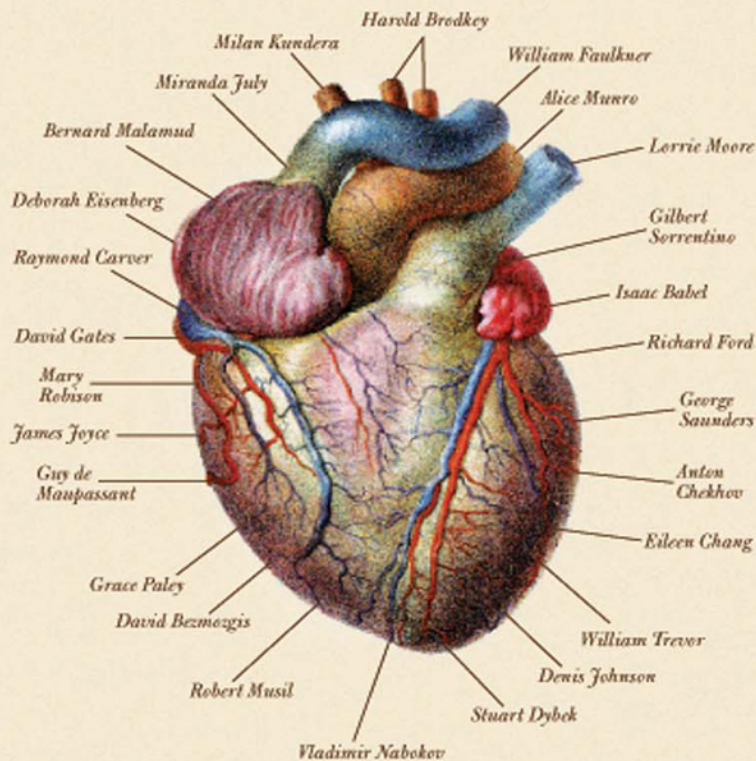


Edited by
JEFFREY EUGENIDES
PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *MIDDLESEX*



**MY MISTRESS'S
SPARROW IS DEAD**

Great Love Stories, from CHEKHOV to MUNRO



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HarperCollins e-books

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INTRODUCTION

JEFFREY EUGENIDES

1: LESBIA'S SPARROW

The Latin poet Catullus was the first poet in the ancient world to write about a personal love affair in an extended way. Other poets treated the subject of “love,” allowing the flushed cheeks or alabaster limbs of this or that *inamorata* to enter the frame of their poems, but it was Catullus who built his *nugae*, or trifles, around a single, near-obsessional passion for a woman whose entire presence, body and mind, fills the lines of his poetry. From the first excruciating moments of infatuation with the woman he called “Lesbia,” through the torrid transports of physical love, to the betrayals that leave him stricken, Catullus told it all, and, in so doing, did more than anyone to create the form we recognize today as the love story.

Gaius Catullus was born around 84 B.C., in Cisalpine Gaul, the son of a minor aristocrat and businessman with holdings in Spain and Asia Minor, and lived until roughly the age of thirty. It was as a very young man, then, that he found his way to poetry—and to Lesbia.

Lesbia wasn't her real name. Her real name was Clodia. Classical scholars disagree over whether she was the Clodia married to the praetor Metellus Celer, infamous for her licentiousness and possible matricide. Lesbia might have been one of Clodia's sisters, or another Clodia altogether. What's certain is that she was married and that Catullus's relationship with her was adulterous. Though, like many adulterers, Catullus disapproved of adultery (in poem LXI he writes, “Your husband is not light, not tied/To some bad adulteress,/Nor pursuing shameful scandal/

Will he wish to sleep apart/From your tender nipples,”), he found himself, in the case of Clodia/Lesbia, compelled to make an exception. He became involved with a wicked aristocratic Roman lady who used him as a plaything, or—the alternate version—he fell for a fashionable, married Roman girl, who ended up sleeping with his best friend, Rufus. Whatever the details, one thing is clear: a great love story had begun.

Of Catullus’s many hendecasyllabics devoted to his relationship with Lesbia, only two concern us here. The first two. The poems having to do with Lesbia and her pet sparrow.

*Sparrow, my girl’s darling
Whom she plays with, whom she cuddles,
Whom she likes to tempt with finger-
Tip and teases to nip harder
When my own bright-eyed desire
Fancies some endearing fun
And a small solace for her pain,
I suppose, so heavy passion then rests:
Would I could play with you as she does
And lighten the spirit’s gloomy cares!*

That’s poem II. Poem II A is a fragment. And by poem III Lesbia’s sparrow is dead. “[P]asser mortuus est meae puellae,/passer, deliciae meae puellae,/quem plus illa oculis suis amabit,” Catullus writes, which translates as, “My girl’s sparrow is dead,/Sparrow, my girl’s darling,/Whom she loved more than her eyes.” (Incidentally, this poem, or more specifically, the onomatopoeia of its two central words, “*passer*” and “*pipiabat*,” did more than anything I can remember to make me want to become a writer. I can still hear our Latin teacher, Miss Ferguson, piping out in her most piercing sparrow’s voice, “*passer pipiabat*,” getting us to notice how much the plosive rhythm resembled a bird singing. That words were music, that, at the same time they were marks on a page, they also referred to things in the world and, in skilled hands, took on properties of the things they denoted, was for me, at fifteen, an exciting discovery, all the more notable for the fact that this poetic effect had been

devised by a young man dead for two thousand years, who'd sent this phrase drifting down the centuries to reach me in my Michigan classroom, filling my American ears with the sound of Roman birdsong.)

