyes, or the gentlest hands--as if she didn't deserve an entire good boy. Babe would end up sleeping with some of them and becoming a pet and then they'd get tired of her and her silly Dutch boy haircut that made her look square-headed.

And quiet, sly-looking Andy. Tall, sort of lanky and with a funny knock-kneed walk he'd gotten from their mother's side of the family--Aunt Stell, Mom's sister, walked that way--from great-grandpa, they all said. Andy was always a real loner, which was tough on their mother when it became only he and Babe in the house. He kept himself scarce. Still did. She hadn't heard from him in years.

She guessed now, in her high desert room grown suddenly chilly, that Andy and she shared a nose for certain kinds of trouble. His way was to keep himself scarce, but she'd gotten mired in ineffectual problem solving. Whenever she got to the point with a therapist where she might admit fantasizing about her miscarried daughter, what she would look like if she had lived, what trips they might take together, even little silly things like buying clothes together, she'd found a way to break things off. They would take away that fantasy, wouldn't they? One of them had dug out of her that dream she'd had of Emily growing up and marrying Victor. Could that be part of your healing, the woman had asked her? *Healing!* How could the woman not realize that dream had been a fucking nightmare?

She'd had to break things off. They would never have allowed the anger she felt at the world to linger, never allowed its broad targeting to stand. No, she'd been right to finally get off alone, the kind of alone-but-not-alone that Midge let her be.

Jane rose from the bed, completely sleepless it seemed. She took the comforter from the chair and draped it around herself and walked about, hugging the ends closed. Victor had never called her crazy, even at her craziest. In fact, the reason that she would always remember that long night when she'd talked so much

about her family and he'd listened so well was that he probably saw quite clearly that she might be crazy, and had accepted it. He was sharp enough to see the schitziness behind her make-normal blitheness. Still, he'd pressed closer as they'd kissed and hugged, arms snaking deliciously around each other. Soon, they were opening each other's clothes. He turned off the lamp in the kitchen and in the candlelight she felt she could express a fear that had stolen into her heart. "You should know, Vic, that I'm a non-orgasmic woman."

It had barely given him pause. "There's no such thing."

She sighed under his kisses. "When I think of my family, I want everything perfect for them. But it hasn't been, and it won't be, and I worry that it won't be for me. I think sometimes that I wasn't bred for happiness." There, she had told him everything; a duty fulfilled. If now, he could still stay with her....

To this day she could still feel behind her ear the tremulous breath that had filled his lungs. When she looked up into his face she noticed pinpoints of light in his eyes, tiny reflections of the different candles. That deep breath of his stirred her. Now, he pulled her closer, as if they could be closer, so lashed at this point by their encircling arms.

"Keep holding me," she said.

"I'll keep holding you."

Her own breathing became remarkably free, full of gentle sounds. "You think you will? Do you think you will keep holding me?"

"Yes, I do. I've discovered something important. You want to hear it?"

"Of course."

He'd kissed her, once, then again, brief warm bursts of pressure against her lips, and then he drew back and said, "Sometimes I think I was sent from another planet. Call it the planet Faith. I was sent to find you. If you stay with me, you can cry or laugh, whichever you like and whenever you like. You can take long showers and you can act strange in restaurants. Because with me you can always believe that things will get better."

Quite a speech. By her desert window, Jane inhaled the night air deeply at the memory of those words, on this night, so many years later. Bliss barked outside.

She sighed and pulled the comforter closer around her. "How unfair," she whispered aloud. How unfair that she had been only partially able to exploit the promising facets of her and Victor's beginnings. Victor might have meant what he said back then, perhaps in that moment, but he'd never spoken that way since. Life had pried at the weak edges of his resolve once they were back in the daylight. Still, she missed the earnestness of his self-conviction, motivated first by passion and then, over the years, more and more by simple habit.

She lowered herself awkwardly to her bed, still clutching the comforter about her. On her side, she stared deeply into the welter of folded cloth and shadows until she'd made a ghost of her distant husband to lay beside her. "Vic," she whispered. She thought quickly of his face, his hands. She was about to slide into a reverie designed to restore the remembered sensations of his touch when a clear image of Janice Patrice's shocked face slipped into her mind. It surprised her, pulled her from near-sleep, sliding in from the time when the three of them, she and Victor and Janice Patrice, had collided at a doorway so many years ago at that fund-raising dinner. The girl's startled face had registered a half-dozen conflicting expressions at once--surprise, pleasure, panic, shame--and delivered to Jane the final proof that she was never sure she wanted. She thought of the deep terrible messes that people made of their lives, of marriages weakened by the habitual neglect that led to the gradual demise and final destruction of intimacy.

The monstrous frog chirring had stopped.

She lay still in the silence. She had loved that little plastic doll which had grown wrinkled and sticky in the dryer. She could almost hear the sound it made down the years when her father ripped it from the dryer wall.

Seventeen

How beautifully launched.

Sims took an awfully long time getting ready to go somewhere, Bobby had learned. To be ready to go somewhere and not be able to because another person wasn't ready was one of his least favorite situations. He'd be in the car and driving by now, but instead he was sitting on Sims's futon couch in a sports jacket and his hair combed, and even more strange, about to go somewhere that he wouldn't normally be going to, except that the other person wanted to go so badly. Some play in Hartford that she'd read about while trolling through websites that he, a supposed appsmeister, had never heard of.

He resorted to his cell phone, checked his messages and found nothing special. It was Friday night, there were a couple of parties but they were being generated by friends of the lamer sort, nice but lame. Sims said he was getting to be a snob, that he should consider what he could bring to a party rather than what it could bring to him. But that wasn't really the point, it was time and how you used it and the fact that... His mother was calling and he immediately clicked it in.

"Hey, you out in sunny California with Aunt Charlie?" he asked.

"I am! I got in this afternoon. I'm being rocked in the bosom of the Charl family!"

"Mom, 'c'mon. Watch your language. Homeland Security might be listening."

"Are you two staying in? It's a Friday night."

He explained about the play, about Sims taking so long to get ready, that he hadn't seen a play since the family went to see that musical about religious fanatics.

"*The Book of Mormon*," she prompted. "What are you going to see tonight?"

"I can't even remember the name of it. Hey, are you all done with Santa Fe now?"

"Why're you asking that?"

"Well, going out to see Aunt Charl and Grandma...."

He heard her sigh. "Oh gosh, I can't tell. I have to say, though, I've made

some pretty amazing friends out there. I am *dying* to show you off to them.”

“That’s not a great way to lure me out there, the threat of having my hair messed by my mother in front of a bunch of cowpokes.” They both laughed. Then he asked, “Really, though. It’s almost been a year and you said a year.”

“I know, I *know*. But they really like me and I really like them.... Oh, and guess what! Speaking of luring, they’ve come up with this plan to get me a horse.”

“A *horse*? That big thing you ride, with the tail and the mane and all that?”

“Wait, I’m going to show you a picture of her...if I can figure out how to do that.”

“Just forward it as a message.”

“Oh yeah. Hold on.”

The message came in and he flicked the image to full screen. He was staring at a horse’s face with what looked like greying hair and lots of dark but translucent spots. Sims appeared in the room, pulling on a jacket, so he flipped the phone around and held it up for her. “Christ, my mom’s getting a friggin’ horse.”

Sims stared at it for some time. “It’s beautiful,” she proclaimed. “Old, but beautiful.”

“How do you know it’s old?” he demanded.

“I know horses, and don’t be so surprised.”

Bobby put the phone on speaker. “Hey, Mom, we say the horse is very cool but Sims says it’s got some mileage on it.”

Jane said, “She’s got a lot of years on her, but she can take a rider still, just so they aren’t too heavy. My buddies tell me I have to come back to claim her, and one of them, Emmit, that old chap with the trailer, says I can keep her at his place.”

She sounded like a teenager about to go to the prom. Sims was pointing at her wrist watch.

“We gotta go,” said Bobby.

“I so want to meet you!” Sims called out.

Bobby headed out the door with several thoughts swimming through his brain. It was beginning to look like his mother was putting down roots out there. While Sims drove--she always insisted on driving, he was too distractible, she

claimed--he kept chattering in mild shock. "I guess I always thought this was a kind of temporary thing. I am like totally surprised."

"But Bobby, I mean, the whole plan, it was never just this little thing."

He nodded. "Yeah. It's bigger than I thought, I guess."

"It *is* big. It's no joke what she's doing. I mean, it's kind of heroic, if you think about it."

He looked over at her. For all the "ferocious focus" his ed counselor claimed he had, Sims seemed to be blessed with something much more valuable. Some kind of mental clarity or clearness of vision. He didn't know what to call it, but he certainly liked having it around.

Really, how had this thing with his parents gotten so *big*? What had he missed?

He couldn't recall a time when his parents didn't seem like a rock solid pair. Back when he'd maxed out his credit cards and then written bad checks against them, it was astonishing how quickly and powerfully they had hunkered down around the problem.

"We've got to see this as *our* problem." His mother.

"We might have been asleep at the wheel." His father.

"I say let them sue him." His mother. "Two of those banks sent him pre-approved cards!"

His father: "They might retaliate with a bad credit rating."

And they really kept at it, digging for the "root causes." At some point they concluded that they had set him up by always boasting about his industriousness and the size of his bank account when he hadn't even graduated from high school yet. Then they were all in therapy sessions together. He'd forgotten most of what happened in those several hours. There were not many of them, and they had gone by quickly, perhaps for just long enough as it took for him to feel that they were working the problem out together and that they had his back.

"What are you thinking about?" Sims asked from behind the wheel. "You've been very quiet, sir."

He smiled to himself. "I was just trying to figure out why I didn't see this

coming. My Mom's thing, I mean. We saw this family therapist--you know, to work on my head--and I just remembered that some pretty harsh stuff came up."

"Really?" Sims sound interested, a bit more than appropriately so, in fact.

"Well, sometimes she'd ask the therapist whether it was their fault, or *her* fault. Something she did, or maybe didn't do."

Sims pointed the car precisely ahead. "Worth exploring, for sure."

"Yeah, but the therapist would...well, you know how they do it. Pointed it all back at her. 'What do *you* think you might have done, Mrs. Bill?'"

"Yeah, they do that. And did it get weird?"

Was *weird* the right word? It might be. "Once she just sort of blurted that she was angry that she couldn't have a daughter and maybe that had rubbed off on me in some way."

"You mean because you're a boy and not a girl?"

"No, I think because after she had that emergency operation to get me out she couldn't have any more kids."

The voice of the navigational system warned that a right turn off the highway would be needed soon. He hadn't even noticed that Sims had activated it. But he had heard, very clearly, many years ago, way late at night after his and Arlen's bedtime, his parents' arguing and then his father shouting, "This persistent despair of yours!," so loudly that Arlen's head had dropped down from the bunk above to check if he'd heard it too. Eleven or twelve years ago, that had to be.

Sims had swung the car into a parking spot behind a small church. He recalled that a church was to be their destination, a play put on in a church that doubled as a kind of community arts center. He looked over at her as she rummaged through her bag, and with almost a kind of fury.

He pulled the tickets from the top pocket of his jacket. "Are you looking for these? You asked me to hold onto them."

She looked at the tickets, let out a big breath, and laughed. "Man, if my head wasn't screwed on...." But it *was* screwed on and it was a very good head.

He loved her. The thought took him over with a rush. She had read about this play, figured out the dates and the costs and talked it all through with him, and

then bought the tickets and put the date on their phone calendars, and now driven them to the very event itself. It had all gotten to the point that he could imagine being without her as only something terribly second-rate. And it struck him, sitting there in with his hair combed and his teeth brushed, that he might be feeling as his father once had while looking over at his mother, perhaps dressed as nicely as Sims was for stepping, together into the rites of the world.

He almost said, "I love you." He had never ever said that to a girl, and especially never ever to a college junior woman two years older than he and with her own off-campus apartment. What he said was, "This is a long way to drive for a play."

She had her hand on the door handle. "If you grow up on Long Island, you get very used to driving loooong distances for a fun night out."

She pulled the handle, had nearly swung a leg out, but he caught her arm and held it firmly. "Wait," he said. "I want to tell you something else."

On the other side of the country, and three hours earlier by the clock, Jane watched Charlotte work a mean microwave. The machine wheezed and blew in response to a riff of punched buttons that Charlotte had activated while hardly looking.

"Jane honey, why don't you stay on here and chill for a coupla extra days," Charl proposed as she repelled through the kitchen. "We'd love to put you up for a while and besides, you sound kind of stuffed up."

Jane agreed that she did feel a little punky. All that shuffling between air-conditioned spaces and a steady drop in altitude, and stressed every step of the way. The microwave began to beep, but it wheezed and blew a few more seconds before quieting down. Charlotte snapped open the door and extracted two neat little pita bread sandwiches, tuna and cheese, a snack to tide them over until Brad brought Jennifer home from baseball practice. "Besides, you haven't seen Jennie for three years."

"The baby of the family."

"Some baby. She rules this roost, let me tell you."

They shared a smile.

"You should talk to Brad first before you start making stay-over offers."
Jane's voice sounded like a whimper to her own ears. "I'm a mess. I think I really am getting sick. I'll pollute your happy home."

"Really? You look pretty good, mostly. Darker, thinner. Anyway, we'll put on masks." She bit into her snacky sandwich and spoke with her mouth full. "Hey, listen Janie, this solo thing you're doing, just when *are* you going to start using some of us to help?"

"I've used someone for twenty years."

"And he used you. Welcome to married life."

Jane took in her sister more carefully than she'd been able to in the car. There were some changes; not much aging, as usual, but her heels had lost an inch and there was more gray-hiding red in her hair and a bit more make-up. Her designer jeans seemed to fit over-snugly for a woman of forty-seven, and those black-black heels and sexy little bolero jacket, pink and silken.

During the drive, Jane had found herself telling all. It had been an absolute luxury to have Charlotte alone for those two hours within the close confines of the car. She needed the time with her, because Charlotte would appraise her plans and ideas without judgement and Jane could use any validation she might come away with to do battle with Sissy.

"So you think he did himself in," Charlotte said. "Huh."

Jane was confused for a moment, then realized that now Charl was speaking about their father. "No one knows the whole story, do they? Do you?"

"Just that it was a heart attack. That's what Mom's always said."

"I know."

After a few moments, Charlotte asked, "You'll have to go easy on her. She's not exactly fragile but she's on the edge of fragile."

Jane nodded to herself. "I've almost talked myself out of this a few times, but a part of me thinks she might welcome a chance to, to..."

"Unburden herself or something?"

"Yes."

"Well, I do doubt that. That generation likes to keep their skeletons *way* back

in the closet.”

Jane nearly interrupted, “The truth is that I’m doing this for myself.”

“I get that. Okay, then go for it, I say. But don’t expect too much thanks from the other kids.”

If there were a fuller truth to be learned, who indeed would benefit besides herself? David would keep well immersed in business and cable sports and Little League. Babe and she would talk about it avidly someday, when the time was right, but she couldn't imagine how she might even broach the subject with the out-there Andy. Sara would want to know. She had bolted the family nest about two minutes after getting her driver's license, finally settling in the northern latitudes, but a part of her was always tied to the family. If you sent her an email or a text, there would be a response, *pow!*, within the minute.

At the moment, Charlotte was watching her closely from across the breakfast counter. The two sisters sat on stools, Charl with a coffee mug and Jane with a beer. “You still sure about going back to New Mexico?”

“Bobby just asked me that. Yeah, I think I’m going back.”

“Is he okay with it?”

“Neither of the boys knows what to make of it. *No one* knows what to make of it, including me!”

They shared a laugh. “That’s not true,” Charlotte insisted. “The boys can’t be mad that you didn’t stay home and molder while they were off having college adventures. This time next year, Arlen will probably be living in Greenwich Village.”

“It's Brooklyn now, Charl.”

Jane reflected that she did not really have a place in mind to finally light. She truly had become rootless, free floating. At the moment, she felt as if she'd left a trail of identities behind her, little piles of clothing and whatnots discarded along the roads, like a fleeing refugee who had to discard things to keep moving forward. Some versions of herself she could hardly accept. Had that been she compiling data for needs assessments for two, no three nonprofits? Had that been she somehow becoming a makeshift expert on after-school science projects? Becoming a passable cook for a three males with thankfully low culinary standards? And how about lying

between two dogs in a straw-strewn shed on the edge of the high desert?

Of all things, these reflections elicited a kind of muted joy within her. It was true that now felt she could enter just about any new environment and function quite well. She could sit here on a bar stool and survey her sister and brother-in-law's upscale world without fear of being subsumed or bruised. The world was becoming a set of environments that she could visit, explore, study, stay in or move on from. This kitchen, redone to accommodate the latest suburban appointments--a butcher block "station" between the sink and refrigerator and a breakfast countertop with four matching stools--how foreign and wonderful.

Charlotte asked, "What will you do if you stay out there?"

Jane frowned slightly. It might be too early for her to share an idea that had been forming in her thoughts, but she did so anyway. "I love my job at the gallery, but I've been thinking of something else too."

"Spill."

"A kind of second home for animals."

"You mean like a shelter? They don't have those out there?"

Jane shook her head. "Sure, but I was thinking more for farm and ranch animals, and large pets."

"Large *pets*?"

"Like retirees who buy a Shetland or an emu and then can't take care of it anymore, or die. There's a hundred scenarios, but the common need I think is to have a place to hold onto the animals until we can find a next place for them."

Charlotte took a last bite and then went to pour herself more coffee, which she could drink right up until the moment her head hit the pillow. With her back turned, she asked, "You see a place for Vic in all this?"

Jane ate slowly while she considered the question. "Less and less."

That brought her fully around again. "Wow, really truly?"

"Too much to work on, too little to salvage. Does that sound harsh?"

Charlotte laughed. "I read this article about establishing a family night? So, we all agreed that on Wednesdays Brad'd pick up Jennie after baseball practice and we'd all be home for supper. Do you know he had to set it up as a standing

appointment with his secretary? Can you imagine? And I *know* she has to brief him every Wednesday morning about it."

Jane was shaking her head. "That's a tweak, Charl. You guys already have so much. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think Brad has slept with other women."

"He doesn't have time! And he'd probably just fall asleep in the middle of it."

They both shrieked with laughter. When Charlotte caught her breath, she asked, "But wasn't all that a long time ago? I mean, that's bastardly stuff but he stopped it, right?"

Jane shrugged. "It preys on me, what can I say? And I'm not sure how much will power was involved in his breaking the habit. His promotion stuck him in the office, away from his road honeys. I guess was supposed to pretend that that meant he loved me again and sweep the rest under the rug."

"He might have gotten himself *off* the road, to stop himself."

"That's generous."

There was a noise, a deep electrical humming and clacking.

Charlotte said, "That's the garage door. Brad's home. I hope he remembered to pick up Jennie."

A few moments later, Jane turned on her stool to face a door that opened in the kitchen wall. A child was coming through that door, a grown child, her youngest niece, Jennifer, with her father, Brad, directly behind her. At first, Jane could only stare. The expression on the girl's smooth, innocent face was composed of both pleasure and shyness, and on her shoulder, beside the lanks of her brown hair, the left hand of her father. The girl wore an old sweatshirt with the arms torn off, a T-shirt beneath it. Her forearms were streaked with dust. On her left knee below the hem of baggy shorts were fresh scratches. Brad was talking, his thickly curled head turned away toward the door he was managing to close with the one finger freed from his briefcase handle, saying, "Here we are and here's Aunt Jane...", and soon had rid himself of the briefcase on a kitchen chair and brought his other hand up to his daughter's other shoulder as the girl stepped forward with a careless, awkward grace.

Then they stood before Jane, the father unaffectedly steadying his daughter

against the mild imbalancing of meeting a beloved relative grown distant and mysterious in ways not yet accountable to the daughter's young mind. Jane felt her breath taken from her. It had hit her like a wave: how beautifully, beautifully launched this child was--for life, for love. She could feel it, see it, the trust, the *trust*. It emanated from her like a powerful aura. Jane's heart tumbled and soared both, wrenched by a kind of convoluted envy, strangely pure, for this wonderful girl, so deservedly fortunate.

"Hi, Aunt Jane." Jennifer's voice was tentative, but underpinned with a deeper confidence.

"Oh, just *look* at you." Jane couldn't help herself; she drank in Jennifer's clear brown gaze, her straight young body. But she must stop staring at the poor girl. She rose and quickly gathered her niece into her arms. "Oh, Jennie. What a *wonder* you've become."

The encounter took what seemed to be the last of her strength. It was all hitting home, the shuffling about, the prospect of battle with Sissy, the distant tug of husband and sons. All through the evening after Jennie had showered and changed, Jane wanted to hear every shred of the family's news, especially Jennifer's doings. She would have talked all night, but Charlotte was monitoring her and suggested, just short of insisting, that Jane get some rest.

Much later, Jane awoke fully in the quieted house with an urge to call Midge. She snapped on the lamp and read radio clock: eleven-thirty. She tried to dissuade herself, registering her own wheezing in the quiet room, but eventually she rose and tiptoed to the kitchen where she left her phone.

She was startled to find Jennifer standing in the kitchen in her baggy sweats. A countertop fixture threw a dim light upon them both.

"Did I wake you, Aunt Jane?"

"No, no. What are you doing up?"

"Eating yogurt? Want some?" She tipped a quart container Jane's way.

"No, I'm good, thanks. Hey, you're wearing the earrings I sent you!"

Jane lifted a hand to brush back the girl's hair and reveal the gleaming silver and turquoise that the night light had animated.