But back to the poem. The pluperfect of "*pipiabat*" is elegiac: the bird "used to sing." Now its song has been silenced. Catullus, who in the previous poem had cause to wish the bird would fly away, now changes his mind. "Oh what a shame!" he writes. "O wretched sorrow! Your fault it is that now my girl's/Eyelids are swollen from crying."

Things were bad with the sparrow around. They're bad with the sparrow gone. Nothing is keeping Lesbia from giving all her love to Catullus now. But Lesbia's no longer in the mood. Worse, her crying has ruined her looks.

If Catullus gave us the confessional love story, these first two poems delineated its scope. The book you're holding in your hands, which takes its title from Catullus, is an anthology of love stories. They were all written in the past 120 years. There are translations from Russian, Chinese, French, Austrian, and Czech writers. There are stories by famous, dead writers and by young Americans, stories involving, as in Milan Kundera's "The Hitchhiking Game," two lovers taking a road trip in Communist-era Czechoslovakia, to the two terrifically well-groomed, adolescent "TrendSetters & TasteMakers" from the near future in George Saunders's "Jon," to the little Jewish boy in Isaac Babel's "First Love" who falls for the Christian neighbor who shelters him during a Russian pogrom. Despite the multiplicity of subjects and situations treated here, one Catullan requirement remains in force throughout. In each of these twenty-six love stories, either there is a sparrow or the sparrow is dead.

2: A LABOR OF LOVE

At the behest of the energetic, unstoppable Dave Eggers (the Bono of Lit), I've been reading almost nothing but love stories for the past year. (Note: The entire proceeds of this anthology will go to support 826 Chicago, the literacy project here in Bucktown, and another labor of love.) In discovering and gathering these stories, my method has

been maximally random and sociable. At lectures and book parties, in elevators with editors and at literary festivals with fellow novelists, on college campuses, in loud tapas bars, over a *Delirium Tremens* at the Hopleaf on Clark Street, I asked whoever happened to be nearby to name a favorite love story. Jonathan Franzen, bobbing off the Amalfi Coast after an illegal dinner of sea urchins, suggested three separate stories by Alice Munro. Kathy Chetkovich nominated “Secretary” by Mary Gaitskill, which I didn’t select (not about love, I didn’t think) and Mary Robison’s “Yours,” which I did. Jhumpa Lahiri was the first of many to insist on “The Dead.” Asked to propose something from his own oeuvre, Martin Amis struggled to find anything sufficiently romantic. I didn’t confine myself to writers. Natasha Egan, of the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, mentioned a story I’d read a few years earlier and loved, David Bezmozgis’s “Natasha.” The German artist Thomas Demand had me look at Robert Musil’s difficult and rather punishing “Tonka,” which I tried my best to forget but couldn’t get out of my mind. (How like love!) Edwin Frank, editor of NYRB Books, was responsible for sending my way the work of the illustrious Chinese writer Eileen Chang, which was a revelation to me and, I suspect, will be a revelation to many American readers. And then there were the students and dinner party guests, the bookworm bartenders, the voluble taxi drivers.

Many stories in this collection didn’t need an advocate. They were among my favorite stories already. As a way to narrow literary focus, selecting “love” as your theme doesn’t help much. Viewed a certain way, almost any story appears to be a love story. Generally speaking, however, what animates most of the stories in this collection isn’t agape but eros. The love here is mainly romantic love. In almost every story you’ll find a lover and a beloved, a subject pursuing an object. In Miranda July’s “Something That Needs Nothing,” a young woman longs for the love of her best friend, only to finally win it at the expense of turning herself into another person. The spinster in William Faulkner’s southern gothic, “A Rose for Emily,” whose chances for marriage have been doomed by paternal opposition, devises a desperate measure, after her father’s death, to keep her next lover at her side. A frustrated teenage

love affair leaves the narrator of Stuart Dybek's "We Didn't" with a memory more indelible than any resulting from consummation.

At dinner just the other night, asked to list and describe the love stories I planned to include here, I did so at length—and was met by furrowed brows. This wasn't what my dinner companions had expected when I'd said the word "love." They were expecting happier, fluffier stories. They were expecting *love*. And so here I should make an important distinction.

3: WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED A LOVE STORY?

Please keep in mind: my subject here isn't love. My subject is the love story. A compendium of philosophical notions of love might begin with Plato's hypothesis that human beings were originally hermaphroditic. Severed into two sexes, men and women spend their lives seeking their other halves. Saint Thomas Aquinas reasoned that before the Fall erections were volitional. Adam, sinless, couldn't have randy thoughts. In the Garden, confronted with Eve's nakedness (nakedness he didn't recognize as such), Adam issued disinterested, elevator-operator commands. "Up," was one. And afterward: "Down." Evolutionary biology does away with love completely, finding in the novelist's most dependable material—adultery and divorce—nothing more than a hardwired imperative to pass genes along to the next generation. Sexologists see only a chemical state of infatuation that lasts a couple of years, transforming thereafter, among even the most well-matched couples, into the bath-towelly togetherness known as pair-bonding.

When it comes to love, there are a million theories to explain it. But when it comes to love stories, things are simpler. A love story can never be about full possession. The happy marriage, the requited love, the desire that never dims—these are lucky eventualities but they aren't love stories. Love stories depend on disappointment, on unequal births and feuding families, on matrimonial boredom and at least one cold heart. Love stories, nearly without exception, give love a bad name.

We value love not because it's stronger than death but because it's weaker. Say what you want about love: death will finish it. You will not

go on loving in the grave, not in any physical way that will at all resemble love as we know it on earth. The perishable nature of love is what gives love its profound importance in our lives. If it were endless, if it were on tap, love wouldn't hit us the way it does.

And we certainly wouldn't write about it. The stories in this collection bear this out in each and every instance. From William Trevor's "Lovers of Their Time," which tells the story of a married travel agent and pharmacy clerk who have nowhere to meet but an out-of-the-way bathroom in an old hotel, to Gilbert Sorrentino's postmodern "The Moon in Its Flight," where the teenage lovers are thwarted not only by fate but by the literary conventions of romance, to Harold Brodkey's scandalous story "Innocence," which consists of the extended account of a Harvard senior's unflagging attempt to bring his girlfriend to her first orgasm by means of a virtuosic and intensely cerebral act of cunnilingus, the characters in these stories seek a paradise that recedes endlessly before them. Escape from one set of circumstances brings confinement in another. The fated love turns out to be a human fantasy. Desire is a homeostatic system. Push it down in one place and it rises in another.

4: ROMAN BIRDSONG

The stories in this volume fall within the continuum laid out by Catullus's first two Lesbia poems: *from voyeuristic longing to disenchanted entanglement*. The narrator of "Spring in Fialta" recounts the many missed romantic opportunities he's had with a woman named Nina, whom he'd first met, and kissed, on a pitch-black Russian winter night years and years before. Nina recurs in the narrator's life like a theme in a piece of music, and every time the strings announce her arrival, the cymbals clash and she disappears. I'd been under the impression lately that I was cooling ever so slightly on Nabokov, that sober middle age had made me less susceptible to his lush lyricism. But rereading "Spring in Fialta" reminded me how much better Nabokov is than everybody else. Not only does the story impart to the reader a profound wistfulness, in which the evanescence of love expands to suggest the fragility of life and time and memory itself, but Nabokov manages, at the same time, to weave

into the story secondary and tertiary levels of meaning. There's what's happening with the weather, for instance, the "cloudy and dull" spring of Fialta that, in the background of the narrated events, is slowly transforming, thawing, dripping, and brightening, in order to flash out at the end with the story's tragic revelation. Along with this, Nabokov has studded the story with recurring details—of the circus coming to town, of speeding automobiles—all of which will figure in the denouement. The literary craft in all this mirrors the literary imagination (the seeing of patterns, the orchestrating of fate) that the narrator brings to his random meetings with Nina throughout the years, a literary imagination that every lover possesses and is a veritable Shakespeare of. "Spring in Fialta" isn't only about a love fated never to be. It reenacts the story-making we inevitably engage in whenever we fall in love.

The sparrow in "Spring in Fialta" is Nina's husband Ferdinand, who's always in the way. In the case of "The Lady with the Little Dog," however, the sparrow is dead. Gurov, the unfaithful husband in the story, seduces Anna Sergeevna, an unhappy young married woman, while they are both visiting Yalta. Gurov, who has done this sort of thing before, assumes he'll forget Anna as he's forgotten other women. But he doesn't. Her memory haunts him and, finally, he pursues her to her hometown, where they resume their affair. In the story's final scene, the two lovers clandestinely meet in a dingy hotel room in Moscow. And then comes one of the most enigmatic endings in literature. "And it seemed that, just a little more—and the solution would be found, and then a new, beautiful life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning." One of Chekhov's admirers, Serafima Remizova, was highly disappointed with this ending. "I read your story," she wrote to Chekhov in a letter, "and I should like to ask you to write the continuation of it. You have abandoned your heroes . . . at the most critical moment in their lives, when they are about to make a decision. But which one? . . . It is important for someone like you, Anton Pavlovich, who can see into the human heart, to show . . . how happiness can be found in such a situation."

But the inconclusiveness of Chekhov's ending, his failure to show

how happiness can be found in such a predicament (along with the suggestion that perhaps it can't be found), is exactly what makes this story one of the greatest love stories of all time. It ends where the preliminaries of love end, after the stirrings of attraction, after the trysts and renunciations and the renunciations of those renunciations, when desire has attained its object and the real, the heavy problems begin.

I've read "The Lady with the Little Dog" countless times over the years and my interpretation continually changes. When I was younger (and more sophisticated), I was sure the ending was ironic. The emotional deadness of the lovers' marriages was sure to infect their own new relationship in time. Reading the story now, older (and more innocent), I couldn't help finding in Chekhov's last line a glimmer of optimism. The story seemed to me, this time through, to be about that miracle you come across every once in a long while: two unexceptional people, for no demonstrable reasons, being exceptionally in love.

Christianity, which in its beginning retained much of the earthiness of Judaism, a sense of the body and its sexual appetites as inherently good, was slowly influenced by Neoplatonism, which held for a strict duality between the body and the spirit. Asceticism, abstinence, monasticism—you can blame it all on the Greeks. Nevertheless, if the stories in this collection provide any evidence, it's the renunciation of the body that distinguishes true love from any simulacrum. When the body is no longer desired, when beauty has faded, when possessiveness has been relinquished, real love shows its face. This seems to happen most often in old age, or as the result of a winnowing of ego. Born with desire, these stories say, we grow into love, and then only sometimes, and only if we're lucky.

In Alice Munro's magnificent "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," the husband of a woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease, after regretfully relinquishing her to a nursing home, finds, on his subsequent visits, that she is slowly forgetting him and becoming involved with an elderly male patient. The husband responds to this death-in-life with an act of love that goes beyond the bounds of matrimony, approaching the selflessly divine. Deborah Eisenberg's shatteringly beautiful and unerring "Some Other, Better Otto" suggests that, in moments of existential cri-

sis, the only lifeline remains the quotidian, humdrum, durable presence of that imperfect thing: one's life partner. Each of these two stories is nearly impossibly good. The complexity of the characterization alone is a marvel—Munro's model husband was, it turns out, a serial philanderer some years back, and the irascible Otto of Eisenberg's tale becomes, despite his scorched-earth policy relating to other human beings, a person of uncommon tenderness and philosophical insight, in the way depleted soil is enriched by burning. These two stories are the bleakest in the collection, too; they tiptoe right up to the abyss, Munro by unsentimentally describing the inevitable decay of the mind and body, Eisenberg by insisting on the absurd and pitiful insubstantiality, the puniness, of the self. And yet these are the stories in which love, to use an old-fashioned word, triumphs. To borrow from Raymond Carver, whose work is also included here: this is what we talk about when we talk about love. Not eros, maybe, when all is said and done. Closer to agape.