Jennifer laughed a little. "I might never take them off."

"How sweet." Jane let her hand stay, just touching the girl's cheek, and then pulled it quickly away. "Oh, I'm contagious."

"Don't worry, I never get sick." She smiled in the dark.

"Shhh, we shouldn't talk so loud."

Jennifer laughed. "Mom sleeps with earplugs 'cause Dad snores."

"But we might wake your Dad."

"I don't think anyone's ever been able to do that."

Jane was so grateful that the girl let her just look and look at her, touch her at times.

Jennifer snapped closed the yogurt container, gave the spoon a final lick and then set it in the sink. "Can we see that picture of your new horse again?"

"Sure!" Jane found her phone and with predictable slowness activated it and scrolled through to the photograph of the old mare. "Here we go."

The phone's screen lit their two intently staring faces. "Does she have a name?" Jennifer asked.

"I didn't tell you? It's Tumbler."

"Tumbler? *Tumbler*? That's like so perfect."

"I agree."

They continued to study the photograph in silence for a few more moments. Then Jennifer said, "I'd like to reach right in there and hold her head."

Jane laughed quietly. "That would be a lot easier to do if you came out and visited me."

Jennifer gasped. "Oh wow," she said. "Oh wow."

It was the first time that she sounded like what Jane thought a girl her age would sound like.

Eighteen
Her life's desire.

There was a small group of welcomers for the thinly populated midday Coaster run to Los Angeles's Union Station. Jane easily spotted Sissy among them. As she had foreseen, Sissy had positioned herself dramatically, on this occasion at the intersection of the colliding styles of floor tiles in the main waiting area. All of the other welcomers were relegated to backdrop roles. It was mostly by Sissy's tiny smile of appraisal, isolated below a pair of wide, black sunglasses and bracketed by tasteful earrings glowing with real gold, that Jane recognized her older sister. That face had changed over the years, and not just from natural causes. As soon as she'd been spotted, Sissy came forward, arms out with elbows kept close to sides. She pressed her cheek quickly to Jane's, then gripped her by the waist and hugged her in brief, hard spasms as if shaking her.

"You're here," she observed.

"In sunny LA. How are you doing, Sissy?"

"I'm fine. Speaking of sun, looks like you've been getting some. The ride up okay?"

"It was, yes."

They headed for the street, forming a line with Sissy, Jane, and Jane's wheeled suitcase in straight succession. When Jane failed to keep pace, Sissy turned and chided, "Let's move along now. I've got a hireling watching the car, but he won't wait forever."

"Sorry. I usually travel lighter, but I brought a few things for you and Mom"

"Good. I could use some folkloric items to get the eyes of my detractors off the chrome and crystal."

"Oops. Yours is of the chrome and crystal variety."

Sissy laughed into the plaza. "I parked right out front. I tipped a skycap, or whatever they call trainmen, to jump in if a cop came snooping."

"Just like you."

"Uh huh. The showing off begins now, so buckle up."

Sissy was heading for an enormous black Lexus waiting in the no-parking lane with its running lights flashing "Stay clear!" in amber bursts. A handsome young man with lustrous dark skin met her as she arrived at the curb and tipped his service cap. She swung her hand Jane's way, and the man leapt back with nearly balletic grace and nimbly snagged her bag. He slipped the bag beneath the gently rising rear door and pressed it closed with still enough time to beat Sissy to the driver's side and smoothly wrench her door open. Sissy patted his arm as she stepped in behind the wheel.

With a mild shock, Jane could see that Sissy had attracted the man, that many men in fact would now find her attractive, even sexy. She appraised her sister's taste in clothing and jewelry, the rich gold, and the chic clothes, black despite the sunshine. With her legs in sheer black leggings, the snug ends neatly encircling her bare ankles above short-heeled black pumps, and that short skirt girdling her hips, Sissy had clearly discovered the inherent power of her compact contours. The padded shoulders of her blouse, *de rigueur* since the ascendancy of recent over-the-top pop singers, provided a fashionable balance to her figure. She'd left off wearing a padded bra, Jane noticed; it seemed that Sissy had discovered that her generous curves from hip to ankle could signal her sexual power unassisted. Now, with her thumb on the ignition button and a knowing smile just below the black slash of her sunglasses, Sissy paused to whisper, "You'd think he'd paid *me*."

"You love it."

Sissy nodded. "I do."

When the engine roared to life and the door locks automatically snapped down, Jane fell back and cried, "Help! I'm in Sissy's world."

"No better place to be, little sister. So, have you eaten?"

"Charl loaded me with snacks, but I could eat something. You?"

"Starving. But I'm always starving because all I eat these days is roughage."

"That's been true for some time, hasn't it?"

Sissy moved them in and around traffic as if the car moved on rails laid for it alone. She gripped the steering wheel's diametric strut, flicking left and right.

Under the dash, fans machined for silence pushed cool air in a steady wash around their bodies. Quiet jazz percolated through several speakers.

"My diet's worse now," said Sissy. "If I sneak a piece of cheese or some lazy waiter substitutes caffeinated coffee, I get migraines."

"Wow."

"The body adjusts. By the way, I'm pregnant."

Jane stared over at her. "You're kidding. How?"

"Now that was delicate."

"Sissy, you know what I mean. Who, then?"

"No one you know. Rob? I might have written about him."

Jane remembered an email from Charlotte, with whom no information could be considered secret. "The playwright? Sissy, he's gay, isn't he?"

"So what? He's healthy, pink, you get 'em to jerk off into a bottle."

She talked on, something about how the pregnancy was affecting her diet, and something more about the migraines, but Jane could only nod weakly at this point. She was trying to gather her wits. The fact was she felt whip-sawed, nearly faint. A familiar spasm, jerked by a time-sunk thread, had started deep in her groin. It was that strange pain she'd felt at odd times since the miscarriage that had taken Emily from her. From her and Vic.

"Let's start talking like people now, Sissy. I'm not liking clever talk about jerking into bottles. I want to be congratulating you, not trading witticisms."

Sissy wagged her head slightly. "You're right, little sister. I'd better start sounding like the breeders. Oh, that might strike you as clever-sounding too. How to speak, how to speak..."

"Sissy!"

"I'm not, I'm being *good*. Just give me a second. But we've got to make either a left or right here. How about a nice sandwich place with a dynamite salad bar for me?"

"Fine. As long as the lettuce doesn't explode."

"Me-ow."

"Well, I want to feel something serious about your being pregnant--for one

thing that it makes sense from what you've said in the past, but I'm afraid I'm going to be cutting through some sort of jungle of clever talk. It always exhausts me." She had made her point one too many times. By now she realized how severe a shock the news of the pregnancy had been to her. It would be a girl too, she knew it. The daughter she'd been denied. Her life's desire, the chance to raise a girl right, would be denied her, while she'd have to witness long distance as her sister steadily warped a daughter of her own.

She shook her head, but at her own behavior. Sissy certainly brought out the worst in her.

She forced her mind, and heart, to focus on her mission. She'd have to go on relating to this Sissy person, this sibling assigned by genetic chance, who'd make her work for every intimacy, pay as she went to accomplish her healing. She'd already made one bad assumption, that Sissy would believe that this visit would benefit her as well. There had been no such conclusion on Sissy's part; in fact, she'd merely hummed on the phone when Jane broached her suspicions about their father's self-destructiveness and how that might have hurt them. And when she tentatively mentioned "Dad's romantic attachment to us," Sissy had nearly shouted, "Oh, where do you get these insane ideas?" No, Jane would have to prove any benefits, and in the meantime would represent the normal burdens of an unwelcome and imposing guest. And if Sissy did not fall in with her plans, then she might have to resort to stealth.

"Can't we just eat at your place?" Jane asked. "A restaurant seems so cold to me, under the circumstances."

"You mean for our Big Talk? I don't eat in, sweetheart. Don't worry, we'll survive."

Sissy was known at the restaurant. The breathy young hostess said, "Right this way, Ms. Verdianne." Jane fell in step behind her sister as the hostess strode before them through a well-populated dining room to a window table that overlooked an artificial lake afloat with several real swans.

Once seated, Sissy left her menu closed, her decision made, so Jane understood that she had no shielding activity behind which to plan her next move.

She now knew that every old pattern of theirs could reasonably be expected to re-assert and obstruct; the talk would come to nothing, the deeper truths would skitter farther out of reach as Sissy moved to close down every new topic of a potentially uncomfortable character. She'd have to distract Sissy's fast mind from her nearly relentless inventorying of personal damages if she were to get to the deepest truths.

To buy time, Jane pretended to be taken by the view of the lake, one floor down. The view worked against her; its artificialness lent an unreal edge to her thinking. In the center of the lake was one of those cheap contrivances, mere plumbing, that threw up a ring of water streams as if less were more instead of mere economizing. The swans avoided it, gliding and circling in a calm little cove some distance away like figurines on a music box mirror.

Jane took a breath and turned to face her sister. "Here's what it is, Sissy. I need your help to help Mom. If she's living with nasty knowledge about Dad, we need to free her of that."

Sissy let her face drop back slowly as if reacting to a slow-motion slap. After a moment, she reached up and removed her sunglasses by pressing two fingers to each hinge and slipping the whole object forward. "Good for you," she said. "The direct approach. I think I've reached the point where I can at least admire you for directness."

When Jane said nothing, Sissy went on. "I see you don't trust that statement."

"No, that's...."

"No, I wouldn't expect you to trust me. And I don't trust you. It used to make me sad to think it wouldn't happen quickly, or maybe never. Now I just accept that it won't."

Jane simply studied her sister's face.

Sissy said, "I guess my way of dealing with the family mess is different from the gabbing that you and Charl do. My plan has been to remove most of the external causes of my pain. I think my remaking has been fairly successful, though I'm pretty close to concluding that I've been too screwed up to pull off anything resembling a meaningful relationship with a man, and gay is not my way so I've decided to at least be regenerative."

"Can't you just say, 'To have a baby'?"

"Who cares? Anyway, the biological part was not so difficult to arrange, and not only because I have money. If you've got the dough, there's a whole medical apparatus at the ready out there, a SWAT team for the partnerless procreant. Hey, that's good!"

The waitress approached them, and Jane fended her off with the unmistakably blunt flat of her hand. She said to Sissy, "And what does this have to do about getting to the bottom of things?"

Sissy shrugged. "I'm just fed up trying to figure it all out. The whole 'family dysfunction' thing sickens me. I was all for it at first but then I began to feel like a goddam baby, a sniveler. I'll be forty-seven this year and I'm still mad at Daddy and cross with Mommy. Does a Guatemalan peasant stop by her therapist's hut on the way home from the fields?"

Jane dropped a forearm to the table and leaned in. "Sissy, this great friend I made in Lamy, I said nearly the same thing to her, about how childish it all seemed, and she told me about this study done in Guatemala--I'm not making this up--with the peasant women who came to a Red Cross clinic set up there. What they discovered was really shocking, the research people, I mean." She hurried because Sissy's interest might flag. "The women complained of incessant pain, physical and emotional. It was such a load of pain that the researchers discovered, Sissy. So many of them were sick of their husbands, of getting beaten, of dealing with piles of children. A lot of them begged to be sterilized. Really, some of the workers were shocked by the data once they started keeping it."

Sissy had turned to look out the window. "So, the point is it's a great big sick world?"

"Pain is everywhere, and no one likes it."

"And if we get the chance to escape it, take it?"

"I would say...deal with it, and grow. Anything but pretending pain doesn't exist, or that we're not normal for experiencing it. I see these as duties. Now, anyway."

Sissy nodded but remained silent. She glanced over at the returning waitress

and muttered, "I wonder if I can eat now. I'm supposed to, for two as they say."

"Please do."

They both ordered salads, and then circled the central salad bar together, each keeping to the other side. Through the plastic canopy, Jane gazed through at the image of her sister distorted by the curved Plexiglas. Sissy was keeping her head down, picking with unusual carefulness among the chilled crocks of sliced vegetables and torn leaves. Sissy cut herself a thick slice of dark whole wheat bread and announced, "This was once denied me."

At the table, Jane's sister munched carefully, keeping her lips tightly closed. She swallowed and said, "Can I indulge myself in a few moments of gruesome curiosity? Specifically about your marriage, and how maybe marriage isn't something I should be craving?"

"Should I start it off for you? Yes, Vic and I are having problems. Always have, I guess." Jane ate for a while, thinking. "I'm not even sure what they are. I guess the main thing I discovered is that living with Vic made me feel...small. Smaller than I should have felt."

"About what?"

"Being less than perfect, I think."

It was getting very hard for Jane to speak. Her conclusions about her father's death, his serious despair and the ways he chose to deal with it, pressed against her throat as if words were matter. She might blurt something that she ached to but felt that she should not, not yet. Sissy would freeze up, close off access to her mother, and it was their mother who safeguarded the knowledge she most needed.

"Whenever I would get depressed, it would interfere with Vic's world view that one should just plow through trouble and smooth it out as an act of the will."

Sissy snickered. "I warned you about him. Mr. Positive."

The conversation was wheeling off course. Jane had never meant to pursue an indictment of Victor, but if sharing gossipy facts about the dark underside of her marriage was the tribute Sissy demanded for her cooperation, she would comply. "It's not really optimism or cheerfulness so much as some kind of demand for simplicity. He doesn't like things complicated; the more complex, or indeterminate,

or unresolved, the worse for him. It makes him feel unmanly or something if he can't snap it right within a certain period of time."

Sissy stabbed at specific vegetables and brought each slowly to her lips. "I do find this interesting," she admitted.

"Vic never openly insisted that I clean up my act, but over time it threw him--me too--just how complicated and not so very visible my problems are. It was in his look, the quick predictable way his interest would...flag. And he had this way of withholding affection at certain moments, I think to communicate his disapproval of how slowly I was dealing with something." She kept going, feeling her way sentence by sentence. "He's been a good father, a kind of standard conscientious husband, provider, a holder of jobs, so I've been forced to kind of admire him from afar. That's a strange feeling to make do with for years on end, especially when I began to discover that he's sort of like Dad was, really sad in a deep-down way. And he would never take it very seriously when we agreed that he had problems to work on too." Should she keep talking? "Then, he started sleeping around. At least, I'm pretty sure he did. I've never told anyone that part. Not in the family, anyway." Not true. She'd talked to Charl about it. But Sissy might be flattered to think she was now privy to classified information.

Her sister munched on a slice of green pepper and shrugged. "Kind of predictable, I'd say."

"Maybe so."

Jane was inwardly chafing at this point because all the talk about Vic was pulling her further from the points she really wanted to make. She wanted Sissy to consider how damage was being handed down through generations, about how more than a few of the Verdianne women habitually looked to complete the lives of weak men who had no intention of completing those lives themselves, that evading that trap must not be done at the cost of one's emotional life, that part of the reason she'd left her home was to save her husband and herself from the impossible tasks they'd pressed upon each other and then blamed the other for not accomplishing.

Jane elected to flail on. "But what was I saying, what was...?" She stabbed her fork into lettuce leaves. "He made me feel that my problems reduced the quality of

his life somehow."

"Don't they? In a close relationship, I mean?"

"I guess I wonder why our weaknesses can't be an expected part of it, even a kind of richness. Christ, everybody has them."

"Looks like Victor would say not."

Jane stopped speaking, confused as to what point she was making anymore. Her silence, her labored chewing, her dropped eyes, all these signs could not but betray her confusion, and she would have loved to feel Sissy's hand gripping her arm to comfort her. Then she was visited by a sharp, lingering sensation that Victor was very troubled. All of her unbidden visions of him shackled up with some young thing or happily bacheloring with a gang of cronies evaporated like steam from a mirror. She could nearly see him, a figure hunched and brooding in his corner of their universe. It was oddly comforting to feel he might be in pain at her absence, that across miles they were still bound, still married, still trying.

When she looked up, she discovered Sissy staring off out the window with her elbows bracketing her plate and her fork sticking from her laced fingers. There was a change, a reversion to something distressingly familiar in her sister's posture: Sissy had become angry. Jane watched her, waiting, not sure that any additional words she could muster as the moment would clarify things rather than muddy them further.

Sissy said, "Call me selfish, but I like it that you two are having problems. I always thought you threw Vic in my face. All your lovely beaux, actually."

Jane laughed weakly. "I wouldn't call it selfish. Vain, maybe." She could not help adding, "Think about what you're saying, Sissy."

"What?"

"Really, Sissy, having boyfriends just to make *you* feel bad? Did you ever think that maybe all I was doing was just trying to really connect with another human being? Like I might have needs other than wanting to make you feel lousy?"

"*Your* needs, *your* needs."

So, her reward for exposing her wounds would be this new attack. "Your needs too. Really, Sissy, why do you insist on putting yourself in the center of so

many universes?"

"Fuck off, Jane."

"Oh, that's constructive. Really, you should listen to yourself some time."

Jane actually managed to keep on eating, albeit mechanically. She kept her warming face still as Sissy eyed her with extreme concentration, her dark brown eyes shifting carefully back and forth between her own. Evidently, Sissy found nothing to be gained by a direct attack because she shrugged, then laughed.

"So we get nowhere," she said.

"We get somewhere, always, whether we like it or not, and I know it's painful, Sissy, but knowledge goes on. We only get better at facing it or ignoring it, but it's still there, and growing."

Sissy pushed her plate away. "I'm not hungry anymore--but not because of what you're saying, just to explain."

"Thanks." Jane took a breath and waited for a few seconds to pass. "Can I just say a couple of things, some things I've been thinking about?"

"For example?"

"For example, that I've concluded that it's not my fault Dad had inappropriate feelings for me."

"Oh my Jesus!" Sissy grabbed at her chair arms and looked around as if she'd been suddenly trapped within them. "You think he was in *love* with you." At the table behind her, a circle of silver-haired businessmen lowered their voices.

Jane started to say something more, but Sissy had leaned back with fingers pressed to her temples. She appeared to be silently fuming. Before Jane could speak, Sissy rose from the table and said, "Let's go. I can pay up front."

"I sort of wanted coffee or something."

"I need air."

Jane had no choice but to follow. She waited in silent confusion in the foyer while Sissy presented a credit card to the hostess and then signed the slip. There were watercolors of beach scenes, rocks pounded by surf, hung in a row between the bathroom doors. Pain was like that, like waves. If not stopped, it rolled out and pounded other souls, such as one's children. Sissy was going to have a daughter, and

then over the years she was going to slowly but surely fuck her up.

In the car, the two of them remained silent for a long while. Finally, Jane said tentatively, "I'm not sure exactly what's happening here." She waited for a moment, and then went on. "But in my humble opinion when Dad gave up, or whatever he did with Mom, he looked around for another object. And there I was, just coming into womanhood. That's my theory, anyway."

Sissy shouted, "Jesus, sister, most of the rest of us already *had* a woman's body."

Jane managed to say quietly, "But don't you see? You were all too grown up by then. He couldn't secretly want you because you'd figure out what was going on."

"So what? Anyway, this all has to do with my being pregnant, doesn't it? Whenever you feel the eensiest bit eclipsed by me, in whatever fucking way, you find some way of bringing the family's attention onto you and your bottomless supply of needs."

This was too much. Jane kept her face resolutely to the view outside her window, crowded desert land strung with wires and planted with non-indigenous palm trees.

"Listen, Jane," Sissy blurted. "It's unfair for me to have to be made to feel, at any point when it's emotionally convenient for you, like something turned up in a litter box."

"I don't do that."

"The hell you don't. Twenty years of promoting your perfect family. Seems that was a bit of a stretch, right? So now you've got to come up with something to blame your failure on, and this month it's Daddy did himself in because he was super guilty about loving me too much."

Though Jane was stung, she felt compelled to consider the charge seriously. Meanwhile, Sissy went on. "You don't get it, do you? You're practically middle-aged and you're still thinking like a teenager. Dad was just unhappy, Jane, just plain old fashioned day in, day out unhappy. When that happens to a parent, the kids take it in and make some sort of sense out of it--but it's usually stupid sense. In your case, and Charlotte's and Sara's, by the way, it's that Dad really wanted you instead of

Mom. I got onto some kind of rejected lover track because Dad and I palled around like boys when..."

"What?" Jane snarled the word.

"You don't remember me and Dad working on the car, putting in the retaining walls?"

"No." It was as if Sissy were speaking of some other family. Jane thought back hard, but she could come up with only one brief memory of Sissy coming into the house to fetch, as she announced to Jane and Charlotte in the kitchen, some tool or other from the basement.

"Anyway, the sadness, Jane. David took it in as disappointment in him, so he made himself into a Dad clone. Sara fled to the North Pole. Andy's rejecting the world. You and Charlotte became New Improved Wives and Moms. But mostly it made us competitive of each other, blamers and schemers, and it pushed us all apart."

When Jane remained silent, Sissy went on. "We're just a normal unhappy family, little sister. You can go on TV if you want an 'expose all' and cry for the camera, but there's million million families just like ours and it's no big deal. Me, I'm tired of being a victim and so I'm just taking action."

"So am I," said Jane.

Sissy stayed quiet. When she finally did speak, she did so only to lay out some tentative plans for the evening. Jane lied about being tired and needing to go to bed early. Sissy fell in with this fiction by announcing that she had several open houses to manage for her company the following morning. They talked about real estate values, which were rising again after the recession, and Jane concurred with Sissy's wisdom when she boasted about dumping her condo holdings early on. On Jane's side, the topic prompted a vision of Victor alone in their house, of the general anxiety attendant upon giving up and moving into new spaces. By the time they reached Sissy's home, Jane was aching to be back to her own private room in Midge's house, though that place might now exist only in her imagination. When she looked around more closely, she found herself in a neighborhood of which she had not even a distant memory. "Where are we going?"