Had Catullus written only those two opening poems about Lesbia's sparrow, he might not be remembered today. Although they prefigured his own fraught relationship with his married woman, and although I find in them the poles around which all love stories revolve, there is a whole world of detail, particularity, and specificity in between. Read these stories, then, not to confirm the brutal realities of love, but to experience its many variegated, compensatory pleasures. From the bracing acerbities of Lorrie Moore's "How to Be an Other Woman" to the stark assessments of Richard Ford's "Fireworks" to Bernard Malamud's comic presentation of one very picky rabbi, the stories that made their way to me, by sometimes circuitous paths, never failed to be just the thing, after a long, unromantic day at my desk, that I most wanted to read.

It is perhaps only in reading a love story (or in writing one) that we can simultaneously partake of the ecstasy and agony of being in love without paying a crippling emotional price. I offer this book, then, as a cure for lovesickness and an antidote to adultery. Read these love stories in the safety of your single bed. Let everybody else suffer.

There's this thought, too. After Lesbia spurned him, what did Catullus do? Kill himself? Drink to excess? No. Mostly, he wrote, and eulogized his friendships and his dead brother. He brought to his work the

same devotion he'd once lavished in vain on Clodia. And he left behind his poems, which speak to the stories in this collection that burn, dazzle, delight, or sadden, depending.

Passer pipiabat. Here's a loose translation: "Better a sparrow, living or dead, than no birdsong at all."

(Finally: As this book is a charitable undertaking, I ask the reader to be charitable toward its numerous and unavoidable omissions.)

FIRST LOVE AND OTHER SORROWS

HAROLD BRODKEY

Toward the end of March, in St. Louis, slush fills the gutters, and dirty snow lies heaped alongside porch steps, and everything seems to be suffocating in the embrace of a season that lasts too long. Radiators hiss mournfully, no one manages to be patient, the wind draws tears from your eyes, the clouds are filled with sadness. Women with scarves around their heads and their feet encased in fur-lined boots pick their way carefully over patches of melting ice. It seems that winter will last forever, that this is the decision of nature and nothing can be done about it.

At the age when I was always being warned by my mother not to get overheated, spring began on that evening when I was first allowed to go outside after dinner and play kick-the-can. The ground would be moist, I'd manage to get muddy in spite of what seemed to me extreme precautions, my mother would call me home in the darkness, and when she saw me she would ask, "What *have* you done to yourself?" "Nothing," I'd say hopefully. But by the time I was sixteen, the moment when the year passed into spring, like so many other things, was less clear. In March and early April, track began, but indoors; mid-term exams came and went; the buds appeared on the maples, staining all their branches red; but it was still winter, and I found myself having feelings in class that were like long petitions for spring and all its works. And then one evening I was sitting at my desk doing my trigonometry and I heard my sister coming home from her office; I heard her high heels tapping on the sidewalk, and realized that, for the first time since fall, all the windows in the house were open. My sister was coming up the front walk. I looked down through a web of budding tree branches and called out to her that it was spring, by God. She shrugged—she was very handsome

and she didn't approve of me—and then she started up the front steps and vanished under the roof of the porch.

I ran downstairs. "The bus was crowded tonight," my sister said, hanging up her coat. "I could hardly breathe. This is such a warm dress."

"You need a new spring dress," my mother said, her face lighting up. She was sitting in the living room with the evening paper on her lap.

She and my sister spread the newspaper on the dining-room table to look at the ads.

"We'll just have to settle for sandwiches tonight," my mother said to me. My father was dead, and my mother pretended that now all the cooking was done for my masculine benefit. "Look! That suit's awfully smart!" she cried, peering at the paper. "Montaldo's always has such nice suits." She sighed and went out to the kitchen, leaving the swinging door open so she could talk to my sister. "Ninety dollars isn't too much for a good suit, do you think?"

"No," my sister said. "I don't think it's too much. But I don't really want a suit this spring. I'd much rather have a sort of sky-blue dress—with a round neck that shows my shoulders a little bit. I don't look good in suits. I'm not old enough." She was twenty-two. "My face is too round," she added, in a low voice.

My mother said, "You're not too young for a suit." She also meant my sister was not too young to get married.

My sister looked at me and said, "Mother, do you think he shaves often enough? How often *do* you shave?"

"Every three days," I said, flushing up my neck and cheeks.

"Well, try it every other day."

"Yes, try to be neater," my mother said. "I'm sure girls don't like boys with fuzz on their chin."

"I think he's too proud of his beard to shave it," my sister said, and giggled.

"I feel sorry for the man who marries you," I said. "Because everybody thinks you're sweet and you're not."

She smiled pityingly at me, and then she looked down over the newspaper again.

Until I was four, we lived in a large white frame house overlooking the Mississippi River, south of St. Louis. This house had, among other riches, a porte-cochere, an iron deer on the lawn, and a pond with gold-fish swimming in it. Once, I asked my mother why we had left that earlier house, and she said, "We lost our money—that's why. Your father was a very trusting man," she said. "He was always getting swindled."