"You haven't seen my new place. Or the one before it, probably. I have to think about the kid now."

Jane braced herself for what she could envision as future decades of The Kid: pictures, bits of news, less than subtle bragging, information about shoe and dress sizes and favorite colors. She would be forced to become Aunt Jane to Sissy's mail order baby.

They slowed then swerved into the driveway of a modest white house with a wide front yard in the center of which a short, fat palm tree sat like a gigantic pineapple. Heavy beds of ivy held yards of ground around its base. "It's safe out here," Sissy explained, "and the schools are good." She jammed the car into park and switched off the engine. "Lots of the neighbors have kids."

It was very quiet in the interior of the car now. The two sisters sat side by side, neither making a move to leave. Jane took a breath and said, "You know that the reason I came out here was to talk to Mom. Are you going to let me see Mom tomorrow?"

"No, I won't allow that," said Sissy.

"Sissy, we have to get to the bottom of things."

"We have. Pulling Mom into all this is non-negotiable."

"Stop talking like this is a business meeting or something."

"It is, isn't it? I mean, you haven't said one fucking word remotely congratulating me on my pregnancy."

Sissy had abruptly jerked the door handle and was already swinging out toward the back of the car. By the time Jane could collect her wits, her sister was already halfway up the walk with Jane's bag trailing behind her. Jane reached for the door handle, but stopped; she was stunned by the depth of her blundering. She could not have scripted a worse way to secure her sister's support than she if she'd consciously tried to do so.

Nineteen

An epicenter of sadness.

Sissy hadn't heard any noise from Jane's bedroom, so she decided to slip into the full bathroom and take her shower first. She was surprised to find no traveler's toiletries laid out. She would not have pegged Jane as overly hygienic, but she would have predicted the presence of a damp toothbrush. The shower doors were dry, but the bathroom itself felt damp. The pile of guest towels she'd left out was untouched.

Perhaps Jane was in the kitchen? No, she was not there. Sissy kept moving on to the laundry room, where she found her bath towel from the back of the bathroom door newly damp and wadded up in the washer. What in the world?

She marched back to the guest room and found it so clean and empty, the bed so carefully made, that only a forensic specialist could determine whether anyone had slept there last night. So, Jane had woken early, dabbed at herself, and fled. Yesterday's encounters had been rough, one or two could even be called nasty, but to just bolt without a murmur? Was there a note somewhere? There was not.

Sissy took a long, sad shower, but by the end of it, she had shrugged off the last vestiges of guilt and readied herself for the professional activities of the day. She was nearly out of the driveway when she hit the brakes, killed the engine, and headed back into the house. Her office door was closed, a good sign, but the interior did not look quite the same. Her computer was off, desk drawers closed, closet door firmly closed as she preferred to leave it. She sat at the desk and pulled open the top drawer of the two-drawer cabinet beneath it. She could not be sure, but the spacing among the hanging files seemed slightly altered. Behind one there was nearly a quarter inch of empty space before the one behind it. In the closer file were several copied documents that contained her signature.

Sissy snapped up her phone and dialed her mother's assisted living residence. A recorded voice came on and asked her to be patient, that the fucking staff was busy helping other less important people and would be with her soon. Not soon enough!

Her job as older and wiser and legally responsible sister was simply to protect a poor woman in her old age from as many natural and unnatural shocks as she could. That Jane had not been willing to honor that objective was no great surprise. As Sissy waited and fumed, she rehearsed the blistering verbal missiles she'd direct at her selfish younger sister when she next had her in her sites. She'd let her know in no uncertain terms that she herself had learned plenty about herself, been in therapy for years in fact, and she could assure her that all the gobs of so-called truth about parental mistakes had not done her a grain of good. It was all just first-world luxuriance, the addiction of the privileged to shortcuts and externally applied solutions. And what genuine benefit did the damaged enjoy from discovering who was responsible for their damaging? If you identified your knife-wielding attacker, did your stab wound disappear? Those were the sorts of things she'd shout at Jane, though with even more acidic inflection.

A woman came on the phone. Sissy recognized Mavis's voice and offered a quick pleasantry and asked to be put through to her mother. Mavis told her that her mother was not in. About a half an hour before, in fact, she and one of her daughters, visiting from out of town, had driven off together.

For a moment, Sissy could say nothing. Then she asked urgently, "How could that happen without my say so?"

"She had a release, your sister, signed by you."

"That's not possible, Mavis. Any release signed by me would have to be notarized, signed in blue ink, the works. Do you have the document in front of you?"

"I do. Let's just see, Ms. Verdianne..." Mavis's voice quaked with rising anxiousness. "Ms. Verdianne, it's all filled out and signed properly so I'm not sure what the problem is."

Sissy nearly replied in detail, that the document was a photocopied paste-up with a forged signature, but she held up and instead asked, "Did my sister say where she was taking my kidnapped mother?"

"Only...out to breakfast. Oh, and that she would be back by this afternoon."

"We have to sign out where we're going, Mavis. Check the sheet!"

"I'm looking at it right now. It says, 'Out to breakfast, back by lunch or

shortly after.”

“And that’s all?”

“It’s all we’ve ever required, Ms. Verdianne. I think you know that.”

“Well, that’s one fucking policy we’ll have to change.” She might have gone on, but her brain was telling her that it would be better to keep Mavis on her side. “I’m sorry, Mavis, it’s just that...okay, please call me as soon as my mother is returned. Will you do that?”

“Absolutely. Of course.”

If there was one feeling that Sissy deplored above all others it was powerlessness. Pacing the rooms, biting at a nail and ruining a manicure only one day old, and kicking at the rug, did not reduce the feeling by a single milligram. But then her gaze fell on the turned candle holders that Jane had given her, which were still standing side by side on kitchen countertop. They were articles made of polished steel and brass, twin cones whose points met at a bright steel bearing in the center. She had been surprised to like them, mostly because they indicated that Jane knew her tastes somewhat, though she would have preferred that the maker hadn't imposed a beaten look to trumpet the fact of their being made by hand. At the moment, however, the best use she could put them to was to grab them up, step out onto the patio, and hurl them with all her strength against the flagstones. The satisfaction of seeing them blasted into parts was intoxicating, but regrettably for less than a minute.

At that moment many miles away, Jane perambulated her mother through a wheezing automatic door and then down the long empty aisles of Saver’s, just ten minutes open. Before her, the old woman's head switched about, alert as a loon's. She had insisted on a tight scarf to hide her thinning hair. Jane still felt the vestiges of the pain she'd felt at the sight of so much pale scalp showing through as she'd helped her mother to dress. It cut her further how game the old lady was, how she'd trembled with excitement at Jane's arrival, and how eager to get her spindly arms into a cardigan and her whole self into the wheelchair and out the door. Outside in the parking lot, she had inhaled the pulpy Los Angeles air as if she'd been rolled onto the deck of an Alpine chalet.

Behind her, Jane felt as if she were rolling this poor trusting soul to her doom, step by step to the edge of a precipice. She was both glad she'd come and terrified to ask the questions she'd come to ask. Sissy's strongly implied accusations, that her prying would be just a form of selfishness, had taken root. She had decided to let the morning unfold naturally; at the very least, it could remain just a pleasant, unannounced visit from a loving daughter.

She watched her mother's head as they wended their way through the piled clothes. It troubled her to see how bent the old woman had become, but now she raised a hand to stop Jane and then with a cry grabbed at a brightly colored blouse. When she'd opened it and laid it flat on her lap, she giggled like a child. "My, my." She fumbled for the label. "Read this for me, Jane. Is this my size?"

"Your size, Mom, but I'm not so sure it's your color."

"Oh, you! You'd have me in blue, blue all the time!"

The old woman looked up at her and they shared a smile. "Noble blue," said Jane. "That's what you used to call it."

"Till I got sick of it."

Jane took in her mother's eyes, still bright behind her wide plastic glasses. "I'm so proud of you, Mom. You've really kept yourself up." When her mother smiled, she could see that her teeth were still good, but how hard her gums had become, the shrinkage that exposed roots. Some of the metal work of an old bridge was now visible.

"It's the pool, Jane. Do you still swim, sweetheart?"

"They let you swim?" She thought of her mother's weak heart failing at the deep end.

Her mother shook her head. "That's just what I call it. I walk around holding a rail, and sometimes they let me float a little bit--like an old mat. Helps to keep my pulse up, they tell me. I think we should try over there." She reached up to rehang the blouse, and they moved off to another long rack of clothing, bathrobes. She waved her hand in the air impatiently, signaling her daughter to move faster. "You see," she said, then reached up to swat the robes. "They don't make them with snug sleeves anymore. It's all kimono style."

"That's just the newer ones. We'll find one with sleeves."

"All kimono style now. Oh, those big sleeves...." Her mother made a circle in the air under her raised right wrist. "They catch on everything. No wonder Japanese houses are so bare. Their sleeves'd be catching on vases and lamps and knocking them over all the time!"

Jane scouted ahead, just a few yards off. "Here, Mom," she called back.

Her mother wheeled herself up, competently in fact, and again with that knocked-out happy smile that had always buoyed and mystified her daughter.

"How in God's name, Mom, do you always stay so cheerful?"

"That's easy. Lucky to be alive, dear. Lucky to be alive." She pulled the robe from Jane's hands and flattened it over her. Jane reached down and helped to arrange it over the front of her mother, and then stepped back. "That's a good color for you, Mom."

"Dark blue. Ah, noble blue, again. At least it won't show the food stains from all the dropping and spilling I do in front of the TV."

Jane laughed. "See. You always find a way to be satisfied."

Her mother was now holding the robe tightly to her and looking down the length. "Not always," she said, "but I'm happy not to want as much as you do. You and Sissy and Babe." She raised a hand as if swearing to something. "It's very lucky to be able to just feel lucky enough that you're alive."

Jane leaned back and regarded her mother. "What are you trying to say? Are you saying that people want too much--like a generations thing, or something?"

"I've said it to you before, Jane."

"And you really believe that?"

"Sure!" The old woman brought one hand down sharply on the wheelchair arm. "You want the world. Your father and I got along so well with so little. We were happy with nothing."

At the mention of her father, Jane felt her heart sink into panic. Among her restored memories were two vivid recollections of awakening to find her father standing in her doorway, the door wide. He'd been watching her sleep, and when Jane had awakened he simply moved off, as if he'd been a dream. How much better

if he'd just laughed and sat down on the end of her bed to chat with her. Or midnight milk and cookies at the kitchen table. Was that what he'd wanted to do, but just not able to?

"Were you really happy, Mom?"

Her mother did not answer. Perhaps she had spoken too quietly. Jane wheeled her to a mirror and again arranged the robe down the front of her, flattening it along her to approximate her wearing it. She sensed that her mother was watching her reflection in the mirror, plumbing the image of her daughter's head as if she could penetrate her thoughts in that way. The question hung in the air, still unanswered. Now her mother held the robe close with her thin fingers and looked at herself in the mirror, peering carefully through her glasses. "I think this is nice, Jane. Don't you?"

"Yes. It's all cotton. Three pockets, too. Lighter than your other one, which you said is too hot sometimes."

"Three pockets! Enough for my glasses, a book, and a packet of tissues!"

They laughed, and Jane took up her mother's hands and gave them a squeeze. Now, before her eyes, her mother had shrunk into the small, aging woman she was, a brittle creature hunched in a wheeled conveyance. And she planned to assault this poor woman with deeply personal questions about their past?

At the register, Jane insisted on paying for the robe, fending off her mother's fistful of wadded bills produced from somewhere. At the same time, she held her breath as the saleswoman checked on her credit card number; she would not be surprised if they confiscated the card. Angela was not so wealthy as to offer paid vacations or other benefits. But the card held up. On the way out, Mrs. Verdianne held the bag close to her lap, smiling broadly.

They spent the rest of the morning cruising through another couple of thrift shops, a long tradition between them. They bought several recycled biographies and a small reading lamp to clip onto the headboard of her mother's bed and a pair of woolen knee socks. "I wore the same kind at Our Lady of Lourdes Academy for Girls," her mother observed. "Still scratchy as ever, but they're so warm." She explained, for the umpteenth time, that her weak heart left her extremities cold at

times.

When they grew hungry, Edie Verdianne voted for lunch at a familiar chain, though Jane tried to steer them toward healthier fare. They argued good-naturedly in the rental car about the old woman's craving for fried foods. "It might've hurt me, I'll grant you that, but how's it going to hurt me now?"

"It always hurts you."

"They feed me really good back at the place."

"Really? I'll call 'the place' sometime and find out what you mean by really good."

Her mother laughed joyously and flapped a hand against her daughter's arm. "You would too, Jane! You'd do it!"

They were early at the restaurant, so it was easy to find a table where her mother's chair could be rolled up to its end. The old woman beamed around the room, her blue eyes reclaiming some of their youthful clarity from the bright Southern California sunlight that flooded in through the tall banks of windows.

They chatted for a while about her mother's admirable letter writing, a lost art in the computer age, and the many interesting responses she'd gotten from Jane's siblings, in-laws, nieces and nephews, and far-flung cousins. Charlotte's husband, Brad, might actually leave law to set up a business, and David was getting fatter and fatter. There was a binder of responses to her letters back at the nursing home (She'd learned how to print out emails!), if Jane cared to look through them. They talked about which photographs her mother might put in the ceramic frames that Midge had made for her. The sheer breadth of the family dazzled Jane, made her own cravings for specialized confidences seem puny. Meanwhile, evidently delighted with the outing, her mother talked on while pressing soft shards of fried fish to her mouth with her fingers. She took up each French fry with careful satisfaction, stirred the ends in a pool of catsup before each bite. "God is good," she breathed.

Jane took a breath herself. Could this be the time and place to talk, as she'd hoped to? As if by prior arrangement, the late morning patrons had thinned away around them; the lunch hour had hardly heated up. They'd been left alone far from

the cash register and waitress stations. "I'm glad we're talking about family, Mom," Jane said, tentatively. "I was wondering if I could ask you some questions. They're pretty personal though." Her voice failed a little. She sounded as if she were whining.

Her mother laughed quickly. "That's not a strange request from you."

Jane smiled, though it was hard to execute one fully. "I know. But I don't know if I can be...satisfied with the answers we've all made do with in the past." With some surprise, she felt the words coming out of her in the right form. She felt these words could not be taken offensively, that she would be understood. When she looked up, she encountered her mother's same half-mad smile. She had to speak directly into it. "I don't think I've become the great daughter, or woman, you might have wanted, Mom."

The statement had the immediate effect of placing her in the center of a warranted tragedy, an epicenter of sadness that she felt justified in feeling, more deeply now that she was in the presence of her one and only mother. Put simply, a number of people important to her had tried to love each other properly, and failed. Her eyes filled despite her attempt to stem the tearing. When her mother's hand snaked through the empty plates, Jane clasped it in her own two hands.

"You're still my daughter, Jane. If you're needing something from me, then you better tell me what it is."

A painful laugh leapt from Jane's middle. "It's different, Mom. I have to warn you that it's kind of emotional."

"Ah." With a kind of alarm, the old woman looked around her daughter's head, as if watching an insect about to light.

Jane kept hold of her hand. "Mom, don't turn away from me, because I need your help. It's that I'm hurting people, Mom. I'm a good woman but I'm hurting people." She looked at her mother and found the woman peering closely back at her. "It's hard to explain, but the older I get the more aware I am of a kind of terrible uncertainty in the center of myself. Vic and I have hurt each other, we've drawn back into ourselves and let the world program our lives. It's all become kind of a frightening habit, so that I've become trapped into sharing only certain feelings and

only at the most perfect moments." She took a breath. "Do you follow me? The worst thing of all is that with each year those moments seem to be getting fewer and fewer."

The remnants of her mother's smile faded by millimeters. Then, with a small shudder, the old woman's expression grew stern with what Jane perceived was concentration. If she was not mistaken--and now she felt an answering squeeze, firm and sure, from the hand that she held in both of hers--she could feel the woman bringing up immense reserves of strength that as a daughter she had intuited were always there. So many children, so many triumphs and tragedies, both large and small, and the interminable lean, trying years, and this woman had survived.

"Go on," Edie whispered. "Is there something you want to know?" Her weak hand squeezed one of Jane's in a series of fluttering spasms.

"Yes, there is. I have to know what happened to Dad. What happened to Dad, Mom? Please tell me. Did he kill himself?"

Her mother's chin dropped with a rush of breath. For a long moment her posture remained frozen, and then she raised her face slowly. "I'm sorry," she said. "I must have.... I'm just so struck by your words, sweetheart. I mean, what you were saying about you and Vic."

Her mother fell into an even longer silence, her mouth open the while. When the waitress came to clear the table, the old woman ignored her as she swept up the dishes between the mother's and daughter's hands, which still lay on the table where they had just come apart. Jane asked for tea for both of them, after a confirming nod from her mother. Something in her expression made the young waitress drop her eyes and step away with only a quick nod. When they were alone again, Edie lifted her eyes and then reclaimed one of her daughter's hands.

"Poor thing, you're being so patient." She shrugged her shoulders and sighed once, dramatically. "I suppose I should just start with the very sad fact that I did not love your father anymore toward the end of his life." Her eyebrows jerked a little. "There. I said that out loud, didn't I?"

Jane only nodded, as if nothing, even this, could shock her. Yet, she could never have expected to hear those particular words. She thought that she had

already thought the worst, but....

Her mother spoke on. "That was a real puzzle to me--because there had been so much love in the beginning." Her eyes came up pointedly. "What you just said about drawing away, you and Vic. When Charley did that to me I guess I thought it would be temporary." Now she lowered her voice. "He had become...unable to love, you see."

"I understand, Mom."

"Do you? I'm talking about impotence too, sweetheart."

Jane felt her own breathing quicken. Perceptibly, her heart had seemed to be rising within her, as if rolling up to the first precipitous peak of a roller coaster. Her thoughts fluttered with novel confusions--that maybe the whole truth was none of her business, that she would be getting more honesty than she'd bargained for, that she might be forced to be ashamed of her parents. She managed to keep on track. "No, I didn't know that, Mom."

"How could you! Yes, your father'd become quite impotent, except for a few odd occasions where he'd suddenly...desperately try to connect, I guess you could say, and then I'd swell up with another child, right as rain."

"Your famous fertility," Jane managed.

They disguised their anxiousness in a shared laugh.

"A blessing under the circumstances, I suppose." Mrs. Verdianne pulled her hand away and slumped back in her wheelchair. "It might be good to say these things, just say them and then see where we are after they're all said." She scrunched her nose and made a little nod. "Wouldn't you say?"

"I would say so. Yes. What happened to Dad, do you think?" Then she added hurriedly, embarrassed by a trembling in her voice, "Am I being cruel by asking?" Sissy would say so. She braced herself for more of her mother's surprising candidness.

"No, no. I'm not sure anymore why it was so important to hide the truth before. But you know, Jane, the really cruel thing is that I never really knew. It has been a frequent subject of my prayers to ask God to help me put behind my anger at a man who has died. For not telling me why Charley was in pain, and why he

wanted to die."

"I had a dream once, Mom, where Dad told me that he wanted to die. It was right after we put down Foxy. I've never forgotten it, though I couldn't have been more than twelve at the time."

"Oh, there were so many parts to it, and the way that disappointments ate at him, as if they'd been personally planned for him. And then on top of it all, his health. That was no small part of it, always a kind of failure for a man. He had heart medicine--you all knew about that, we had you all around the table one night and told you--and I would lay out two pills for him by the bathroom sink every morning." Abruptly, the old woman came forward and planted her forearms on the table top with a force that startled her daughter. The pressure even rolled back the locked wheels of her chair an inch. In the next moment she had raised her hands to her face, completely covering them.

"Mom?"

From behind her hands, her mother said, "God, sometimes it comes back, clear as crystal. But I've never told anyone, not even Stell."

"What comes back, Mom?"

"One morning many years ago, lifting the lid of the toilet and seeing two orange pills melting in the bottom."

Jane heard her own breath suck in. "Oh."

"It started just after you went away to college." Her mother's hands dropped away and she looked off out the diner's wide windows. "And that not the worst of it, Jane. The worst is that I did nothing. I said nothing to Charley about seeing those pills there, or to anyone. Isn't that something?" She lowered her eyes to her daughter's. "I put down the toilet lid, just as if I hadn't seen a thing. And I just went on putting out the pills, every morning."

Jane's face felt cool. She kept her head down, willing the blood back into her cheeks. "You couldn't understand it all, Mom."

Her mother's hands came down and she laid her arms limply on the table. "I was old enough to know better, Jane. You want the truth? Well, I became an accomplice in the attack that eventually killed him."

"He *made* you an accomplice, Mom. He made *all* of us accomplices."

Her mother smiled at her, but in that old saccharine way. "Sweetheart, he didn't know..."

"Mom, he knew. He threw the pills where you could find them."

"Yes, and I didn't stop him."

"He knew that too, Mom. He made all of us accomplices, and witnesses...and participants in his depression. He made it our whole lives, Mom."

She was certain now. It was a wonderment, the terrifying vanity of the man, that his pain should be so important as to claim an entire family's attention. And how devastating for her mother, whose incessant hopefulness had been twisted into her father's ultimate challenge. The mean stubbornness steadily overpowering her innocent optimism. And the impotence? Was it really that, or just the ultimate withholding of affection, on one level, and just a sneaky way of slathering his own shame over a fellow soul whose brightness he took as an affront?

Within herself, she quavered at how well she'd learned some of her father's tricks.

In the next moment, her whole heart was suffused with pity for her mother. Such a good, good person. Someone who had deserved so much better. It was crushing to think of her own mother's bright and open hopefulness steadily crushed beneath her father's heel.

"Mom, you've been so alone with this. I made a friend back in Santa Fe who's been helping me sort through some of this."

"The one who made those beautiful frames?"

"Yes, that's right." She reached forward to grip her mother's hands again. She gripped them tightly, to press empathy into them, though she couldn't be sure that she was not just draining them for support. She could see the pale tips of her mother's thin fingers bunched like tiny white grapes in her grasp. She brought the tips to her lips and kissed them. "Midge, my friend, she said that sometimes people get us to help them die. Without our even knowing it."

Her mother had looked off out the window again, as if looking back in time. "I think Charley felt he had failed with us. I know too, and you might not know much

about this, that his father had been terribly hard on him. His father had beaten him..."

"I always hated Grandpa," Jane spat out. She had only a few early childhood memories of him, always stiff in his chair, the waves of disapprobation pulsing from him through the household while Grandma, a scuttling turnip, kept popping from doorways to answer his bidding.

Jane's mother scowled. "He was a terrible man, wasn't he?" But then she laughed, of all things. "I guess they all got walloped a lot back in those days, Jane. I think for Charley and me it was so nice at first, because he'd escaped his father--or so he'd thought. Don't you remember, all that fun pretending to squabble over clothes and claim space in that little house? But when you kids got older and needed more things, I think it got pretty dark for Charley."

"What do you mean?"

Her mother shrugged. "That he couldn't provide that he couldn't get us a bigger house or some such thing. And that kind-of-a-hero brother of his, killed in the war."

"Mom, who cared about Dad's ability to provide or not?"

Her mother regarded her with a strange expression, a slight tolerant smile that conveyed that she might be encountering Jane as a child again. "Why, we all did, sweetheart. All of us. Oh, we used to brag about how we all made do--five, six, seven, eight in a house for two--but wouldn't those be sort of insulting things for the man of the house to overhear? We let him know our disappointments in little ways, probably in more ways than we know."

Jane's thoughts were moving quickly, but in directions that surprised and irritated her. She was forced to pry back into her father's mind. If sex meant babies, and babies meant more needs that he couldn't provide for, did her father turn against the affection, the woman that produced those babies? She could easily construct a hundred silly traps that could suffice to confabulate her father's heart. With some alarm, she realized that her mother could not really help her with the next part, the part where her father's affection had begun to take its aberrant turns, where daughters became mirrors to reflect an image of a self unsullied by the

darker knowledge that a real flesh-and-blood wife might have come to possess. She nearly shuddered to think how much power he'd relegated to them. She could vaguely remember the way some of their words could hit him like bullets--anger at having to share a single family car with so many others, or at so-and-so getting a new this-or-that when he'd said so-and-so couldn't have a this-or-that. At the same moment, she was angry that such responsibility had been heaped on her, inappropriately, and without her consent.

She had been infected, for life, set up for the next man who would demand that the struggles of his heart be known but hidden, counted but discounted--in a word, present, inflicting, but unresolved. Had she gone off alone in the world, now, because she had determined not to be the enabler of another person's pain? Something within her was breaking free, a dammed power whose force was considerable.

She heard her mother's words distantly. "Now we've opened the can of worms, haven't we, sweetheart? I don't know why, today, it seemed all right to say these things out loud. Maybe it helped me to know that you wanted to know. Parents shouldn't dump their personal nonsense on their kids. That's not right."

Jane was further confused to find her feelings pricked by her mother's choice of words. Since when was suicide "personal nonsense"? How had her father's pain been so steadily rebranded as a minor concern? "But it doesn't work that way, Mom. We were a family, and every family has problems. And strengths. Keeping things hidden..." She decided to stop herself.

They asked the waitress for more hot water and drank a second, weaker cup of tea together.

"What will you do now?" her mother asked, and Jane understood that she was inquiring about only her immediate plans. The tone of permitted disclosure had vanished from the old woman's voice. What, was it over, would the doors now roll shut again? Wasn't it monstrous that a grown man had been forced by an entire culture to use infantile tactics to beg for help?

"I'd like to stay for another day," she said. "Would you like that, Mom?" She forced herself to concentrate on some ideas she'd thought of earlier. "Maybe we can

go to a play, or I could take you through the Huntington Estate."

Her mother managed a wan smile, though her thin frame was slumping with fatigue.

Jane clucked at herself. "Let's get you back, poor thing. This has been hard for you."

Her mother protested, "No, no," but not with conviction.

Still, once in the car, Jane had to ask. "What's kept you going, Mom? What's your secret?"

"No great mystery, sweetheart. First of all, there weren't all just *bad* times, you know. And I have all of you. I'm so proud of all of you."

Slumped against her door, Jane raised a hand to her brow. "You can't be serious, Mom. Not about me anyway. Careerless, and now my marriage all screwed up."

"Oh, stop. Every life has bumps. You've done wonderful work, Jane, and such a great job with the boys. It's really something that you've taught them how to love people. I'm the only woman on the floor whose grandsons write to them."

"Really? Bobby does too?"

"Yes! Well, cards anyway. And you try, Jane. You always try. I'm so proud that you never give up."

She should give up. What sort of future had she opened for herself? Now, whenever she talked with her mother, she'd be thinking, "My father killed himself and this woman helped him do it."

Eddie had Jane bring her back to the home after lunch; her doctors recommended outings but not for more than a few hours at a time. She left her mother propped up in bed and just in time for a soap opera that she rarely missed.

Back outside in the parking lot, she discovered Sissy standing beside her enormous Lexus. Before Jane got even close to her, Sissy called out, "I thought we were going to talk more about Mom before you spoke with her?"

"We did. You said you didn't want me to see her."

"I guess you think your particular needs outweigh just about anyone else's."

They were just a few feet apart now. Unconsciously, Jane had held up at a

distance just beyond where Sissy could land a punch.

"Did you know that Dad killed himself?" Jane asked.

Sissy's mouth tightened below the dark glasses. She folded her arms and took a step closer. "So now you know about the heart medicine, is that it? And look at you. How puffed up she is with her earth-shattering new knowledge."

Jane leaned against the Lexus. "You knew?"

Sissy shook her head, arms still folded. "How deeply important she is now, the vessel of forbidden family knowledge. How deeply vital her role, the axis upon which the whole family spins." She twirled a finger in the air.

Jane instinctively braced herself now that a hand had been freed. She considered, though, that she would not mind the blows; they could not really hurt her.

Sissy went on. "You should see yourself now, Jane. You wear your humility like a queenly robe of state. But what's really happened is that you went out and bludgeoned an old woman so that you could regain your position as the glowing center of our tiny solar system."

Sissy now advanced another step closer, her tone becoming more threatening with each syllable. She was gearing up, working through her rehearsed statements. Still, Jane felt strangely impervious to harm. She blinked to herself as she got to her feet; knowledge was power after all. "As far as glowing centers go, yes, I guess I was trained as well as any of us after Dad and Mom gave up on each other." Not completely true, not even the point, but it scored with Sissy. "But isn't it just a little sad to you that it all made you jealous, for life."

"Angry for life. There's a difference. I can remember how coyly you could drop your eyes at ten. God, you were an accomplished seductress from the womb. Poor Dad. He never knew what hit him."

Jane shook her head, but the words would not simply roll off her. Maybe it would be she who did the punching. "No girl is a seductress from the womb. She has to learn that stuff. I guess I sensed it was expected of me. And Mom was in on it too. It made it simpler for her, took the heat off."

Sissy threw up her hands. "How penetrating she is! She is now the sole

source of all family truth."

"Can we drop the theatrics, Sissy? They're so childish."

"How wise, so highly *evolved*. Why does she suffer to speak with us?"

Jane shook her head. "I think you're pretty mixed up. I'm just wondering whether to bolt for my car."

She was never as good at the word-matches as Sissy was, but she could sense that her calmness was wearing her sister down. The moment of physical danger had passed; the steam had seeped from Sissy's words, and soon she would be forced to merely deal with her. Jane turned to face her sister. "What gets me is that you can pry anything you want out of her, but I have to kowtow to you."

"I don't owe you any goddam explanations. I know that poor old woman because I changed her fucking diapers after her stroke. She said a lot of things under sedation, or when she thought she was at death's door."

"So why didn't you share it all with the rest of us?"

"Do you think she needed me to broadcast those confidences, and then stand back as you all buried her under an avalanche of letters and telephone calls?"

"Yes," she answered simply. "Well, not an avalanche, but some level of reckoning. She seemed almost grateful to me for our conversation."

"Ah, and now you're her confidante--and savior too, I'll bet."

"For one day only. But we all have our uses." Jane lifted her eyes boldly. "Maybe Mom needs someone like you to support her day in and day out, and maybe she also needs someone else to come out of left field once in a while and get her to talk about Dad and her and us."

Arms still folded, still standing, Sissy demanded, "Did you say anything about Dad and us?"

Jane winced. "I couldn't. Not yet. I think it was a failure of nerve. Anyway, the whole thing makes me sick. I mean, this stuff was all going on when Sara was nearly thirty, for God's sake. You were twenty-five. How could they decide for us that he was better off dead? It's all so monstrously selfish." She was speaking quietly at this point, and over her own words she sensed that Sissy was trying not to be caught weeping, but when she looked up she saw that tears had wet her cheeks

and she would soon need to blot her nose.

Sissy said huskily, "Do you intend to tell the rest? You going to tell Babe all about her mommy and daddy?"

"I don't know. Maybe Mom will now. And I hope she does. It's only been a few minutes, Sissy, but I can't tell you how much it's helped me to know just how lost Dad was. You were selfish to keep the truth for yourself. You hoarded it for the power it gave you. You're a worse person than I ever thought possible."

Sissy clucked and rocked her shoulders. "You should see yourself, Jane. Positively plumped to the gills with self-satisfaction."

"You always misread everything. Anyway, I'll be out of your hair soon."

"Damned right. I want you out of this town."

"I'll leave when I'm ready."

Jane kept herself straight as she walked off. She half-expected to feel Sissy clawing at her back while screaming primally, but she made it back to her car in one piece. She drove off, heading nowhere that she could have described if asked. Maybe the path that she'd set out on, from east to west, was a trajectory she should stay with, ending with a slow, peaceful walk into the ocean. But no, she had to keep close to her mother for just a while longer, and she had children, two fine sons--her mother had said so--who might need her for a bit longer.

Twenty
The really great stuff.

Enid Grace called a few days after the company barbecue and took Victor up on his offer to help her fix up her new apartment. He knew he'd be ogling her on the sly, or at the very least soaking up her rich female ambience, but what was the harm as long as he kept his hands to himself? When Ben asked him what he would be doing over the upcoming weekend, he even answered honestly about helping Enid, and he'd managed to keep a straight face when Ben's eyes had rolled.

"Uh oh. Trouble."

"Please."

"Really, Vic, come on. Enid Grace? The Woman in the White Swimsuit?"

No one would ever forget Enid's striking form tripping through the waves at Nahant cove the summer before. The ribbing in her snug one-piece suit had moved up and over the strong curves of her body like the immaculate cornrows of some sort of strangely sensual agricultural model. She did not reappear in that suit this year, perhaps because the date had been pushed up to June when the Atlantic waters were still too cold for most, but her strong brown thighs were nearly as tantalizing in white shorts. She did not reappear with her husband either, because sadly they were going through a divorce.

As she munched on celery stalks in a nearby lawn chair, Victor was helpless to avoid drawing her into a chat. Within minutes they were talking about her divorce and his "separation," two shipwrecked souls adrift on the sea of love.

"I almost didn't come," she said. "But why sit around moping all the time?"

"That's the way I finally looked at it. I think I've been putting on some kind of kind of hurt-but-proud act. Anyway, she's supposedly coming back."

"For a big reckoning, huh?"

She'd been hungry for chat, Enid had. After the first few words about his long-delayed textbook attempt, she dragged the whole story from him.

"I don't get it," she admitted. "The kids write their own histories? What do

you mean their own histories?" Her round brown eyes had come up at him from beneath a crown of dark, frizzy curls. The way her thin but agile lips curled around a length of celery made his pulse rate speed up.

"Basically, Enid, they have to *write history themselves* before we start throwing strange, old historical facts at them. It's learning history from the inside out--starting with autobiographies of their own lives, then biographies of their parents, histories of their families, all based on questionnaires that the class develops together."

"So the American History and Western Civ stuff comes later. Wow. So they conduct interviews and then write their own history books. That makes a large amount of sense, Vic. I mean, all of it would then make more sense to them."

"That's my thinking, Enid."

It was nice to feel encouragement from another person, and especially one so attractive. His confidence rose until it was all there, the textbook, stored right there in his brain. He could envision the way he'd lay out the product, down to the sidebars taken from sample oral histories conducted during the field studies at select schools. It might be, after all, a great substitute for actually doing the teaching himself.

"Kids need a sense of place," he said. "A sense of identity. And a sense of participation, too. History can provide that, but not in the empirical, abstract way it's fed to them now."

"It all sounds very original, Vic."

"Thanks."

Actually, there was a pretty well-established network of local and personal history advocates strung out across the States, but he hadn't mentioned that. Next, they talked about his garden, how much he hated to weed but how good it felt physically to get out there and chop and tug away at the vegetation. He learned that she had become even more of a workout fanatic since her breakup with her husband. "It's been good for me, and for a lot of reasons," she concluded.

"The breakup?"

"Well, yes, but I was talking about working out. There's some real nuts at the

club, guys with their brains in their biceps and girls like blow-up dolls." She paused to pat a napkin against her mouth. "Funny thing, I thought I'd never buy one of those stupid skin-tight exercise getups, but I did. I get a shock every time I see myself in the mirror."

"We all need to be a part of things," he said with a shrug. "Think of it as your uniform." He thought of Enid in one of those skintight body socks.

She was nodding, her head facing her paper plate, which now lay flat and empty on her smooth thighs. "I used to be part of a marriage, now I'm part of a health club." She looked up and smiled all around, as if more than he were listening.

Curious because of his own situation, Victor said, "I want to ask what happened to your marriage, but it would probably sound like prying. Since my wife took off, I'm keeping pretty alert to warning signals."

He realized that he'd been hinting at his relative availability. Enid was silent for a moment, just chewing steadily at one corner of her mouth. Then she said, "There's not much to tell, really. He got older and he got scared. Then he found a skinnier younger woman to replace me."

Victor tsked.

"Shit happens," Enid said with a shrug. "I was unhappy, so I ate too much. He used that, and a few other things, as an excuse to make his escape. I don't know, maybe we should've had kids or something." She smiled ruefully at him, revealing white teeth with the front incisors just a little bit crossed.

"But I remember you from last year," he protested. "You were as lean as could be. Still are."

"I ballooned right after that. You haven't seen me since I went over to Promotional." (He had. She worked on a different floor, but he could sometimes spot her among the lunch-goers on the street. He could even remember a perhaps heavier Enid at the periphery of a fall training meeting.) "Then I took it all off in thirty days."

"You look great, no doubt about it. Listen, he must have been crazy to leave after you lost the weight for him."

"Nah, he knew the score by then. I wasn't losing it for *him*." She winked.

"Just wanted him to see what he'd be missing."

Enid must have had friends whom she could have asked to help her move that furniture. He suspected that she wanted to take things between them a step further, and it wasn't too difficult in the face of Jane's self-indulgence to allow himself to let that happen.

Now, a week later, as he readied to drive to her new apartment, he caught himself half-consciously dressing as if for a date. He settled for an orchid flat-knit shirt and khaki shorts. At the last minute he replaced his watch with a band of plaited leather that Arlen had given him years ago.

He was fantasizing a fling, having concluded that it would make him happier, but when he reached her apartment, he had to reach really deep to keep cheery. It was a third floor eave room with the smell of cigarette smoke seeping from thick wallpaper bubbled in more than a few places. Beneath the aroma of pine cleaner, the place stank of marital failures, of holed-up broken hearts.

Enid was friendly but businesslike from the start. She took the paper bag of sugar snap peas and young lettuce heads that he'd brought from his garden, thanked him, and placed the bag in the kitchen sink. Then she officiated through a short tour. "I had to clean the whole place," she announced. "Notice the shiny floors, the gleaming windows? Pure grime-ola when I got here. But that made it cheaper. It's the most that I can afford for now. I'm not sure how much I want to take from Michael."

He'd never known her ex-husband's name. "Is Michael well off?"

"Very. That's been part of the problem. He measures his dick by his bank account. Measures everything. Used to keep count of my orgasms." She gave him a knowing look over her shoulder as she preceded him through the rooms. He wasn't sure what that look meant. The frankness of her admissions, things he'd imagined said over coffee with a female confidant, made him feel neutered, as if she were unaware that he were a man, but then again she could be coming on to him. She'd dressed in snug jeans, left her arms bare in a black sleeveless T-shirt. He watched the slight jounce of her buttocks as she walked.

He found himself at rest in the center of the living room, though his thoughts

circled. Enid--whole, firm, and needy--stood just a few feet away. He was aware that he could, if he chose, distract himself from the woman's smooth curves with the conviction that a stable marriage might constitute a refreshing freedom from the rigors of dating, wooing, seducing, and extricating, but what the hell? Still, the sheer dumpiness of the place kept nagging away the thrill.

Around the windows, the molding bore the scars of a dozen sets of curtain hardware. Several of the windows had cracked panes, and more than one sash sat askew, unbalanced by a single connected sash weight. The floors were more promising, good oak but discolored in the corners and around the radiators, each of which shone coldly in aluminum paint.

"Come here," Enid said, at a window and beckoning with one finger. He went to her side.

"Look at that." She pointed down at a yard full of green rows. "There's an old woman next door, Polish I think, out there every day. She's all twisted up, like one of those nylon-stockings dolls they sell at country fairs? She's my inspiration. She's alone, and she hasn't gone to hell with herself."

"Fat chance." He admired the even garden, the two full bird feeders hung from a locust resplendent with tender, new leaves.

"What?"

"You're going to hell with yourself."

"Thanks, Vic." She said this kindly and softly and it made him sober up a little. He decided to keep to the task, help her move her furniture around and not muddy her heart with vague intimacies. Her affection for the old woman had moved him.

She kept up the tour for the moment, seeking his counsel on this or that. In the bedroom he laughed at all the pictures, mostly unframed nature posters, one by Eliot Porter that he recognized. Another showed mustangs charging through a canyon.

"You expected Rembrandt?"

"No, that's not it. It reminds me of my son Arlen's room, especially the place he's got now down at school. He puts anything he wants on the walls."

"What's wrong with putting what you want on the walls?"

As she talked, she worked to open the clamps on a Harvard bed frame with her bare hands.

"Nothing, except what he chooses to put up. I'm trying to remember: a box of Wheat Chex, empty of course, and a black velvet painting of a puppy dog, and a huge awful print of big swoony gondolas oozing through what might be Venice." He remembered Arlen's collection of mid-century postcards, mounted by the dozens across a wide corkboard, but he did not mention it. He shut up because he realized that Arlen's choices were satiric; hers were not.

"Help me with the mattress, will you, Vic?"

He got to it. She worked fast, but not always efficiently. After the bed was down she remembered the rug, and so they had to lift the bed up again and prop it against the wall until they'd brought the rug in from the small back porch and laid it out. He could see he would be more of a help if he contributed to the planning. He directed them to set the single bureau by the one plug in the room so that the cord of a bean pot lamp could reach it.

By the time they'd finished another room, he could be sure that she took his advice as a matter of course. More and more he suspected that she considered furniture shoving one of the offices of men. It might seem unnatural to her, despite the nice definition to the muscles exposed by her sleeveless black T-shirt, to be dragging rugs without a man about. All the while, she shoved and lifted purposefully, moving directly into a future so clearly etched in dark ink that he wondered how she couldn't see it. The clean, purposeful way that they went about setting up this dour domicile. Didn't she realize that it would take a lot more than ready-made eyelet curtains and air freshener to banish the demons from this apartment's dark corners? She did not know how to take care of herself.

It complicated his conceived role as short-term lover to be associated with a doomed project. She explained that she'd taken the place as a holding point until she could figure out her next move, but it seemed bloody unfair to him that a strong-willed woman would get maneuvered into such a narrow space. Strong-willed was how he needed to see her (strong enough to fuck for fun), but everything she did

telegraphed her poignant humanity. Even in her snug jeans she lifted with bent knees, back straight, by the book. She shoved heavy matter around, abstracting it to objects to be acted upon by a Strong Independent Woman; even the refrigerator wasn't really a refrigerator so much as an opportunity to prove how undaunted she could be.

"Here," she said, "I got straps. The casters don't work so well." She got down on her knees and started fishing wide canvas bands through the supports. "I've seen this done."

The movers had dumped the fridge just a few feet from the wall, close enough to have been plugged in. "Hey, Enid, let's just walk it. Here, here." He reached down and pulled her up by the shoulders. They fit in his hands like the smooth, round balls in socket joints.

Together, they easily worked the refrigerator side to side until it reached the wall. Victor's palms were still a-tingle from the touch of her skin.

"Well, I guess *that* was pretty easy," she admitted, her eyes lowered.

"Sorry you didn't get to try your strap technique."

Her eyes lifted to his. "Think you're pretty smart, don't you?"