She was not a mercenary woman, nor was she mean about money—except in spells that didn't come often—but she believed that what we lost with the money was much of our dignity and much of our happiness. She did not want to see life in a grain of sand; she wanted to see it from the shores of the Riviera, wearing a white sharkskin dress.

I will never forget her astonishment when she took us—she was dressed in her best furs, as a gesture, I suppose—to see the house that was to be our home from then on and I told her I liked it. It had nine rooms, a stained-glass window in the hall, and neighbors all up and down the block. She detested that house.

As she grew older, she changed, she grew less imperious. She put her hair into a roll, wore dark-colored clothes, said often, "I'm not a young woman any more," and began to take pride in being practical. But she remained determined; she had seen a world we didn't remember too clearly, and she wanted us to make our way back to it. "I had it all," she said once to my sister. "I was good-looking. We were rich. You have no idea what it was like. If I had died when I was thirty, I would have died completely happy. . . ."

But being practical did not come easy to her. She was not practical in her bones, and every spring brings back the memory of my mother peering nearsightedly, with surprise, at the tulip shoots in her flower border. And it brings back her look of distraught efficiency during spring housecleaning. "You'd better clear your closet shelves tonight," she would warn me, "because tomorrow Tillie and I are going in there with a vacuum cleaner, and we'll throw out everything we find." Year after year, I would run upstairs to save my treasures—even when I was sixteen and on the verge of a great embarkation, the nature of which I could not even begin to guess. My treasures consisted of my postcard collection—twenty-five hundred cards in all, arranged alphabetically

by states of the Union and countries of the world (the wonder was that *I* lived in St. Louis)—an old baseball glove, my leaf collection, two obscene comic books I had won in a poker game at a Boy Scout jamboree, my marble collection, and thirty-five pages of secret thoughts written out in longhand. All these had to be taken out to the garage and hidden among the tools until the frenzy of cleaning was over and I could smuggle them back upstairs.

After supper, as the season grew warmer, my mother and sister and I would sit on the screened porch in the rear of the house, marooned among the shadows and the new leaves and the odor of insect spray, the light from our lamps sticking to the trees like bits of yellow paper. Usually the radio was on, and my mother, a book on her lap, her face abstracted (she was usually bored; her life was moved mainly by the burning urge to rise once more along the thin edge of social distinction), would listen to the comedians and laugh. When the phone rang, she would get up and go into the house with long strides, and if the call was for my sister, my mother would call her to the phone in a voice mottled with triumph.

Sometimes in the evening my mother would wash my sister's hair. My sister would sit in front of the basin in Mother's bathroom, a towel around her shoulders, smiling. From my room across the hall I would hear my sister chattering about the men she knew—the ones she dated, the ones she wanted to date, the ones she wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. My mother would interrupt with accounts of her own cleverness, her sorties and successes when young, sometimes laughingly, but sometimes gloomily, because she regretted a lot of things. Then she and my sister would label my sister's suitors: one or two had family, one had money, one—a poor boy—had a brilliant future, and there were a few docile, sweet ones who were simply fillers, who represented the additional number of dates that raised my sister to the rank of a very popular girl.

In these conversations, my mother would often bring up matters of propriety. Late dates were improper, flirting with boys other than one's date, breaking dates. Then, too, she would try to instruct my sister in other matters, which had to do with keeping passion in its place and so preventing embarrassment for the boy and disaster for the girl. My

sister would grow irritated. "I don't know why you talk like that—I behave very well," she would tell my mother. "Better than the other girls I know." Her irritation would please my mother, who would smile and say that only good-looking girls could afford to be good, and then they would both laugh.

I used to wonder why my mother didn't take my sister's success for granted. My sister was lovely, she had plenty of dates, the phone rang incessantly. Where was the danger? Why did she always lecture my sister?

Once, my mother said my sister ought not to dance with too many boys or she would frighten off the more serious ones. My sister was getting dressed for the spring dance at the country club. Arrogant and slender, she glistened like a water nymph, among her froth of bottles and jars and filmy clothes. She became furious; she screamed that she *liked* to dance. I closed the door to my room, but I could still hear the two of them. "Don't be so foolish," my mother kept saying, over and over again. "Please don't be foolish. . . ." Then my sister, on the verge of tears, said she just wanted to have a good time. My sister's date arrived, and I went downstairs to let him in, and by the time I came back upstairs, the two of them were laughing. My mother said she was just trying to be helpful; after all, my sister was impractical and her looks wouldn't last forever. My sister, as she opened the door of her room, said, under her breath, "They'll last a lot longer yet."

I'll never forget the wild rustling of her voluminous white skirt as she came down the hallway toward me. Her face was strangely still, as if seen by moonlight. Her hair was smooth and shining, her hands bent outward at the wrist, as if they were flowers. "How beautiful you look!" I cried. My sister smiled and then solemnly turned all the way around, and her huge skirt rose and fell like a splash of surf. She was so beautiful I could hardly bear it. I hugged her, and she laughed.

Later that night I asked my mother why she got so distraught. Wasn't my sister popular enough? My mother was sitting in the kitchen, in an old, faded yellow housecoat, drinking a glass of warm milk. "You don't know anything about it," she said, with such sadness that I rose from the table and fled to my room.

"I know what I'm saying!" my mother would cry when she argued with my sister. "You must listen to me. People talk. . . . You don't know who you'll meet on a date; it's good to accept even if you don't like the boy. . . . Girls have to be very careful. You're thoughtless. Don't you think in fifty years I've learned what makes the world go around? Now, listen to me. I know what I'm saying. . . ." But my sister's face was so radiant, her charm was so intense, she pushed her blond hair back from her face with a gesture so quick, so certain, so arrogant and filled with vanity, that no one, I thought, could doubt that whatever she did would be right.

I wanted to be arrogant, too. I didn't want to wear glasses and be one of the humorless, heavy-handed boys my sister despised. I was on her side as much as she'd let me be. She was the elder, and she often grew impatient with me. I didn't seem to understand all the things involved in being on her side.

Night after night I saw her come home from work tired—she had a secretarial job in a hospital and she hated it—and two hours later she would descend the stairs, to greet her date, her face alight with seriousness or with a large, bright smile, depending on her mood or on where her escort was taking her that evening. A concert or an art movie made her serious; one of the hotel supper clubs brought the smile to her face. She would trip down the stairs in her high heels, a light, flimsy coat thrown over one arm, one hand clutching a purse and gloves, her other hand on the banister. In the queer yellow light of the hall chandelier, her necklace or her earrings would shine dully, and sometimes, especially if she was all dressed up, in a black dress, say, with a low neck, because they were going out to a supper club, there would be an air, in spite of her gaiety, of the captive about her. It was part of her intense charm. In her voluminous white skirt, she went to the spring dance at the country club and brought back to my mother the news that she had captured the interest of Sonny Bruster, the oldest son of M. F. Bruster, a banker and a very rich man—more than interest, it turned out, because he started calling my sister up almost every day at work and taking her out almost every night. My mother was on the phone much of the afternoon explaining to her friends that my sister wasn't engaged. It was criminal the way some

people gossiped, she said. My sister had only gone out with the boy ten or twelve times. They were just getting to know each other. Then my mother began to *receive* calls; someone had heard from a friend of Mrs. Bruster's that Mrs. Bruster had said her son was very serious about my sister, who was a very charming, very pretty girl, of good family. . . . My mother rubbed her hands with glee. She borrowed money from her brothers, and every week my sister had new clothes.

My sister would come home from work and run upstairs to change. Sonny would be due at seven, to take her out to dinner. My sister would kick her shoes off, struggle out of her dress, and dash around the upstairs in her slip.

"Mother, I can't find my earrings."

"Which earrings, dear?"

"The little pearls—the little tiny pearl ones that I got two Easters ago, to go with my black . . ."

My sister was delighted with herself. She loved being talked about, being envied.

"Mother, do you know what Ceil Johnson said to me today? She said that Beryl Feringhaus—you know, the real-estate people—was heart-broken because she thought Sonny Bruster was going to get engaged to her." My sister giggled. Her long hair was tangled, and my mother yanked a comb through it.

"Maybe you ought to cut your hair," my mother said, trying to hide her own excitement and to stay practical. During this period, my mother was living in the imminence of wealth. Whenever she stopped what she was doing and looked up, her face would be bright with visions.

That spring when I was sixteen, more than anything else in the world I wanted to be a success when I grew up. I did not know there was any other way of being lovable. My best friend was a boy named Preston, who already had a heavy beard. He was shy, and unfortunate in his dealings with other people, and he wanted to be a physicist. He had very little imagination, and he pitied anyone who did have it. "You and the word 'beautiful'!" he would say disdainfully, holding his nose and imitating my voice. "Tell me—what does 'beautiful' mean?"

"It's something you want," I would say.

"You're an aesthete," Preston would say. "I'm a scientist. That's the difference."

He and I used to call each other almost every night and have long, profound talks on the telephone.

On a date, Preston would sit beside his girl and stolidly eye her. Occasionally, toward the end of the evening, he would begin to breathe heavily, and he would make a few labored, daring jokes. He might catch the girl's hand and stare at her with inflamed and wistful eyes, or he might mutter incoherent compliments. Girls liked him, and escaped easily from his clumsy longing. They slipped their hands from his grasp and asked him to call them up again, but after a few dates with a girl Preston would say disgustedly, "All she does is talk. She's frigid or something. . . ." But the truth was, he was afraid of hurting them, of doing something wrong to them, and he never really courted them at all.

At school, Preston and I had afternoon study hall together. Study hall was in the library, which was filled with the breathing of a hundred and fifty students, and with the dim, half-fainting breezes of high spring, and with books: it was the crossroads of the world. Preston and I would sign out separately, and meet in the lavatory. There we would lean up against the stalls and talk. Preston was full of thoughts; he was tormented by all his ideas. "Do you know what relativity means?" he would ask me. "Do you realize how it affects every little detail of everyday life?" Or it might be Spinoza that moved him: "Eighteenth-century, but by God *there* was a rational man." I would pace up and down, half listening, half daydreaming, wishing *my* name would appear on Preston's list of people who had elements of greatness.

Or we talked about our problems. "I'm not popular," I would say. "I'm too gloomy."

"Why is that, do you think?" Preston would ask.

"I don't know," I would say. "I'm a virgin. That has a lot to do with everything."

"Listen," Preston said one day, "you may not be popular but you're likable. Your trouble is you're a snob." He walked up and down the white-tiled floor, mimicking me. He slouched, and cast his eyes down,

and jutted his chin out, and pulled a foolish, serious look over his face.

"Is that me?" I cried, heartbroken.

"Well, almost," Preston said.

Or, leaning on the window sill, sticking our heads out into the golden afternoon air and watching a girl's gym class doing archery under the trees, we talked about sex.

"It starts in the infant," Preston said. "And it lasts forever."

"Saints escape it," I said mournfully.

"The hell they do," Preston said. The girls beneath us on the hillside drew their bows. Their thin green gym suits fluttered against their bodies. "Aren't they nice?" Preston asked longingly. "Aren't they wonderful?"