He smiled back, but only after checking how deeply his condescension had registered. She had spoken with a particular kind of small smile that sometimes played at the corners of her mouth and invited confrontation. The slight overlap in her two front teeth moved him, partially because it might consign her to a less educated class than his and partially because she might award him points for finding her attractive despite alleged flaws. He guessed too that she was helpless to forego certain kinds of gender nonsense, such as automatically acknowledging particular kinds of superiority. These small facts could be used to his advantage if he were to succeed in peeling her clothes from her.

She looked at her watch. "Let's eat."

"Oh, it's time, is it?"

She made the soft rapid laugh that he sometimes could not quite hear. "Yes, that's right. There's a plan here. What did you think?"

"I can see that. And do the workers have any say in what the plan is?"

She looked up, smiling tentatively while wrapping the straps into tight rolls. "You aren't hungry, is that what you're saying?"

He let up. If she were taking his teasing so literally, then she wasn't getting its flirtatious drift. "No, I'm starving. I was just trying to get a rise out of you."

"Uh huh."

But when he looked into the virtually empty refrigerator he fell back on teasing again.

"Wow, look at this spread."

This time she laughed out loud. "Come on, I just bought enough for the two of us."

He went on with the teasing. "Now what shall we have? Let's see." He rummaged around in empty space, and then brought his hand down on a snug pile of plastic deli bags. "Ah, how about the cold cuts?" He handed these back to her, where she'd been standing hands on hips. "Now, what shall we put on our cold cuts?" With some ceremony he reached for one of two condiments in the refrigerator. "How about mustard?"

He turned back to her and found that her face had changed. She had just looked away and he caught the glint of tears in her eyes. She flicked at one eye with the blade of a finger.

"Enid?"

"Sorry." She heaved a sigh. "Wow, I just got this feeling of emptiness."

He had only just touched her when her eyes were dry again. Her lashes fluttered at him above a small, embarrassed smile.

At the table, eating together quietly, he said, "Look, that was damned insensitive of me."

"What?"

"About the refrigerator, and some other remarks too."

She snorted. "Are you kidding? You've been a shot in the arm, Vic, and I mean that. Coming out here like this. I can hardly see my friends these days because they keep staring at me as if they're waiting for me to fall apart. Or they start in on how I should be taking Michael to the cleaners." She shrugged. "The

worst is when they tell me how I should fight for us, Mike and me, and they list all good stuff we had, how we looked so *good* together." She shrugged again, looking off. "I guess I'd keep thinking that the physical stuff was all we had. And that I didn't have all the rest. You know, the really great stuff."

Victor wrinkled his nose. "How could that guy have left you?"

She shook her head. "I left him."

He fell silent, not sure what to say. He couldn't be cheerful at the moment, that was certain. Living without former mates, no matter what the circumstances, was serious business. In the next moment he'd decided to make a large difference by rallying their separate spirits.

"Look," he said, "let's join forces. My situation is that I'm going crazy in my empty house--both of my boys aren't coming home this summer, I think I told you at the barbecue--and I've got time on my hands. What do you say we fix this place up a little?"

She shook her head. The light from the window behind her came through her curls in points. "I need to conserve my funds, for my real place. I might not even stay in the area."

"How about just getting the wallpaper off?"

She sighed. "I just finished doing that with Michael, fixed up an entire old house. Vic, you're a sweetheart, but..."

He was warming to the topic. "Then maybe just one room, like the living room, a bright place to be in when you need a bright place."

She picked up the second half of her sandwich. "Please don't take care of me."

The way she spoke made him shut up. She'd called him to help her move furniture, not repair her life. But he snickered inwardly. So, she wanted to try things out for herself. Her way. All the women he seemed to bump up against were doing that, his wife first and foremost. They didn't have much room in their lives for him, it seemed.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked, her own smile back.

"You. All you macha women. So damned independent." He tried to sound

blithe, even reached out and prodded her shoulder. "Look at you with your muscle shirt."

She chewed, swallowed. "Making fun of me?"

"I can't win. Do you want my famous cheering up or not?"

"So why do *you* roll up your sleeves?"

He gazed vacantly at his unrolled sleeves. "What?"

"No, I mean at the picnic--barbecue, whatever it was. I saw how you rolled up your shirt."

He pushed his jaw forward. "I had to make room for my enormous biceps."

"They might've split the seams, is that it?"

"Might." He couldn't quite keep up his mock serious face. He laughed, spitting out a bit of ham by accident. He wiped his chin. "You should talk, Ms. Step Aerobics."

"I'm talkin', all right. Want to arm wrestle?"

"You love humiliation, is that it?"

"Take this in." She made a muscle.

He regarded her, trying to size up the squint in her eye, her head turned half away. She seemed serious.

He swallowed his last bite. "I'd tear your arm off."

Enid rose and pulled her chair around the table. Now the window light, which had pricked through her hair a moment before, fell on her face. Her brown eyes, usually set with seriousness, were betrayed by the warmth of their deep earthen color. "Come on," she said and set her elbow.

Without a word he complied, sensing that any other course would be insulting. Besides, he was intrigued. And all the talk of muscle was turning him on. He gripped her hand, thumb high, both setting their forearms to cross their wrists more tightly.

"Ready?" she asked.

"I'm ready, sure."

"Want to put money on it?"

"Sure. A thousand dollars."

"On three," she said. Then counted evenly.

On three she yanked and pulled immediately, and by this surprise maneuver she succeeded in bringing his arm far down before he quit biding to gauge her strength and pulled back with seriousness. Gradually he brought her arm up, but for some time they hovered at the weak point in his own leverage, her face set and wrinkled with grimacing, before he was able to bring her arm over and, with a final collapse, to the table top with a bang.

She exhaled loudly. "Whew. Hey, you're a lot stronger than my ex."

He did not have to fake his breathing. "Damned impressive, Enid."

"Want to race? Not right now, when we're done moving things?"

"You mean a foot race?"

"Sure. You think I meant cars?"

He stayed a long time. There were a few pieces of lighter furniture to be moved up from the basement. Later, he handed things to her from boxes--crock pot, iron, two wine glasses, four tumblers with silver rims clearly rifled from a larger set, a box tightly shrink-wrapped and heavy with a store-bought set of dishes, a bundle of flatware bound with rubber bands.... He went down the street for a six-pack of beer, but she would drink only half of one.

"I don't like how it makes me feel," she explained. "I want reality."

He finished her half and all of his. Later, when she stood on a chair while he handed her a final few items, he began to feel a little silly, as if he were stretching the time needlessly. He announced, "I should be off. Looks like you're in good shape now."

"Really?"

The tug of fear in her voice was what he'd hoped to hear. Her standing on the chair had put her good body too squarely in his line of vision to ignore. Her eyes were safer targets, calm then assured then dancing then puzzled, always hard to figure out. Regarding her alleged physical attraction to him, he'd processed a few facts--for one, that remark she'd made about her friends' uncomfortable solicitations. So, he was just safer to be with, perhaps. All in all, she wanted no deeper involvement with him, but might be willing to barter for the plain comfort of

company.

He should, then, press the issue a little. "You'd probably rather be alone, sort some things out."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

In the hallway he slipped an arm across her back, and she leaned easily against his side. "So nice of you to come help."

"I'll be honest. I find you...something. Very moving."

"Pitiable."

"No," he breathed. "Come on. Hug?"

"Sure, why not."

Her body came around into his arms. He pressed with his hands into the small of her back to bring her front up firmly against him. He waited, nearly counting, heard her sigh, and then brought his lips down to hers.

All at once she was gone. She had dropped back quickly, sliding from his arms. "Whoa," she said, blinking.

He stepped toward her but her arms were now so firmly crossed, her elbows jutting like protective points. She was speaking. "I don't think...wait..."

"No, Enid. I just thought..."

"You'd better go, Vic. Wow. What the hell am I doing?" Her eyes were looking around at nothing.

He gripped her elbows. He needed better words. "It's all right, Enid. I guess I sort of felt a deeper connection slipping in between us."

She grimaced. "What does that mean? Are you talking about fucking or something?"

The expression on her face, which a few seconds before had registered a teetering smile, now registered disgust, and to a degree that curdled the juices within him. He might have been something covered with warts, for the hard look in her eyes. Worse, she looked as if she might even cry.

"No, of course not," he squeaked.

"I mean, aren't you married? You're still married, right?"

"Sure I am, Enid. I was way off, I can see that now. I just felt a kind of

connection, or attraction."

He got moving. As he walked down the hallway, she followed with her arms still tightly crossed. At the head of the stairs, she said, "Vic, look, I think I kind of set you up. Really, I'm sort of fucked up these days."

"No, come on, Enid." He must have been smiling in an awful lopsided way because he was feeling acutely guilty. "I'll call you. You've got a really nice place here."

With every word he worsened things. As he walked down the stairs and out the front door, he barely heard her last words at his back. In his mind, she had already rooted and grown like a permanent thought, a figure shaken with knowledge that he'd imposed on her. He could have shot himself on the spot, leaving her like this--in a worse state than he'd found her. He would never erase from his mind that he'd confirmed her worst suspicions: that she was a failure at love, that she was alone and childless.

In his confusion he turned right instead of left on the front walk, but he could not retrace his steps and risk passing beneath her windows. So he kept walking. He would have to circle the block. Ridiculous. He thought of his unopened bag of garden vegetables, still in the sink. They should have used the lettuce on the sandwiches. At the corner, he came upon a school athletic field, a long, pitted expanse bracketed by baseball diamonds at either end. It was here, he supposed, that Enid would have staged their foot race. On the near diamond, a couple of kids ran about while their father snapped grounders at them from the pitcher's mound. Those two kids were not his kids; Enid Grace was not his wife.

Once, on their honeymoon in Puerto Rico, he and Jane had walked out of a strange stand of mangrove trees and discovered themselves on an endless beach, brilliant white and completely empty. With a gasp, she had leapt out onto the sand and begged him to run with her, but he'd said no though she pleaded again and again, because he thought he might look silly to her or to someone who might be watching from among the trees. Finally, she'd run off alone.

He circled the block, moving resolutely, head down as he passed behind Enid's new home. He recognized the old Polish woman's adjoining yard. The old

lady had probably been happily married since she was thirteen, probably survived some post-war pogrom with her husband and then come to America to start Perfect Marriage-Part Two. That would be Enid's solace, that alone, the sight of an old Polish woman hacking at clods.

He reached his car and drove along the Charles River, vaguely heading for Route 2 and home but aching with a deep, sullen hurt that kept him slightly bent over the steering wheel. Really, he was taking this all too hard; it hadn't been a rejection, not really, just a matter of missed signals. Besides, he might have a second chance at her. The episode might have planted seeds.

But his conscience had an intractable hold on his gut. His breathing wouldn't deepen beyond a shallow point. He was heading toward home, but the specter of his empty, lonely house was unbearable to consider.

He pulled off the highway when he spotted a tavern at the far end of Lexington. He slipped off at the exit and doubled back, then rolled up slowly in the parking lot, peering hard at the front. At first, the place appeared to be closed, but then he could make out a few people spaced along the windows, probably from booths. He had his hand on the door handle, but another car pulled up directly next to his. A man stepped out and headed toward the tavern door, alone. The sight of the man, alone and striding and smoothing the front of his shirt, strongly held his attention. The man was his age, probably just killing time as he himself was. That man might be what one would call a man without a woman in his life. Men without love often looked like that--a self-conscious casualness about their clothes, a churlish set to their faces meant to express dignity. You could spot them spaced along the bars and watching whatever was playing on the big TVs, or stepping from package stores, grinning with temporary delusion as they toted their six-packs to the car.

He rubbed his eyes, then blinked them open and rolled them against the edges of their soreness. Where was real help? What would he gain if he turned, right there on the edge of Lexington, and took the Turnpike west to reclaim his wife? What would he gain? Monogamy? The word sounded gummy and rancid, like a jar of old gray paste.

Now here he was again, in flight to or from. It became clear to him, as it periodically did, that in all of his relationships, before and during his life with Jane, he had always managed to find some fault with the woman he was with. For example, Elizabeth had not liked music very much, and Frances had been too short. -That was all, just too short. The first perceived fault validated the act of fault-finding itself, and from that point it became easier to amass them, and their mounting number made it easier for him to disengage from the women themselves, before and during his marriage. With the one woman whom he had married, the process allowed him to discount the ineradicability of his freely given vows.

He lay his head back on the headrest and recalled how, at first, Janice Patrice's good body had drawn him, and the mild tug in her gaze in the conference's vendors room that he knew would hold that of any man who cared to gaze back. He'd gradually ingratiated himself as her temporary mentor at her community college, drawn into her office time and again for "professional chats" purportedly to help her tack down curriculum or model some learning goal or other in the classroom. He would appear outside her office door, an unexpected guest taking valuable time from a pressing schedule to "look in and see how you're doing." He'd flop down in her side chair and occasionally sweep her away to expense account lunches to chat about how his company's textbooks would magically form the spine of her next successful history course. Then he'd have to be back, again and again, to check up on her progress with her American history and social studies classes. His visits were an assumed form of flattery. He was the veteran, a safe, married man with years of experience, and so generous with his time.

For the first few months, he was certain himself that his motives went no further than the kindly ministrations one professional might show another. But whenever she leaned back in her swivel chair, relaxing in his easy presence, he always noticed the full curves of her thighs, often so perfectly encased in dark stockings. As she spoke, her words propelled by trust, he pretended to be unaware of the heavy rise and fall of her breasts. Or the way her wide mouth curved around words, lusciously, to his eye. She was ripe on the vine, and the day arrived when he could manage to ask himself why shouldn't he be the one to step up and pluck her.

They had eased into deeper confidences, he and Janice. She couldn't find a good man anywhere. Where *were* they? He posed as one, eventually clucking that his wife, whom he was "crazy about," was disappointingly cool emotionally. There, he'd told her. Whom else could he share such troubling, private knowledge with but her? She was sympathetic, no doubt considering, as he hoped she would, how her own libido, never fully tapped, would be more than satisfying to a good man like Victor Bill. He did not dissuade her when her remarks began to sound unsympathetic of Jane (by then he'd told her of the miscarriage.) It must be a mean joke, she eventually declared, to decide to love one person fully and meaningfully and then discover that that person could not satisfy your basic needs.

After a beer one late afternoon after her classes, he'd given her a lift to her apartment building, one of those trendier complexes chockfull of singles, and hesitated to say goodbye to her, and then stared out the window in a way to telegraph his confusion. The season conspired with him, shuttling the sun away and darkening the streets for privacy. She sensed what he'd meant for her to sense, so that when he turned to her and told her that he loved his wife but was dying to kiss her, Janice Patrice, she had not refused. In fact, she seemed flattered. In this same direct way, he was able to continue to kiss her, indulging in longer and deeper kisses, then to ask with a giddy laugh to hold her breasts. In the back seat of the spacious Solara, they giggled at how they were imitating her students. It had been easy to promote the rest as an adventure of pure desire, a spontaneous episode of healthy bodies and pure hearts seeking to unite. And so he had managed to have sex with Janice Patrice.

Even while their locked bodies writhed in foreplay in the back seat of his family car, he knew the whole thing would never amount to more than a series of clandestine couplings. He knew the nature of the woman he was kissing, a slightly maturer version of the same dreamy-eyed teen girls who occasionally glanced at him as he breezed down conference or school hallways in his snug suit and colorful ties. Before long, she'd want all of him, as a full partner in her life, just as Jane had, back when he'd somehow convinced her that he would make a good husband. Still, he carried it on, milking the affair for as many shots at her as he could manage

without blowing his marriage. When his nerve gave way before actual guilt, he could always find a weak-willed peripheral male friend to confess to over a beer, looking hangdog and penitent until he heard his flattered confidante pronounce the predictable "What's the harm, Vic? God, we all need a little fling now and again." He could ride these pat confirmations for another few episodes, rolling over Janice's increasingly more frequent episodes of misgiving. Later, he used Ben Braverman's more honest cluckings to begin to pry himself from Janice.

But the final ending had come in an unexpected form. Gardner, Massachusetts, was fairly far from Arlington, a solid buffering distance, but who would have guessed that when Hill-Broadmore threw that publishing party at the Hyatt on the Charles that Janice Patrice would actually honor her mass-produced invitation, that she would think she could ambush him and that they might somehow play-act with his wife there by his side, waiting in that short red dress with all her teeth showing while he stammered through an introduction. Was that supposed to have been some kind of risky fun? Anyway, that did it; he was free to be free of Janice after that. How could he ever trust her again, right?

These memories, which perhaps he'd conjured to whip up guilt, had backfired once again. They had kicked up his lust. Now he resented Jane, resented her complexity. He longed for the simple touch of Janice again, or for the deep easy responsiveness that Enid Grace's body had promised. He shook his head at himself. "Jane Verdianne, Jane Verdianne," he said aloud. She had been a single woman once, a free girl, with hopes, and she'd fallen in with him, taken him on, sores and all, given him her whole self and even now, in his fourth decade, he made that all seem like a chintzy sort of making do. Shame on him.

With a mind wearied from thinking too much, he walked the distance to the tavern, entered its cheery embrace with gratitude, and found a seat far down the bar from the few other patrons. The lady bartender swooped down the length and dropped her bare forearms right on the bar before him. "I was wondering if you'd ever come in," she said. When she grinned, her eyes nearly closed behind big glasses with black plastic frames. She had tattoos of ivy tendrils snaking up both her arms. "I could see you out there."

He looked where she was tipping her frosted bangs and saw his empty car through the front window. Of its own, his mouth opened to say more, but he had no words prepared. He dropped his eyes; what would she care what he was doing out there in the parking lot?

"Glad to see that I'm being so closely monitored," he managed, and they both shared a laugh. "Glenlivet on ice, please. And be generous."

"You got it."

He watched her slim figure move off. Did *all* female bartenders have to be pretty? The thought fell into his mind like a dropped brick that he might find a calmer, gentler, even sexier woman than Jane Verdianne, but he wouldn't find a smarter, more honest, or more loving one. If he lost Jane, then, and became a sad man alone in a bachelor apartment, wouldn't it be just like taking his whole life and piling it up and setting a match to it?

The waitress brought his drink. "On vacation?"

He raised his eyes, surprised. Of course, a Saturday afternoon, casual clothes, no particular hurry. "Just a short one."

"A getaway, huh? That's the way to go." To illustrate her own carefree approach to life, she cocked a lean hip and dangled a forearm across the plastic lid that covered the little bins of bar produce. "What do you do?"

"Me? I publish books. School books."

"Hey, that's cool. You want a menu?"

He became flustered at the question, because he realized that while it wasn't really supper time yet he really had no plans for how he was going to feed himself that evening. "I might, but not just yet."

"Just wave me down when you're ready."

She headed off, got a call for a refill from one and then another of the others far down the bar. Eventually, however, she wandered back.

He didn't notice her at first. A minute before, he'd taken out his wallet to lay down a credit card to build a tab when the plastic sleeve holding his favorite photo of Jane and the boys flipped into view. There they were, Jane and Arlen and Bobby, all of them smiling. It had been a very happy day, he recalled. Arlen was just about

to graduate from high school, and they'd gone off to splurge on clothes together. Arlen's hair was still longish then, and Bobby had smirked a bit, and Jane.... He stared until the photo blurred from tears that had swelled in his eyes.

"Are you all right, sir?"

He sniffed and looked up and took in the bartender's concerned expression.

"No. Not a bit all right, in fact. My wife and I are separated."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, that's too bad."

He smiled, wanly. "Yeah, it is. She told me she needed some time off to think about a few things, and I said Okay, and so she headed off to the Southwest. That was a year ago."

The bartender looked around and then leaned closer to him. "That sounds pretty rough. She's planning to come back, I hope."

It was more a question than a statement. When Victor started to speak, he coughed. His throat felt dry. "I'm not sure. I'm supposed to stay away, leave her alone."

"But you miss her a lot and so you might go and get her, right?" A smile had come to the young woman's vermilion lips.

He chafed a little to hear his story turned so quickly into something out of a TV drama, but what she said was somewhat true. "I was thinking about it." He realized with surprise that he was feeling less sorry for himself than for Jane, and deeply so. She'd suffered. She'd suffered worse things than he ever would. He wondered, briefly but sharply, what it might feel like to have a baby die inside of you. Except it hadn't been a baby, just a fetus, though many weeks a fetus and so not far from a whole baby in her heart.

The bartender had leaned another inch forward and now half-whispered, "I bet things'll turn out all right."

Victor snickered grimly and shook his head. "I'm not so sure." He sniffed and laughed. "You're very nice to listen to my ridiculous story." With some kind of awkward intimacy established, he turned the picture toward her.

"What a nice looking family," she observed. She gazed at the picture for some time, going away in her thoughts.

Victor quietly gasped, "I think I've lost them. I'm just getting this terrible feeling that I've lost them. You know?"

What was this, seeking comfort from a stranger? Pathetic.

The young woman shook her head, with that same knowing smile. "I'll bet you haven't lost them, not a bit," she said. "How long you two been married?"

Victor took back the wallet, folded it closed, and returned it to his pocket. "Twenty-one years." Mechanically, he picked up his drink and took the final swallow without tasting it. She was going to say something horrible.

"Twenty-one *years*. You want to know what I think? Listen, you tell me to shut up if you want to, but if you want my opinion all you've got to do is really, really ask her back."

When he looked up at her, he found that her eyes had narrowed with compelling concentration. "You just go back there and...you go get her and just love the bejesus out of her. I'm probably not old enough to have any huge credibility but as a woman that's what I would want.

Victor nodded slowly. "That's good advice," he managed. He braced himself for what she might say next.

"Hey, I'm not saying it'd be easy, but eventually she'll see that you care and those twenty-one years will come rolling up behind her like a wave and just whoosh her right back into your life." She demonstrated with a wild flail of her hands, like a swimmer caught in surf, but ended with a laugh.

"Really? That's great." He wanted her gone.

She did go, but she was back in less than sixty seconds with a fresh drink, and another generous pour. She whispered, "This one's on the house," and winked.

He took the drink to a corner booth and meditated over a menu. He remembered as he forked through salmon and risotto that sometimes during his on-the-road days he would stay at motels rather than come home. He'd be out too late, be feeling too tired, or guilty, and he would start scanning the dark roads for a motel. Then, eventually, in the dusk, a distant pastel glow would particularize into the neon sign of a small, clean-looking motel. The warm, vibrant colors would pull him in like the open arms of a woman. Those were wonderful days.

By seven, and into a fourth scotch, he realized that two drinks on an empty stomach, and two on a full one, had rendered his lips numb. The last trip to the bathroom had involved some stutter stepping, which he hoped no one else had noticed. But it certainly wasn't his day because just seconds after he'd paid his check an older man sat down across the booth from him with the expression of a kindly supervisor about to deliver a termination notice.

The new visitor explained that he was the owner of the tavern and that he would like to offer Victor a cab ride home. Victor would have to surrender his car keys, however, but he could leave his car overnight and retrieve his keys and the car any time after ten the next morning.

"Can make it fine," Victor assured him, but his head continued to wag after he said it.

"It's our fault," the kindly man said. "We track drinks pretty carefully but we missed the free one that Sheila gave you."

"Really, listen..."

The man's expression hardened. "Easy, you're talking pretty loud. There's a state law at work here and we all need to go along with it."

Victor's brain churned through a thought. "Can I have a friend pick me up?"

"Absolutely. Give me the number and I'll make the call. How about a cup of coffee in the meantime?"

He spent the next thirty minutes deeply considering the possibility that he'd been bred to please women sexually, as a task in life, and, historically speaking, an honorable one. "Right!" he said aloud to himself at one point. He had several important things to say to Enid Grace.

On the way home, Ben was continuously kind to him for the first time in a long time. He'd even danced a little with him as they left the bar, mewling "Yes, yes" in time with Victor's crooning. As Ben drove, Victor tried to raise his head, but it just rolled back and forth against the headrest like an iron ball.

"I really blew it," he announced, despite all the compelling things he had resolved to say to Enid.

"What happened, buddy?" Ben drove steadily.

He found he could speak. His lungs were working again, much happier with cool spring air to breathe. "Came onto her. She wanted a friend, somebody to show a bit of respect, and I left her all caved in and miserable."

"Probably overstating it," said Ben. "As if we poor dickheads had the power to crush a woman's very soul."

"We do! I mean, don't we? She opens up a little, and I can't even like not...can't take advantage...I mean, can't..."

"We'll tuck you in at our place."

His head reared up at last. "No! Home, Ben, home please. I have to face the music."

"Seems like you've faced enough."

Ben had his winter coat on, of all things. What did he think, that the recent string of seasonal days was some kind of meteorological trick that could be reversed in an instant? Poor dickhead. Victor kept arguing about where he would sleep that night, and finally he prevailed. Sooner than he might have liked, he was alone just inside his front door. Twice he'd pushed Ben back from the front door, the potential humiliation of being taken in and bedded down with Nancy hovering nearby was too painful to allow. Ben had been astonishingly persistent, however, and Victor finally got why.

"My dear friend, you do not have to mount a suicide watch. I just need to be alone and to think and sort and all that good stuff."

Once truly alone, Victor found himself thinking more clearly. The empty house didn't seem so bad. Why had he been so afraid earlier? He flopped onto the couch and let his thoughts swim with images of Enid, mostly of her body pressing rhythmically to his. Imaginary kisses, carnal and gaping, a protracted wrestling of hungry tongues. Her thrown thighs like gates, pelvis solid with the loosed power of flesh and bone. When he thought, from nowhere, that surely these were powers and abilities that had remained locked away in his own real-life wife, a wetness invaded his eyes. Poor thing, now there was a genuine gypping. His pity grew keener, wetting his eyes again. That sweet woman who had loved him for so long (and loved him still, who was he kidding?) had longed to throw open her being. It

was no great secret that some terrible distrustfulness prevented her. She had a body, too, and it had occasionally been responsive, even hungering. Was it written somewhere that their last fifteen years of clumsy, semi-digital sex would be all they would ever have? And what if it were? Really, what great loss would that be, in comparison to other things?

His brain felt sex-drenched, the cortex sponge-like, sopping, the convolutions caulked with androgenic jelly laced with alcohol. He pressed his palms to his temples, then stood up, sighed, paced the rug in lurches. Briefly he considered that he needed access to a value system that he had only heard about, the foundation of great loves that were lived silently, secretly--carefully cultivated behind only one or two doors in any given neighborhood.

By the time he'd stripped down to his boxers, he'd changed his mind somewhat. Why did it all have to be so much work? How bonkers could a wife be and still be considered an acceptable mate? Hadn't he suffered through two career changes with her, both abortive, and seen her safely back to her school administration career after each? By contrast, Enid Grace was fresh, direct, sexy. He realized that her relative friendlessness and her tales about ballooning weight and the like could point to some character flaws, but they seemed minor next to Jane's miring complexity. He should call Enid, he concluded, and right this minute, smooth things over, keep all options open.

His retrieved his phone from his coat pocket in the front hallway. At first, it would not cooperate; he must have turned it off after he'd looked up Ben's number. When it glowed to life, he discovered a text from Enid. "Victor, we left things a little confused but I'm sure now it would be better if we didn't see each other. Silly of me to think I could just snap my fingers and get an instant new friend. No hard feelings, I hope. Luck in love, I hope. Thanks for the hand today!"

He read it again. He would call her on Monday, give her a day to come to her senses. A potential conversation flashed through his mind. She would complain about the difficulty of speaking personally at work, but hear him out. The challenge of it all was intoxicating. He could mount very effective arguments about the therapeutic nature of a physical relationship with the open-ended quality of

romantic exploration--secretly discounted on his side, of course. She would challenge him, of course, say something like, "That never works." She might even indulge him with a fuller explanation of the obvious. "Feelings start up, you know they do." She might say something to make him feel ashamed, like "I guess I want to hold out for something better. You know, the really great stuff."

He rubbed his eyes. The words in his mind sounded almost as if they were spoken aloud in the silent room that surrounded him. So, the boys wouldn't go off with him to the lake that summer? Hell with them, he'd go there alone. Maybe he'd even drown himself up there. That would show them all.

The front door opened and there was Ben again.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Only got as far as the car." He took off his coat and dropped it on a chair. "You have beautiful legs, Vic."

Victor looked down at his boxer shorts and laughed. He found a wall to lean against. "Ben, Ben, I need to make some very big changes."

"Great. Since you've ruined my night's sleep, let's get drunk, or drunker in your case, and talk about it."

Ben wandered away for a few minutes and then emerged from the kitchen with two glasses of whisky on ice. "Tell me one thing, though," he said. "Do I have to take off my pants?"

Twenty-One
Wind and limb.

Midge came out to meet Arlen when he pulled up. She must have seen his little economy rental inching up the short road and concluded that he wasn't sure he'd come to the right place. She stepped from the back of the house and raised an arm. "Arlen?" he heard her call.

He leaned his head out the window as he rolled to a halt beside her. "Hi. You must be Midge."

"That's right. You're early!"

It was just after noon. "I pushed." After he shut off the engine and blinked a few times to shake loose the two hours of road noise, he stepped from the car to take Midge's hand. She surprised him by pulling him to her and throwing an arm across his back.

"I have to hug you. Heck, I feel I already know you from all your mother's boasting about you."

"Yeah, me too." He laughed quietly. She was a lesbian, he knew. The fact made him a bit apprehensive, as if her actions would be much less predictable than other women's. "Is Mom here?" he asked, looking around.

"No, she's out at the hospice setting up for the guest of honor, which would be you." Midge smiled at him, taking him in with her eyes to satisfy an evident curiosity. "Why don't you grab your things and come on in." She waved a hand at the house.

"Okay. Should I bring in my painting stuff?" He answered his own question. "I guess I can leave it in the car for now." He tried a small joke. "It'll probably be safe enough."

A few steps ahead, Midge laughed. "I should think so. It's seven miles to the nearest horse thief."

He slid his duffel bag from the back seat and followed her to the back door. Evidently the front of the house, which sported a square porch and a little peaked

roof on two faded white posts, was rarely used. The lowest of its three steps seemed to have busted through long ago.

"I really want to see your work," he called at her back. "I mean, first hand."

"Me too!"

She seemed to get that they'd both surveyed each other's work on electronic media but never up close and real. In the kitchen, the unmistakable smell of a roasting turkey greeted Arlen's nostrils. It made him stop in his tracks. "Wow, something's cooking."

"I drew the short straw. The stove at the hospice, Emmit's stove, is too small for a turkey. Your mom wanted a big Thanksgiving style dinner in your honor. You'd better brace yourself. You're the guest of honor."

"Really?"

"Yep. Come on, you're in here."

She stepped aside to reveal a doorway to a small room off the kitchen. As he entered that room an odor of new pine lumber penetrated the aroma of the roasting turkey. "Mom's a vegetarian," he said, with a strange insistence.

"Not always." She laughed. "Anyway, it's mostly for the others. How do you like the room? We finished it for you."

He dropped the bag on the single bed. "You're kidding." Four windows in a row revealed open land of genuine immensity.

"Well, it was time. We always did need a guestroom. Your cousin Jennie might be out for the summer."

"Really?"

"That's the plan, anyway. Plans, plans, and more plans. I think Verd eats them for breakfast."

"Who's Verd?"

"I'm sorry. That's a sort of nickname for your mom. I can't remember who started it. Hey, how about a cup of coffee."

"Okay. Thanks."

Midge stepped away. Arlen took in the room, and then the view again. He reached out and touched the walls, all wide rough-sawn planks, shiplapped

vertically. "Our friend Tim did all that in one weekend," Midge called. "Try not to notice that there's no trim around the windows."

"Okay," he laughed. Was Tim the sort of hanger-on handyman his mother had described? He was no finish carpenter, that was for sure; pink fiberglass peeked through along the floor, but then again it had been a quick job.

He strode into the kitchen, keeping his eyes fixed on the wooden floor, heavy planks with copper nail heads burnished from the last sanding. Nothing was familiar. "So, what's the plan?" he asked.

"The turkey's got another twenty minutes or so. Should we head your momma off at the pass? She was planning to come back later to meet you here, but I could just call ahead and then the two of us could drive out and save her the trouble."

She pulled up a chair and sat at the big table, a cup before her and one before a chair that waited for him. He took the chair and sat. "That sounds smart," he said. "Maybe I could take a shower though?"

"Sure! You can get cleaned up, and then we'll head out together. I'll just text her the plan." That done, she asked him, "So, you've been snapping Polaroids from Albuquerque to here? I didn't know that camera even existed anymore."

He scratched behind one ear. "Yeah, not by that name, but Fujifilm makes something similar now."

"So you don't need a computer and you don't need a printer."

"Exactly. I guess my thing is to abstract from random images, but the instant film isn't cheap."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

"But man it's going to be hard to hold back in New Mexico. It's all...pretty wild out there."

She smiled and revealed the "Chicklet teeth" his mother had long ago described during a funny phone call. "Isn't it? That's what I love about it. Do you think you can do work out here?"

"Not sure." He scratched again. "I mean, I look around and I think, Hey, do landscapes! I mean, the rocks and the hidden colors everywhere.... I never have

done them, sort of afraid of getting pulled into a tradition, I guess."

The coffee was very good. He had emptied his cup, and kindly Midge noticed and reached way back for the pot. Once she'd refilled his cup, she said, "Well, we'll take you around while you're here. Your mom says you're sort of mining nostalgic images and we've got a ghost town within an hour's drive."

"No kidding. It hasn't like been pulled down or something?"

Midge shook her head. "From what I know, it just slowly came to a stop, the whole town. Hard to imagine, huh?" A moment later, she said, "Want that shower now?"

She sent him off with a towel, but he turned at the door. "It might sound strange, but can I take a look at Mom's room?"

Midge straightened up from where she had just opened the oven door. "A wise child, I can see that. Straight down the hall, pardner. The door on the left." She pointed across the dining room.

Arlen wadded the towel in his hand as he walked. The door to her room was ajar; he had only to push it slightly to swing it wide. He did not actually enter, just looked around. Its ascetic bareness was surprising to him. There was a wide, low bed, a mattress on a platform, a rug before it with a few wisps of light animal hair vying with the dark maroon weave. A tall armoire with a half-length mirror, where a picture of Bobby and him, arms across each other's shoulders, was taped up. One of the two windowsills was bare, but the one nearest the bed held a series of increasingly larger clay vases, each unglazed and shaped like perfect eggs. On the four walls were only two items, a wide oval platter secured with wire, and what must certainly be an Indian doll, a figure whose long husk skirt accounted for most of its length. The doll hung a bit askew. A low rattan end table held a lamp, a battery-powered clock, a stack of manila envelopes, and a thick spiral-bound photocopied booklet with New Mexico Department of Education in bold letters on the cover. The fragrance of patchouli was the only other evidence that his mother did indeed sleep there.

He took his time in the shower, thinking, sorting. After shaving and dressing, he helped Midge load the turkey and quite a few covered bowls into her Wagoneer.

They chatted easily on the way over to the hospice, and in the silences Arlen gawked about to hide his anxiousness. It had now been months since he'd seen his mother, the longest time they had ever been separated.

"Hey, don't you have a dog, Midge?" he asked. He looked around as if it might have slipped into the Wagoneer undetected.

"Yes. Bliss. She went over with Verd. They're sort of... sisters. Separated at birth, I guess."

He joined late in her laughter because he wasn't exactly sure what parts of her statement to take seriously. Now he felt burdensome, potentially in the way. The fact that they had finished off a special room for him...

Later, they dropped into silence when Midge rolled the vehicle onto a dirt road. It was bumpy enough for Arlen to feel he should hold onto his armrest, though Midge just shook about loosely in her seat, rolling the wheel this way and that. A fence with a gatepost clad with chrome car bumpers soon rolled into view. Beyond, several figures were turning at various points to regard them as Midge slowed to roll the car in. A tall man stepped away from a shed on the other side of a split rail fence and lifted his rolled hat. Beside him, a gawky sort of boy, or girl, broke into a run for a low-roofed house a dozen yards to the right of the Wagoneer. Arlen could just hear her calling out. Meanwhile, three dogs streaked for the Wagoneer like missiles homing in on a target. Swarming up, one of two Great Danes nearly leaped through Arlen's window, its big head coming within an inch of his own. "Whoa," he called out, leaning completely against Midge. The dog lifted his head away and pranced off with several loud barks.

"That's their way of saying hello. Bliss is the black and gray border collie, among other things."

After he'd straightened up again, Arlen spotted a blonde woman coming from around the back of the house. She was tall and lanky looking in jeans and a heavy sweatshirt. Her face was reddish, nearly burnished, and her eyes shone very blue above the collar of her denim shirt. As she walked, she held a straw cowboy hat in place tipped back a bit on her head. Arlen gasped, "That's..."

Midge's hand fell onto his wrist. "Yes, Arlen, *that* is your mother."

It took poor Arlen nearly a full hour to get over the shock. Later, he could remember mumbling phrases, smiling a lot, and generally being unable to put full sentences together. He had trouble believing that this woman who kept hugging him or gripping his arm or shoulder could really be his mother. It was certainly she, but there were too many new things about her to take in.

He had to sort through his impressions of her as Tim and Diane (the gawky *girl*) came forward for introductions and then set him to fielding questions about his trip out. A dull ache remained in his left side from the first hug his mother had given him. He had never been hugged so hard by anyone. And her skin was darker while her hair was fairer, or grayer, and her eyes so sharply blue. Her face had lines in it that he could not remember, but it seemed smoother at the same time. When she gripped the turkey roaster on the floor of the Wagoneer, the muscles jumped in her tanned forearms where she'd shoved her sleeves up. Then as everyone headed for the house, she stepped along beside him with long strides, her boots, which he could now see accounted for her extra height, hitting the ground hard. Between her words, he could see her smile shine from the corner of his eye.

Tim had paused on his way back to the shed to open the back door for them. Jane backed through so that she could keep beaming at Arlen. "It's so great that you actually got here. And I cannot believe that we're going to have your for a whole month!"

"That's good."

Inside, the girl, Diane, twirled around the kitchen table. "Hide that bird! Tim'll probably eat all of it!" When she grinned, she revealed a mouthful of bristling orthodontics.

The handsome man in the slouch hat protested from where he leaned in the corner. "Shee! You eat more than I do." He was backing away from them as Arlen caught the screen door with his elbow. "I'm just going to finish up with the latch."

"We've got a smart goat," Jane explained. "Keeps getting loose."

The two women had instinctively lowered their heads to clear the back door jamb, though it seemed just tall enough for Arlen. Perhaps it would brush his mother's hat, though. Inside, it was dark and shadowy in most corners, but the

makeshift central table lay nearly set for dinner beneath a cheap three-bulb fixture. Arlen was trying to make sense of a middle-aged woman and a small old man who were working their way around the table with fistfuls of silverware. "Angela, Emmet, here's my pride and joy," Jane announced. She laid one hand on his arm and the other on the back of his neck and turned him from the woman to the man as if he were a statue on a revolving pedestal.

"Howdy, as they say," said Arlen.

Emmet's bright eyes came up and he barked out a laugh. "Howdy yourself. Well, look at that kid, will you now?" He had dropped the forks with a clatter and now came around the table to shake Arlen's hand. His small bony hand had a raptor's grip. For several long seconds he stood with his head back a bit to peer closely into Arlen's face.

Angela waved a handful of silverware at him. "The famous artist," she said.

"Not really."

"Hey, we've been tracking you, so no false modesty."

"The woman *does* own a gallery," Jane scolded. Her grin was there but then not. Her face had softened suddenly, and then her eyes filled as he watched with some alarm. "Oh, Arlen," she said like a breath. Then she pulled him to her again, though much more gently this time.

"Uh oh, there she blows," said Angela, back to laying forks again.

Diane giggled. "She's been a mess all morning."

"Oh, Arlen, I made you wait all these months and..."

"Wind and limb, Verd," said Emmet. "Wind and limb."

Midge came through the doorway. "Now here's a tender scene."

"The mother and son reunion," said Emmet.

Arlen scratched at his ear and looked off. In the far room, perhaps the only other room, all the corners held squat, overstuffed chairs. The kitchen area before him might also be the dining room. One wall sported two different kinds of lower cabinets with plain open pine shelves. Heavy crocks held the lower ones. The shelves continued, he could see, near the low ceiling of the central room. One was lined with animal skulls and kerosene lanterns in no particular order. A large

crucifix with several withered palm leaves hung on a lone beam, the only visual division between the tiny kitchen and the open central room.

"How long do we have the boy for?" Emmitt asked Jane.

Arlen answered for his mother because she was wiping her nose with a tissue she had fished from her jeans pocket. "I've got all of August at least, but it's mostly just studios senior year, so I don't have to rush back or anything."

Angela said, "We might have a spot or two on the gallery walls. We take a big cut, though."

"Hey, eighty percent of a million still leaves me with two hundred thou."

That got a laugh from everyone.

Midge had lifted the tin foil from several large bowls and now set them along the table. Sweet potatoes, green beans with some kind of white sauce, and square-cut chunks of some fibrous yellow vegetable. Angela was now at the small stove to scoop beans from a simmering pot. "Pinto beans with onions," she said to Arlen when she caught him watching. "My specialty." He noticed that she actually did smile at times, little glimmerings that came and went.

Diane made a little leap in place. "Let's give him the tour!"

"There's time, right?" Jane asked no one in particular.

"Nope," said Angela. "Verd, drag the dressing out of that bird, would you?, and Diane, would you get Tim in here? He and Emmitt are going to have some kind of carving contest."

"No contest!" barked Emmitt. "He's the man handy with a saw."

"Can you eat, honey?" Jane asked Arlen.

"Sure!" He was indeed very hungry.

His chronic confusion must have showed, because after Tim and Diane returned and they'd all sat down, Emmitt boomed out at him from the head of the table, "So, what do you think of your old lady now?"

Most everyone laughed in anticipation of his answer. He said at once, "I can't believe it." He kept his eyes down, too embarrassed at first to meet his mother's beside him. "I mean, Mom, you're like *glowing*."

Jane preened a little. "Well, well." Then she laughed and grabbed his

shoulder. He felt her face bump against his cheek and land a kiss. "But look at *you*," she said. She reached across his back and shook him by both shoulders, turning him as if he were not already facing the group. "Isn't he beautiful?"

"Very beautiful," said Emmet. "Just like the Moaner Lisa."

Arlen looked across the table at Diane. "So, do you work here full-time now?"

Diane looked to Jane. "I don't know, do I?"

"She does it for love, because I sure don't have the money yet to pay her."

"You pay me!"

"Honey, not nearly enough."

Emmet tapped Arlen's wrist with the tip of his knife, then waved the blade Diane's way. "This child has a gift with animals. She's a healer, I can tell you."

"And a wonderful worker," said Jane with feeling.