After school, Preston and I went out for track. The outdoor track was a cinder oval surrounding the football field. A steep, grassy hill led up to the entrance of the school locker room. "Run up that hill every night, boys," the coach pleaded—Old Mackyz, with his paunch and his iron-gray wavy hair—at the end of the practice period. "Run, boys, because when you're abso-lootly exhausted, that's when you got to give *more*. It's the *more*, boys, that makes champions." And then he'd stand there, humble, and touched by his own speech.

During our warmup sessions, we used to jog-trot the length of the field and back again, keeping our knees high. The grand inutility of this movement filled me with something like exaltation; and on every side of me, in irregular lines, my fellow-males jogged, keeping their knees high. What happiness!

"The turf's too springy," Preston would mumble. "Bad for the muscles." Preston was a miler. He was thickset and without natural grace; Mackyz said he had no talent, but he ran doggedly, and he became a good miler. I ran the 440. I was tall and thin, and even Mackyz said I ought to be good at it, but I wasn't. Mackyz said I didn't have the spirit. "All you smart boys are alike," he said. "You haven't got the *heart* for it. You always hold back. You're all a bunch of goldbricks." I tried to cure my maimed enthusiasm. As I ran, Mackyz would bawl desperately, "Hit the ground harder. Hit with your toes! Spring, boy! *SPRING!* Don't coddle yourself, for Christ's sake. . . ." After a race, I'd throw myself down on

a knoll near the finish line, under a sycamore tree, where the track manager dug a new hole every day for us to puke in. Three or four others would join me, and we'd lie there wearily, our chests burning, too weak to move.

Among my other problems was that I was reduced nearly to a state of tears over my own looks whenever I looked at a boy named Joel Bush. Joel was so incredibly good-looking that none of the boys could quite bear the fact of his existence; his looks weren't particularly masculine or clean-cut, and he wasn't a fine figure of a boy—he was merely beautiful. He looked like a statue that had been rubbed with honey and warm wax, to get a golden tone, and he carried at all times, in the neatness of his features and the secret proportions of his face and body that made him so handsome in that particular way, the threat of seduction. Displease me, he seemed to say, and I'll get you. I'll make you fall in love with me and I'll turn you into a donkey. Everyone either avoided him or gave in to him; teachers refused to catch him cheating, boys never teased him, and no one ever told him off. One day I saw him saying goodbye to a girl after school, and as he left her to join me, walking toward the locker room, he said to her, "Meet you here at five-thirty." Track wasn't over until six, and I could tell that he had no intention of meeting her, and yet, when he asked me about some experiments we had done in physics, instead of treating him like someone who had just behaved like a heel, I told him everything I knew.

He never joined us under the sycamore tree, and he ran effortlessly. He would pass the finish line, his chest heaving under his sweat-stained track shirt, and climb into the stands and sit in the sunlight. I was watching him, one afternoon, as he sat there wiping his face and turning his head from side to side. At one moment it was all silver except for the charred hollows of his eyes, and the next it was young and perfect, the head we all recognized as his.

Mackyz saw him and called out to him to put his sweatshirt on before he caught a cold. As he slipped the sweatshirt on, Joel shouted, "Aw, go fry your head!" Mackyz laughed good-naturedly.

Sprinkled here and there on the football field were boys lifting their

arms high and then sweeping them down to touch their toes, or lying on their backs and bicycling their legs in the air. I got up and walked toward them, to do a little jog-trotting and high-knee prancing. I looked at Joel. "I'm cooling off," he said to me. I walked on, and just then a flock of crows wheeled up behind the oak tree on the hill and filled the sky with their vibrant motion. Everyone—even Preston—paused and looked up. The birds rose in a half circle and then glided, scythelike, with wings outspread, on a down current of air until they were only twenty feet or so above the ground; then they flapped their wings with a noise like sheets being shaken out, and soared aloft, dragging their shadows up the stepped concrete geometry of the stands, past Joel's handsome, rigid figure, off into the sky.

"Whaddya know about that?" Mackyz said. "Biggest flock of crows I ever saw."

"Why didn't you get your gun and shoot a couple?" Joel called out. Everyone turned. "Then you'd have some crow handy whenever you had to eat some," Joel said.

"Take a lap," Mackyz bawled, his leathery face turning red up to the roots of his iron-gray hair.

"He was only kidding," I said, appalled at Mackyz's hurt.

Mackyz looked at me and scowled, "You can take a lap too, and don't talk so much."

I took off my sweatshirt and dropped it on the grass and set off around the track. As soon as I started running, the world changed. The bodies sprawled out across the green of the football field were parts of a scene remembered, not one real at this moment. The whole secret of effort is to keep on, I told myself. Not for the world would I have stopped then, and yet nothing—not even if I had been turned handsome as a reward for finishing—could have made up for the curious pain of the effort.

About halfway around the track, Joel caught up to me, and then he slowed down and ran alongside. "Mackyz isn't watching," he said. "Let's sneak up the hill." I looked and saw that Mackyz was lining up the team for high-jump practice. Joel sailed up over the crest of the hill, and I followed him.

"He's getting senile," Joel said, dropping to a sitting position, sight-

ing over the crest of the hill at Mackyz, and then lying down. "Come on, jerk, lie down. You want Mackyz to see you?"

I was uneasy; this sort of fooling was all right for Joel, because he "made the effort," but if Mackyz caught me, he'd kick me off the team. I pointed this out to Joel.

"Aw, Mackyz takes everything too seriously. That's his problem," Joel said. "He's always up in the air about something. I don't see why he makes so much fuss. You ever notice how old men make a big fuss over everything?"

"Mackyz' not so old."

"All right, you ever notice how *middle-aged* men make a big fuss over everything?" A few seconds later, he said casually, his gaze resting on the underside of the leaves of the oak tree, "I got laid last night."

"No kidding?" I said.