Diane blushed and muttered, "Oh, God...." She lifted the heavy bowl of sweet potatoes across the table to Arlen.

Arlen laid the bowl down and then peered at it more carefully before reaching for a potato. "Is this bowl one of yours?" he asked Midge.

"Fraid so. The county's drowning in them."

Jane laughed. "We are all the proud owners of several Midge Sheehan Originals."

"Price is right," Emmet quipped.

"She gives away the busted ones," Tim explained to Arlen.

"They're not *busted*," said Midge. "They're perfectly good."

Arlen continued to regard the bowl. He knew enough about firings and glazing to know that the uneven, molten surface and the captured particles of glittering grit were not accidents. You had to be good to pull off that kind of texture and surface.

Diane jumped up twice to call Tim from the back door. Finally, he entered and took a seat. "All done," he announced.

"Check's in the mail," said Jane.

"You can wait a long time for the mail out here," said Angela.

Emmet perked up. "When I first set up out here, it was a ten mile run to pick

up a package. But you could just put something out at the forks and the postman'd pick it up and you could settle up the postage next time you went into town."

"We had a lady who'd deliver goat's milk when I first came," said Midge.

Angela said "Ugh," but Diane said, "Oh, but the *cheese*. Yum."

"What you mean is 'yuck,'" said Tim.

"Oh, Jesus!" Emmit yelped. "We forgot grace!"

All around, heads dropped down, everyone's except his mother's. She sat forward with her chin perched on her fists, smiling. Emmit began speaking in a lone, solitary voice.

"Dear Lord, we have so much to be thankful for. Love and healing has come to so many at this table, and we have your generosity to thank for that. So much is expected and so little received in this life, yet here we are, gathered among people who we respect and love. We care and are cared for. Here I am at the short end of a long life with a wonderful new prospect before me, this fine hospice which will carry my name forward in the name of care and love and healing. Well, if we keep getting the funding," he added as an aside, and got a laugh. "For this we are very grateful, Lord, to you and to your many servants here at this table who have made that possible. Let this spirit continue among us."

He paused to let an "Amen" breathe out from the group, and then everyone clapped and oohed and aahed, and Midge even appeared to be crying. "Emmit," she said with feeling and dabbed at her eyes. It was hard to tell if she was joking or not. Tim, a set smile on his face, ran a hand up Midge's spine.

They reverted to eating hungrily, but Arlen often caught himself staring at the company, each in turn. Here was the Midge he'd heard so much about, a solid, kindly presence all right. Bandana and bangs. Tim in that wild hat, so stiffly solicitous to everyone, and the kid, Diane, shy and boisterous by turns, grinning then clapping her lips shut over her braces. Angela, he guessed, was a lone soul who had probably been swept into the group. Of course, they all seemed that way, even his mother. It was hard to imagine on the surface what they all had in common. Emmit was certainly a hoot. The man's eyes, set in flesh so seamed and creased, were like bright green marbles. Arlen could see glints of gold in the man's teeth as he bit

heartily into a flap of meat. Whenever he brought food to his mouth, he lifted his elbow higher than his ear.

Angela was speaking to him from down the table.

"What're you going to paint while you're here, Arlen?"

"Oh, I don't know. I might even take a break from it and just take a load of photographs."

"That's so neat what you do," said Midge.

Jane patted his leg, again. She said quietly, "Just checking to see if you're still really here."

Tim said, "Verd did quite a bit of drawing." He ducked his head as Jane clucked at him. "It's probably top secret, though."

"The hospice must be hard work," Arlen hazarded. Again, he reached for his wineglass. He was gulping the Chianti.

"Don't get her started," said Angela.

"What?" Jane challenged.

Tim began chanting quietly, "Hairworms, tapeworms, lungworms..."

"Oh, Tim, stop that!" Angela cried.

Diane picked up the game. "Pinworms, heartworms...."

"I mean it!" said Angela. "Or I'll leave the table."

"I'll go with you," said Midge.

Jane said, "It is all pretty disgusting. I mean, all the horrible diseases these poor animals can get. Especially when their jerky owners don't really take care of them."

Emmit was shaking his head. "A lot to learn, a lot to remember. Mites and dusting and pasture rotating..."

"Pasture *rotation*," said Jane with a smile.

"Oh, that's right!" Emmit waved a fork fussily.

"I like the titty-dipping," said Tim, quietly.

Diane gasped. "He *always* does that. He does it on purpose!"

"What?" asked Arlen.

"It's *teat*-dipping."

Diane said to Arlen, "And he knows that, of course."

"Y'all corrupted me," said Tim.

"You needed it," Angela put in.

Jane said, "Tim was always volunteering to do it until he found out what it really was." That got a big laugh all around.

"What *is* it?" Her bold references made him redden a little.

Jane said, "Just a disinfecting process for nursing animals."

"Don't look so shocked, Arlen," Emmitt boomed at him. "You was probably tited yourself."

"He certainly was," his mother said. "And just look at the results!"

Midge pointed at his face while the others laughed or clapped. "He blushes just like Verd!"

Arlen hurried on. "So, Mom, you know how to do all that stuff now?"

"A fraction of it. I have to hurry to get up to speed."

Tim said, "Most of the time she walks around looking like an alien. Rubber gloves, rubber boots, rubber apron, a mask..."

"I'm learning how to do injections," said Diane.

"Just say no to drugs, Di," said Angela.

"Oh God...."

During the next hour, Arlen got to boast about his inclusion in RISD's annual invitational exhibition. Then talk turned back to the hospice. Jane and a man named Joe Wise were writing a proposal to the state education department to do animal care and awareness workshops with fourth and fifth graders, but they were distressed about how hard it was to get the buildings and other structures approved by the health department. "They keep finding new things to add," said Jane. "Can't let water stand and they've got rodent control on the brain."

"Your vet let you down," Emmitt prompted. "Shoulda warned you...."

"Well, she's pro bono and she's pretty busy."

When Angela got up to make coffee, Tim announced that he had to head off to his mother's nursing home. He reminded Diane that he was her ride, but she chafed at leaving before Arlen's tour. Midge volunteered to run her home later, though that

meant a forty-minute round trip. Arlen made a point of trotting out to shake Tim's hand before he drove off.

"I'm a big fan of your mom's," said Tim.

"And she's a big fan of yours. Said she wouldn't have a hope with this place without your help."

"Good to hear."

After Tim drove off, Arlen wandered off behind the house where he found a length of wooden fence to lean against. His stomach was so full that it was a relief to just stand still. Far off on the other side, a big graying horse began to step across the field toward him. He kept wondering to himself if the people around that table could really be his mother's friends. The cautious Bravermans would certainly stick out in this crowd.

He wasn't alone for long. Emmit came up behind him, laughing to himself and toking on a rolled cigarette.

"Hey, can I have one of those?" Arlen asked.

"Sure! Here, take this one."

Arlen took the cigarette uncertainly. Its tip was very wet.

As he rolled a fresh one, Emmit said, "See that trailer back there behind you, Arlen? That's where your mom lived for the first few months out here."

Arlen turned to stare. "You're kidding. I thought it was much bigger."

"Nope. I'd look out and see her stepping in or out as if she was living on the champs-delees. But, oh my, she was a nervous little soul back then. Deep down, I mean. God looked out for her, though."

"She doesn't believe in God." He laughed quickly when he thought that his statement might be offensive.

"So she tells me." The old man lit his cigarette and took a step backwards. "Better let out the poor dogs again. They're sufferin to hear us havin such a good time without them."

Arlen became aware that he'd been hearing occasional barks from behind the sagging house during dinner. "Wait," he called to Emmit's back. "What does 'wind and limb' mean?"

"Words some people use to describe a healthy horse!"

"Oh. Thanks."

His mother came through the back door. As she neared him, she held up one of two coffee mugs and tilted her head to signal a question. "Thanks, yes," he called. "Where's Diane?"

"Helping clean up. She'll be out."

Midway to him she changed directions toward a gate and motioned to him with one elbow. "Come meet my animals!"

He nodded at the house. "I already have!"

She threw back her head and laughed so hard that she tripped a little. He headed down the fence to where it connected up with what appeared to be new wire. The big horse, meanwhile, had turned to aim itself at the point of their eventual intersecting. At the gate, his mother was lifting the latch with her elbow. Arlen could hear the horse's heavy steps: *ca-la-lop, ca-la-lop*.

He hurried up and took the coffee mugs from her. As he followed her through the gate, he scolded himself for drinking so much wine. He wasn't going to do justice to the coming tour, which he could see from her grin she was very proud to be conducting. Emmitt's cigarette tasted even richer after he'd sipped a bit of the bitter coffee.

The horse was before him now, its big head startlingly close. His mother held one of its ears while rubbing and patting its head all over. "This here's my friend, Tumbler. She was the first, except that she's mine, not a paying tenant." She lifted a palm to cup the horse's rubbery muzzle.

"She's beautiful."

At the sound of his voice, the animal stepped to him. He backed away with a laugh, a cup in each hand and the rolled cigarette still smoldering between two fingers. At the same time, he was mesmerized by the horse's large eyes and long lashes. So expressive. Those eyes seemed to be apprising him with the same concentration.

"She can do tricks," said his mother. "Watch this."

With a sudden movement, she swung herself up onto the horse. She was

suddenly there, up on the horse, her legs clamped to its bare, barrel-like middle. "Come on, Tumbler," she cooed, yanking at handfuls of its coarse mane and clapping its sides with her calves. The horse began to shudder backwards by flicking its hooves strangely. It managed to move away several yards under Jane's urging. Arlen understood that he was supposed to remark on this feat, but his whole attention was commanded by the startling sight of his mother atop that horse.

"She knows lots of tricks," she called down. A moment later, she vaulted down beside him again and relieved him of one of the mugs.

"That was fantastic, Mom."

A few moments later, Diane came running up. She tagged along as Jane led him toward a low, open barn. All around the open spaces were so entrancing. He stepped more carefully, as if no longer sure of the standard facts of gravity.

"No cigarettes beyond this point, Arlen. Fires."

Arlen paused to stamp out the butt. At the wide-plank structure, he was introduced to four goats, a stud, and three milkers past their prime. His mother explained that the one named Sheila had come to them with three-quarters of her coat eaten away by mange, but she was well on the mend now. He learned from Diane that goats were the source of mohair and cashmere, a fact that surprised him. He'd thought sheep were the source. They turned a corner and found a Shetland pony standing very still in the center of a tiny corral. His mother quietly explained that the pony, Bossy, was going down to infectious anemia. She'd had a long life, though. The vet had shown his mother how to give injections--antibiotics, vitamin A, and painkillers--but the pony was fourteen years old. "We just brush her a lot at this point," Diane said with a sad look to Jane. The two women paused to pat the small pony, one on each side.

All of a sudden the two Great Danes were upon them. The first animal reared up against his mother, nipping at her face with its heavy jaws. She yelped and batted it back, her coffee cup sloshing in the air. She had just set the cup on a fence post when the second dog stood and pushed against her back. "Whoa, whoa!" she yelled at them, throwing first one and then the other side. She danced aside, feigning so that the gray dog pawed open air. Diane gave the other a sidewise kick

in the rear. "Scat!" she cried.

"Mom...."

"This is Gabriel. They're Emmitt's." The dog had its paws on her shoulders, calmer now. It looked as if she and the dog were about to waltz.

"Now, git. Git!" She threw the dog off, yelled "No!" at the other dog as it circled nearer, now with Bliss in the mix as well, and then all three dogs turned in unison and streaked off.

"They're usually much more polite," said Diane. "But I guess all the excitement is just too much for them."

"It sure is," Jane agreed.

The two women led him on, now toward a hut that had been hidden from view before. Jane turned with her arms out. "We're sort of in a big daze for the time being. I didn't even know the tiniest bit about how complicated this might be. I mean, the different kinds of food and medicine. Cross-fencing and feedlots and just remembering to put on rubber gloves all the time. The vet's been so great, though. She's doing it mostly for free, and she's lending me all her books and just *giving* me instruments."

"Tax write-offs," Arlen joked.

"Ha! You cynic!"

"No, but really, Mom, this is all pretty great. But it does seem...pretty big."

Jane and Diane shared a glance. "We're getting some help," said his mother. "I've got Di here, and I'll be able to pay her for more hours if we get some new grants."

"You'll get them, Verd."

"Might get some interns from the colleges."

"Well, I think it's great, Mom. It's incredible, really."

"I'm glad you think so." Jane grew quiet. "Two weeks ago, though, we saw our first friend out. Ivan, an old wolfhound." She sighed and shook her head. "Bossy'll go soon. That'll be the hard part, actually seeing them die."

"Yeah," said Diane quietly.

Arlen nodded. "But you'll make them happy until they do."

Diane gave Jane a shy smile. "You said he was nice."

The three of them made a little triangle. Just as the coffee mugs were emptied, Midge appeared. "We should leave soon, Di, if we're going to get you home by three."

"No," Diane protested. She lowered her shoulders and shook them. "I can be a little late."

"Three *is* a little late, remember? And we have to find Bliss first."

"Better go, honey," said Jane. "Your daddy paid for that tutor."

"Okay, okay. I'll see you on Saturday, Verd."

As Arlen watched, Diane very directly reached up to lace her arms briefly around his mother's neck and then raised her face to kiss her on the cheek. Quite gracefully, Jane slipped her two hands onto the girl's shoulder blades and brought her face down to kiss her cheek in turn. As Diane turned to Midge, Jane patted her on the rump.

The girl turned as she walked away. "Bye, Arlen. Nice to have met you."

Arlen gave her a little wave and then turned to find Jane holding open the hut door. A moment later he stepped onto velvety sawdust. The walls were lined with individual cages, most of them empty, but two were occupied: a skunk and a little swaybacked pig. He knew the species of pig because some idiot artist friend back in Providence had kept one in his studio for a while. The little pig jumped up happy as a puppy, and the skunk seemed to squint from the center of its cage. "She's de-scented," said Jane, "but the family kids got tired of her. Part of my service is to find homes for hard-to-place animals. Not everybody wants a pygmy pig, but healthy rabbits and cats have lots of adoption places."

Arlen nodded. She reached out and rubbed his shoulder, again.

He was getting used to her touching him. In fact, he needed to be touched by that point. The nagging sad thought would not leave him that he'd somehow slipped out of the circle of his mother's intimacy. The sight of her and Diane's leave-taking, the effortless and expected display of warmth, had stabbed him with jealousy. But now as they walked in the direction of the open land, he noted that within a few steps they had quite comfortably looped an arm to each other's waist. This might be

his mother, now, he realized--a person who often and easily touched others.

They strode together in silence, farther out to some tumbled stones that seemed placed for sitting on. He hadn't gotten a sense that they were ascending, but from the stones they could see for miles over rolling plains. Houses were clustered far to the right. "That's the edge of Santa Fe," she explained, pointing to the right. "I imagine it'll keep creeping out to us, though the water's scarce enough to keep the building permits to a minimum."

"Rich people make good donors," Arlen hazarded.

"Smart lad!"

Arlen looked about him. There were whole, jagged ranges of mountains here, wonderful long smears of sienna and ochre, and, nearby, spots of cadmium orange dancing around the feet of a cactus with long spindly arms and three magenta blossoms for fists.

He had to ask her. "So, Mom, do you think you're going to be staying out here? I mean, permanently?"

She just barely nodded. "I guess so." Her voice sounded hoarse. "Thanks for being the first to mention that, Arlen. I've been petrified."

He'd thought he was prepared to hear that answer, but the actual hearing made his face go cool. He looked at her. "Does that mean that you're going to divorce Dad?"

She nodded again. "Looks that way." Her face tried to smile against a frown. "Sorry, partner."

It became very hard to look at her, at the way she was trying to smile. "I guess I'm kind of confused. I mean, isn't there supposed to be yelling and sleeping around and stuff like that first?"

She didn't answer. From her expression, it was clear she was considering his impromptu list, which might mean that he had hit one or more nails on the head. She sighed and said, "I'm not sure there always has to be yelling."

He felt a quick, sharp pang of pity for her. It came into him behind a glimpse of hidden failures and betrayals, and a nearly empathic sense of how alone she had been with all of it. Should he be sharing in the guilt to be doled? "Mom, sorry, you

don't have to..."

"No, no, it's okay. I'm just wondering if I *should* have yelled. I've seen Grandma recently, flew out to talk with her about my dad, and one thing we both learned about ourselves is that we aren't yellers." She laughed. "Probably we were too yellow to be yellers, and probably because we didn't want to find out if certain suspicions were true. Maybe if I had a bigger capacity for pain..."

He cut in, fighting to keep his voice from quailing. "It's fine, Mom. It's really okay, what you decided to do, coming out here and everything. I mean, I never thought it would be, but now that I'm out here, it's so, like, *obvious*."

"Really? You're not mad?"

"Mad?" He considered that, the better able to respond with certainty. "No, or not anymore, anyway. Just kind of sad."

Her head fell so hard against his shoulder that he nearly lost balance. He had to raise an arm to steady her. He could feel the bones in her back through her sweatshirt. "I was sure about Vic and me, about my not growing and the need to try to, but I've always worried that I was hurting you and Bobby in the bargain."

He wanted to tell her something. "You know, Mom, every once in a while recently I catch myself sort of bragging about you."

"No."

"Yeah, to my friends. It always seemed like a gutsy thing to do, going off like this."

Her head came up with a sigh. She hunched, as if tired, but brought her face up to the view. Big tears now. Plop, plop. She sniffed and rubbed her nose. "Well, well, well," she said.

He peered closely at her. "Mom, you look all smooth. Like a girl."

She half-laughed and gripped him above the knee, hard. "Thanks. I think."

When she fell silent, looking off with a deepening gaze, he asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, a lot of things." She had produced another tissue. "It's strange how everybody seems to want so much. I guess it did me and your dad in, in a way."

"I don't follow, Mom."

She laughed and shook her head a tiny bit, her brow clouding. "Why should you? I just remembered a Thanksgiving back when I was about twelve or thirteen. My dad, your grandfather, he and I we did this sort of house makeover the morning after Thanksgiving. Dad and I and my sibs Sissy and Charlotte and David, we all jumped up and started painting the whole house." She paused and then went on. "It's not a happy memory, Arl, because I'm just remembering that we kids must all have been thinking the same thing. That maybe this would make Dad happy, maybe this would make him pleased with the place. But you know, I can remember as clearly as if it was just yesterday how he looked that Sunday morning after all the paint had dried. I saw him looking around and my heart sank, *plunk!*, just like a stone, because I could hear him thinking, 'It's the same old place, the same old small, ratty place.' Just as if he were saying it aloud."

"What made you remember that?"

"I'm not sure." She smiled. "I think my whole life I've been trying to make a place that would satisfy my father, and then by extension, *your* father. Women like me are bred for that patter, I guess you could say. Anyway, it's been a long mistake. I sure hope I haven't caught *you* in that trap."

"Nah. I have no intention of pleasing you or Dad."

She laughed with abandon and gripped him hard above the knee. A moment later he had to ask, "Does Dad know yet? That you're not coming back?"

Her hands came together and dropped down between her knees. "Not yet. I'm afraid I've been a bit of a coward on that score."

"You haven't called him or anything?"

She shook her head. "Once, no twice, but not about this. Anyway, I wanted to talk with you and Bobby first."

A quiet second or two floated by as they sat, breathing in rhythm. Then his mother asked, "He's okay, isn't he?"

"Bobby? More than okay."

"That's good." After a second, she added, "I meant your father, though."

"Dad? He's okay. Coping."

"Is he seeing anyone? Wait! Forget I asked that question."

"Okay," he agreed with a little laugh. A moment later, he said, "You should tell Dad, Mom. It's not fair to him."

She looked at him, then looked away, and then nodded. "Right." A few seconds later, she added, "I don't know if I could bear to hear his voice. It might have an effect that..."

"Then write him! It's...like the next step, Mom."

She nodded slowly again. "Right. I will. Soon, I promise."

She had not wished her time with her son sullied by the old demons, but unbidden before her on the blank, packed soil at her feet came a clear stored image of Victor's expression when that young woman had surprised them before the garish buffet at that hotel some seven years before. How different it all seemed now, that moment of unplanned and unexpected confrontation, because now she remembered the flicker of despair that passed across Victor's face, and in the other woman's eyes the hard false shine above the tremulous smile that wanted to collapse into an honest frown.

Honesty, had it ever seemed so beautiful and rare and powerful as it did to her these days? Several weeks ago she had put on a dress and gone to a meeting and sat before the suited guardians of state resources and said, "All I can say is that at one moment it's all a beautiful dream and the next moment I'm scared out of my mind," and they had laughed with her and urged her to submit a proposal.

And just last night, she'd been lying awake, anxious to be seeing Arlen not so many hours from then, staring up in the dark at the ceiling where once, months ago, a large centipede had sifted grit down upon her. All through that long hour of sleeplessness, she'd meditated on several single words--betrayal, shame, miscarriage. It seemed so terribly dishonest, that last word. It held so much secret blame for the mother--mis-step, mis-take, as if she'd done something wrong and thereby brought about a death. And the elegance of its root, "carriage," unfeelingly hid from the world the dark coiled tragedy wrapped in its soft vowels. It wasn't a mis-anything. It had been a death, the denying of all possible future moments of a particular life.

She had given birth to a corpse. And God had allowed that. God had stood by

and allowed her body to reject the then chief object of her desire, as if he, she, or it knew better. God had allowed her body to operate like an instrument beyond the control of her heart. Her body had concluded that Emily possessed some genetic imperfection, but she, Jane Verdianne, would have taken Emily in any form.

When Emily had come into the world dead, it had been the final sign that she herself was faltering as a life-giving source, an unrecognized but deeply important remnant of her identity. Before that, Bobbie had been pulled from her at knifepoint. Had her body then begun to reject life? She must remember that she'd had the affirming experience of that long, glorious struggle to launch life that was Arlen's birth. She must remember that she'd loved her husband and fought for him during the time when he wanted her help, and she had fought for the boys for every moment of their lives. She would be smart to remember these things more often, and she remembered it then in the dark.

There was enough proof in her life that she could be strong. She, Jane Verdianne, would be one woman who would successfully shake free of mantles of imposed weakness. They would no longer fit, no longer suit her. She'd had a vision these days that the scars within her had been gradually revealed to be mere knots, whose strands could be loosened and unraveled until the size of the knot was gradually reduced. These were among the things she had learned. Now, there were things for her to do, things to be worked on and solved, and things to laugh about and joys to be discovered and savored.

When she sought Arlen's hand it was as much to be comforted as to comfort. Something else was different about the way she felt these days. Her usual anger seemed to be turning itself out and away, targetless. It was a novel feeling, and she worked seriously at defining it in her mind as she squeezed her son's hand, now in both of hers. She decided it was pity she was feeling--pity for all persons whose weaknesses would undo their genuine strengths. Parents who collapsed into their duties, women who compromised, who made do. Her own husband, a man who spray-painted the marks from his sons' dented bikes, who worked day after day at a desk, who packed the car for camping trips, who dug tirelessly on summer weekends in the stone-ridden soil of the backyard to put up tomatoes and green

beans so that his wife and children could taste summer in the middle of February-- this man who'd gone off in every direction but inward, mixed caring so indistinguishably with need that he'd mired himself and his loving beyond recognition.

These reveries were interrupted by heavy, plodding footsteps and a bumping noise.

"Hey!" cried Arlen. Behind him, Tumbler had thrust her head between the corral slats and bumped the back of Arlen's head.

"She wants to give you a ride, I think," said Jane. "Come on!" She pulled Arlen to his feet.

"A ride? No thanks!"

"No, it'll be great, you'll see."

His mother ducked through the slats and took down Tumbler's reins and led her down to the gate.

"I am *not* getting on that thing!"

"It'll be great!"

"It will not be great 'cause it won't happen!"

The shouting had brought first Emmitt and then Angela to the back door.

"She's a mean one," Emmitt called. "But you can break her, boy."

And then the big animal was beside Arlen and his mother was pulling his foot up onto a lower rail and then, impossibly, he was astride the creature and looking down into a bowl of dirt with big smiles along the edges.

"Squeeze her with your knees," Jane ordered.

He squeezed, once and then again, and the horse did not move an inch.

"She's playin' with you," Emmitt explained.

Angela snagged Emmitt's cigarette and sneaked a puff.

The horse was moving now, because Jane was leading it out by her reins. Instinctively, Arlen grabbed up handfuls of the coarse black main and held on.

"Ride 'em, cowboy!" Angela shouted.

Between guffaws, Emmitt croaked, "She's a woman, treat her *mean!*"

Arlen fell in with it all. He raised his arms to the sky and shouted, "Look, no

hands!”

“A natural!”

“Just like his mom!”

Arlen cried out in a squeaky voice, “Mommy, Mommy, *finally!*, the pony you’ve always promised me.”

Now the laughter reached a level of near hysteria. Arlen couldn’t catch his breath. He started to slide from Tumbler’s back. The ground looked very far away, but he couldn’t stop himself. His mother had stepped back, however, and with their arms tangled the two of them fell to the ground in separate heaps.

They were laughing so hard that they could not get up. At the back door, their audience was swatting knees and wiping their eyes and coughing. Tumbler, meanwhile, had stepped over to Jane and begun to nudge her onto her side with her enormous snout.

“She thinks you’re dead!” cried Angela.

Arlen finally got up onto one elbow. “Don’t worry, Tumbler,” he wailed. “She ain’t dead. She’s alive, she’s *alive!*” And with that said, he collapsed onto his back and stared up into the enormous blue sky that went on forever.

Prologue

Charley Verdianne lay under the car, working the clutch plate around with one hand while trying to maneuver the anchoring bolt. Grit kept sifting down into his eyes as he stared up into the undercarriage. Some of it stuck to his forehead and cheeks, wet from the heat of a Saturday afternoon in August. He couldn't quite get the plate centered because his arms kept tiring from holding their own weight aloft. He could feel his heart working, and that worried him. Grunting, he forced himself to concentrate; he probably had enough strength for one pass at getting the assembly together, and then if he forgot to lubricate the plate splines or smear anchoring compound on the new bolts, he'd have to pull the whole thing apart again.

But the plate kept sliding around, and so finally he let his arms fall back and the plate drop beside his ear on the cement. He lay quietly, listening to his own breathing, the silence moving swiftly into him like dammed-up water coming free. He remembered when he'd bought the four-door Impala. He'd bought it in 1980 a used 1978 model, and it was now 1989, so the car was eleven years old. As he lay resting, other numbers rushed into his mind. He'd been born in 1943. He was now forty-six years old.

It was early afternoon and still hot. He remembered with a smart of guilt that he'd picked up a six-pack of beer for the weekend on his way home from work yesterday, a luxurious purchase, but at least it had not been Michelob, one of the more expensive brands he preferred. He slid out from under the car, then rose and headed for the kitchen. He half-hoped that the short trip would throw off the numbers that were lodging in his mind, but the numbers stayed, and then multiplied. When he saw his own smiling military portrait in its place atop the refrigerator among Edie's collection of special photographs, it made him remember that he'd been eighteen in 1961 and had decided to enlist in the Armed Forces and, thereby, effectively ended every meaningful opportunity in his life. His older brother, Arnold, had gone down in a helicopter accident at a stateside army base, a passive victim's death but one elevated to active heroism by parents and relatives.

He took a beer from the fridge. The TV was going. When he craned his neck, he could see Sissy watching alone in the living room. He could hear a cartoon character lisping furiously and then the sound of violent blows, metal on flesh. When he'd first gotten the TV, one of his boss's castoffs, his old dog Foxy had barked at the screen. He remembered how they'd all laughed, surprising the poor old dog, who'd been genuinely worried. Now Foxy was dead, put down because of hip problems, and Charley could not bear to get another dog. He'd talked so much to that dog that the habit had gotten a little spooky. Today, Foxy would have flattened down to watch him under the car, and he would have muttered at the dog to explain what he was doing.

The TV screen reflected as bright white spots on Sissy's glasses. He could stare at her face because her eyes were absolutely glued to the screen. She sat, as she usually did, slouched back on the couch, as if tossed there, and this time she was rhythmically pulling at her bottom lip. She was tensed at the fragile character of her moment of privacy, he guessed; Charlotte might pop in at any minute and they'd start quarrelling over programs, or Babe brought home from Stell's to be assigned to her for watching. He wanted to just walk in and pat her hair, plant a kiss on her cheek, but he held back. His hands were always dirty, and he could feel the grit that still stuck to his forehead. Behind him and down the hall, he heard his wife's laugh, then Jane's, then heard their voices drop and murmur. He pulled back his head quickly, in case Sissy heard them too and looked around and caught him staring.

Eddie and Jane were getting ready to go out shopping, he remembered. His wife had extracted a few extra dollars from him for that purpose. No one could see him there beside the refrigerator, so he reached up and laid the photograph face down.

Back outside, he leaned against the car's fender and mindlessly swigged from the bottle. The beer was cold but began to warm perceptibly as he held it. The numbers had triggered a tightness under his ribs that turned into a pain in his left shoulder whenever he breathed too deeply. Those cramping pains had become part of most of his waking moments and had even invaded many of his dreams. They made it hard to fall asleep at night.

By this point, he'd realized that the numbers had created a thought, and the thought had created the pain. He'd trapped himself in yet another of an endless series of games that his mind created to avoid that pain but which, in time, brought him right back to it. This time it had something to do with the clutch. He tried to distract himself from the clutch, but in doing so his eyes lighted on a row of stunted rose bushes. He'd put those in because Edie had asked him to, after jumping at a sale at the Du Lac Nursery, but no one watered them. Seven kids and no one to water a measly row of poor rose bushes. It flashed into his mind that the roses were in the wrong place, and that was why they were now dying. He hadn't asked her where she wanted them. She seemed surprised when he took her out to show her, staring at the row beside the slab of the carport. He'd been disappointed after all his digging, but now it was pretty obvious that no one in the household could see them unless he or she stood like this, with the car behind.

To have a clear answer usually brought a welcome feeling, because clear answers were rare, but the sight of the dying roses saddened him, and that made him think of the clutch again that was giving him so much trouble but which, he now had to admit, did not really need to be replaced. It was true that the pedal had too much play, but as it was, the clutch would probably outlast the engine, already at over eighty thousand miles. Miles and years. He was forty-six. In four short years he'd be fifty, ten years short of the age when his father had died. More than twice the years that Arnold had been given. He wondered if his old parents had kept track of years like this, if they had wondered how the first son would have used a normal allotment of years.

He looked beyond the roses, took another swig from the bottle. Would Edie notice the photograph when she and Jane came out of the bedroom? On the day he'd gone to the induction center, he'd had bronchitis. He'd told the doctors that, but ten months later when he'd challenged his assignments to stateside mechanics pools, he discovered that he'd been labeled as mildly asthmatic. It took more months to get that straightened out--the word "asthmatic" had to be systematically eliminated from a hundred documents; each one that remained unchanged cost him more time because someone was always picking it up and treating it like the official prognosis

of his health.

He heard a noise behind him. Andy was barreling up the driveway on his battered bike. Not ten feet from his father, he dropped the bike and began to run breathlessly toward the back porch. Charley called out to him, "Hey!" and the boy halted in surprise. It was as if Charley had suddenly become visible, but now that he had the boy's attention, he wasn't sure what to say to him.

"What the hell are you doing, Andy? Don't dump that bike there!"

"I'm coming right back, Dad. I gotta see Mom about something."

"Pick that bike up and treat it with respect. That cost good money, something I guess you wouldn't understand. It's got a kickstand. Use it."

Flustered, the boy ran back to the bike and righted it. As Charley watched him struggling with the tight strut, he remembered that many of his own childhood bikes had had kickstands, but he'd never used them. He'd always been in too much of a hurry then, eager every moment.

"What's so all-fired important to see your mother about?"

Andy kept stomping at the kickstand until the strut came down with a snap. "Jimmy's having a campout in his back yard. He's got Billy and Mike coming and I'm invited if Mom says it's okay."

"Better see her then."

"Thanks." The boy shot away.

Charley looked off, over the roses to the hazy sun that dipped above the three oaks that lined the thoroughfare beyond the Sullivans' house. He snickered to think that the boy had thanked him for release from his company. Who were Billy and Mike? He didn't know many of his children's friends. Already in August the sun did not hang up high as long as it had in July. Summer was so short. Sara had a good friend--Stacey?--a polite young woman who always wore a dress and came by every few weeks to see if they had a new address for Sara yet. Last he'd heard, Sara had left London for France, picking grapes or something. Probably smoking marijuana too and having sex with French boys out in the vineyards. The house was emptying, and emptying of people that he really hadn't come to know very well. David was still nearby, but he came around only on holidays, sort of officially, dressed in a

shiny salesman's suit and holding forth on bits from the news. Charlotte was in college, the first one of the kids to go, if he didn't count Sara's single unfinished semester. The college at Grand Forks was close enough, but just this summer semester Charlotte had worked out a campus job arrangement in return for a free dorm room. She claimed she studied better there, had more time without the commuting. When she came home on the odd weekend, she brought laundry, but only underthings and a heap of towels; the wardrobe she was building with her weekend job was too fine for the washer. Sissy was still living at home but she was usually so morose and distracted that she might as well be somewhere else. For the time being she clerked at a discount appliance store up at the mall, ate cheap lunches at the fast food restaurant there, then complained about acne and putting on weight. Now, in three weeks, Jane would be going away, far away, to college.

He closed his eyes. Every day, every single day now, he prayed to God that she wasn't going all the way to Wisconsin just to get away from the tiny, shabby house, and the brooding silences he knew that he sent through it in waves. The pattern had become unmistakable how, as the kids got older, they contrived to be out when he was home, and then more permanently away. He tried to see it as a natural part of their growing, but whenever he was in the house their solicitousness was pathetic, sometimes embarrassing in its obviousness. They learned, one by one, to accept his stunted responses and then move on.

It had spooked him a little to hear Edie's and Jane's voices back in the house. It was such a little house that everyone had developed the habit of speaking quietly when they wanted to share something private. But that made everything seem private. Whenever he heard Jane and her mother talking--often these days as she prepared for college--he wondered if they were talking about him. Those times when he strained his ears, he discovered that they were not. Strange thing, he always felt disappointed rather than relieved.

Charley leaned down and set the empty bottle next to the carport post. Then, quickly, he lay on his back and slid under the car again. It would have been so much easier to use the lifts at the shop, but the boss nearly always kept cars aloft all night now. Back when he had his own shop, before the doctors told Edie to persuade him

to sell it and save his heart, he could pull the family cars right in and work away. Now, he had to lie on his back with the Chevy wedged up on risers, and he had to be at home.

He regarded the blackened hands before his eyes. He had never, ever liked the feel of grease on his hands. He hated that his hands never came clean, not completely. His fingers were tattooed with black lines and there was always something under the nails. When he watched TV, he picked the tarry caulking from under them until they split or the underflesh ached. He'd never even been that good at mechanical work, but he'd gotten good enough by Army standards, and so when he begged to get overseas and into the action, they pointed out their investment in training him and the shortage of men "good with a wrench." Good with a wrench. That phrase would make a great epitaph for him.

The clutch plate refused to center before his arms began to ache and quiver again. He let the parts drop again. If he'd brought home the centering tool as he'd planned, the job would be done by now. Small sad man, he thought; small sad man. Grit stung his eyes so that tears welled and spilled down both temples. He was becoming so small that he was nearly invisible to others. What if he had another heart attack, would there be enough left of him worth saving? Laying down his picture, tossing his pills...his secret messages had not been found. He thought the laid-down picture would send a message, but what would he say if Edie confronted him about it? He sniffed, rubbed his nose with his wrist. All these terrible tricks he played on her, that tall girl from Crevecoeur who always used to smile. The terrible trick he had played by luring her into his life. Edie, whom he had met directly after his discharge at a homecoming party and married six months later without much knowledge of her really except that she smiled easily. What did he think, that by marrying a woman who always smiled he would eventually become happy?

She always asked the wrong questions. She asked, "Why do you always have to see the bad side of everything?" She also asked, "Why don't you see Doctor Harmond this week?" He thought of that fat, wheezy, gray-headed doctor and he laughed out loud under the car. He muttered into the undercarriage, "Hello there, Doctor Harmond, I'm off my meds and my dick doesn't work."

Once she'd asked, "Did you remember your pills this morning?" and that question was so close but not quite the right question, and so he'd challenged stupidly, "What pills?" She had ruffled her shoulders, hunched herself in that defeated way he hated, then moved away from him.

There were so many things he could call himself now that he never would have dreamed could ever be used to describe him. Failure, flunkey, no-count... Words he'd overheard his parents or relatives say when they were talking about other relatives or friends or acquaintances after dropping their voices. Sometimes, one of his daughters would drop her eyes when he looked at her.

When Jane and Edie had been talking and laughing back there, down the hallway in his and Edie's bedroom, had they been laughing at him? "You'll find your father under the car, where he usually is. We're thinking about putting a cot under there for him." Or, "Oh, sweetheart, no, he loves you. He just doesn't know how to show it." But Edie would have made a different kind of laugh if they'd been talking about that.

Charley's heart hurt. It was hard to tell anymore if it was the physical sort or the emotional sort. They had gotten mixed together, one feeding the other, one becoming the other. If the car rolled off the risers, it would only scrape his face. With the tires on, it would not fall far enough to squeeze away his unwanted breath. Metal on flesh.

He heard footsteps, light ones, Andy's. The boy's slow pace signaled disappointment. Charley could see his sneakers now. One foot kicked at the kickstand of the bike, but the kicks were desultory and the strut stayed in place. The boy began to kick harder, then furiously.

Charley called, "Here!" He reached up and scooped a fingertip of grease from a ball joint, then shimmied out from under the car and walked around to his son. The boy stood by while he rubbed the grease around the point where the kickstand strut seated itself in the grooved metal plate. Now the strut snapped up with one kick.

"Great," said Andy, flatly. He idly held the handlebars.

"What did your mom say? No?"

"Not exactly. I can stay overnight, but I have to stay here for supper."

"Is that so bad, staying home for supper with your family?"

The boy's eyes came up, squinting slightly. "I always stay home for supper. This was supposed to be special."

Charley was surprised that he could remember, across forty years, how it felt to do something special, to break a routine. "What're you going to do now?"

Andy shrugged.

Charley nearly suggested that they play ball, but he figured that the boy would feel strange just throwing a ball back and forth with his father. He could snap grounders to him, but the old bat had split years ago and now a nasty spline jutted from under the electrical tape he'd wrapped around it. Maybe the boy would like to water the roses. He thought of Andy holding the hose to the base of each bush. Would he like doing something like that?

Andy said, "I'm going to go down to the field." His mitt hung from the handlebars, flat and empty.

"Okay," said Charley, and stood back, as if the boy were about to kickstart a motorcycle. "You got half of what you wanted. The camping part."

The boy nodded, his head tilted so much to one side that his cheek rested on his shoulder. Charley slipped a tool from his pocket and began idly tossing it in his palm.

"What's that?" Andy asked.

This?" He looked down at the tool in his hand, surprised that he'd brought it out with him. "It's a socket wrench."

"Oh. It looks neat."

"It's a worksaver. Sometimes." He laughed, and he saw Andy's eyes come up with a smile. Their eyes held for a few moments. When each of his children was very young, he would often stare into their eyes, helplessly drawn by the pure innocence he saw there. But after a year or so, their eyes would start to look away.

Andy said, "Dad, do you love me more than that tool?"

Charley scowled. "What kind of question is that?"

Andy's eyes dropped and he shrugged and pushed the bike back and forth a

few inches. "Nothing. I was just kidding. I'll see you later."

Charley said nothing.

"Thanks for the kickstand," Andy called out as he turned the bike. He gave it a starting push, then mounted and rolled down the driveway. Soon he was on the road, pedaling furiously until he disappeared. Charley thought to himself that if his son had stayed with him while he worked on the car, a thought that had occurred to him briefly, that there was little he could have said or given to him. But he had gotten the kickstand free and launched the boy. That seemed to be his job, to launch children--to France or Wisconsin or overnights down the street. That was something, right?

He had only just gotten under the car again when he heard Edie and Jane coming out onto the porch. He turned his head and saw the hem of his wife's dress, her legs in stockings even in August, and Jane's bare calves and ankles. Jane called out, "Dad, are you alive under there?"

"I'm alive," he called back. He should have paused another second before answering. He'd meant to sound bantering, but instead his tone sounded defensive to him. He took a breath, braced himself for conversation as he stared up into rusty pipes and grimy plates.

"We're off to spend all your hard-earned money, Dad."

He saw their legs moving away. They would head down the driveway and then down the street then out to the main road to catch the bus. If he hadn't dismantled the clutch, they would be using the car.

Without thinking, he slid out again. When he popped up on the opposite side of the car from them, they regarded him with surprise. Jane smiled tentatively, a brief flash of even teeth that cut him like a knife thrust, a pain that he recognized instantly as his first real glimpse into life around the house without her. It was a glimpse into a cold, stripped room.

"So, what's on your list?" he demanded.

"Denim!" She looked back at her mother. "Denim jeans, denim skirts, denim vests."

Edie said, "Not if I have much to say about it."

"Easy to wash, and very in." Jane raised her arms, smooth and brown in a sleeveless blouse. Her white shorts flared around her bare thighs. "You can be filthy as you want," she said, "and nobody will notice it."

Charley looked down at the rag in his hands. He had been working it around to clean patches and rubbing his fingers. Half consciously, he'd been preparing for the possibility of her coming around the car for a kiss and didn't want to smudge her arms or clothes if she did so. He could see that he needn't have bothered, though; the two of them were already near the end of the driveway.

"Have a good time, then," he said.

"We will, Dad. We'll be back in time for supper, though."

He nodded. It annoyed him that she sometimes said things as if to reassure him. He hadn't asked for reassurance.

Eddie was saying, "So you keep an eye on the time, Charley. Supper'll be at the same time it always is, so don't get so tangled up so that you're taking one of your long showers when we're ready to sit down."

He nodded, still working the rag around his fingers. When he heard their retreating steps, he hazarded another glance at them. A brief alarm had flared within him when he found he could not recall the print of his wife's dress. He wondered if he'd even looked at her once since they'd come out. He raised his eyes to look at her now, but found her back to him. Jane's head, however, was just turning away, as if she had been looking back and then, when he had not looked up, had turned her face forward.

He watched them walk all the way down the road, two women of different ages but of exactly the same height. He could see their heads turning and bobbing in conversation. Twice, Jane clapped her hands and half-skipped, her straight legs flashing in the sunlight. She was the same age as the woman beside her had been when she'd met Charley Verdianne. Then they turned at the corner, walked several yards in the same determined hurry, never once breaking the concentrated excitement of whatever topic enclosed them, not even when they passed out of his sight behind the last house on the block and left him alone.

END