He spread his fingers over his face, no doubt to see them turn orange in the sunlight, as children do. "Yeah," he said.

From the football field came the sounds of high-jump practice starting. Mackyz was shouting, "Now, start with your left foot—one, two, three—take off! TAKE OFF, GODDAMN IT! Spread your Goddamned legs, spread 'em. You won't get ruptured. There's sand to catch you, for Christ's sake." The jumper's footsteps made a series of thuds, there was a pause, and then the sound of the landing in the sand. Lifting my head, I could see the line of boys waiting to jump, the lead boy breaking into a run, leaping from the ground, and spreading his arms in athletic entreaty.

"It was disappointing," Joel said.

"How?" I asked.

"It's nothing very special."

I was aroused by this exposé. "You mean the books—"

"It's not like that at all." He turned sullenly and scrabbled with his fingers in the dirt. "It's like masturbation, kind of with bells."

"Maybe the girl didn't know how to do it."

"She was a grown woman!"

"Yeah, but—"

"She was a fully grown woman! She knew what she was doing!"

"Oh," I said. Then, after a minute, "Look, would you mind telling

me what you said to her? If I ever had a chance, I wouldn't know what to say. I . . ."

"I don't remember," Joel said. "We just looked at each other, and then she got all tearful, and she told me to take my clothes off."

We lay there a moment, in the late afternoon sunshine, and then I said we'd better be getting back. We walked around behind the hill, and waited until Mackyz wasn't looking before we sprinted out onto the track.

The jumping went on for fifteen or twenty minutes more; then Mackyz raised his arms in a gesture of benediction. "All right, you squirts—all out on the track for a fast lap. And that includes you, gold-brick," he said to me, wagging his finger.

All the boys straightened up and started toward the track. The sun's light poured in long low rays over the roof of the school. Jostling and joking, we started to run. "Faster!" Mackyz yelled. "Faster! Whatsa matter—you all a bunch of girls! Faster! For Christ's sake, faster!"

Since Preston, in his dogged effort to become a good miler, ran three laps to everyone else's one, he was usually the last in the locker room. He would come in, worn out and breathing heavily; sometimes he even had to hold himself up with one hand on his locker while he undressed. Everyone else would long since have showered and would be almost ready to leave. They might make one or two remarks about Preston's running his legs down to stumps or trying to kill himself for Mackyz' sake. Preston would smile numbly while he tried to get his breath back, and somehow, I was always surprised by how little attention was paid to Preston, how cut off and how alone he was.

More often than not, Joel would be showing off in the locker room—walking around on his hands, singing dirty songs, or engaged in some argument or other. Preston would go into the shower. I would talk to Joel, dressing slowly, because I usually waited for Preston. By the time I was all dressed, the locker room would be empty and Preston would still be towelling himself off. Then, instead of hurrying to put his clothes on, he would run his hand over his chest, to curl the few limp hairs. "Oh come on!" I would say, disgustedly.

"Hold your horses," he would say, with his maddening physicist's serenity. "Just you hold your horses."

It took him half an hour to get dressed. He'd stand in front of the mirror and flex his muscles endlessly and admire the line his pectorals made across his broad rib cage, and he always left his shirt until last, even until after he had combed his hair. I found his vanity confusing; he was far from handsome, with his heavy mouth and bushy eyebrows and thick, sloping shoulders, but he loved his reflection and he'd turn and gaze at himself in the mirror from all sorts of angles while he buttoned his shirt. He hated Joel. "There's a guy who'll never amount to much," Preston would say. "He's chicken. And he's not very smart. I don't see why you want him to like you—except that you're a sucker. You let your eyes run away with your judgment." I put up with all this because I wanted Preston to walk me part way home. It seemed shameful somehow to have to walk home alone.

Finally, he would finish, and we would emerge from the now deserted school into the dying afternoon. As we walked, Preston harangued me about my lack of standards and judgment. The hunger I had for holding school office and for being well thought of he dismissed as a streak of lousy bourgeois cowardice. I agreed with him (I didn't like myself anyway); but what was to be done about it? "We might run away," Preston said, squinting up at the sky. "Hitchhike. Work in factories. Go to a whorehouse. . . ." I leaned against a tree trunk, and Preston stood with one foot on the curb and one foot in the street, and we lobbed pebbles back and forth. "We're doomed," Preston said. "Doom" was one of his favorite words, along with "culture," "kinetic," and "the Absolute." "We come from a dying culture," he said.

"I suppose you're right," I said. "It certainly looks that way." But then I cheered up. "After all, it's not as if we were insane or anything."

"It wouldn't show yet," Preston said gloomily. "It's still in the latent stage. It'll come out later. You'll see. After all, you're still living at home, and you've got your half-assed charm—"

I broke in; I'd never had a compliment from him before.

"I didn't say you were charming," he said. "I said you have a half-assed charm. You behave well in public. That's all I meant."

At the corner where we separated, Preston stood a moment or two. "It's hopeless," he said.

"God, do you really think so?" I asked.

"That's my honest opinion," he said.

He turned toward his house. I jogged a block or two, and then felt my stomach muscles. When I came to a maple with a low, straight branch, I ran and jumped up and swung from the branch, while a big green diesel bus rolled ponderously past, all its windows filled with tired faces that looked out at the street going by and at me hanging from the branch and smiling. I was doomed, but I was very likely charming.

I ran in the front door of my house and called out, "Mother! Mother!"

"What is it?" she answered. She was sitting on the screened porch, and I could see a little plume of cigarette smoke in the doorway. There was the faint mutter of a radio news program turned on low.

"Nothing," I said. "I'm home, that's all."

At the dinner table, I would try to disguise myself by slouching in my chair and thinking about my homework, but my mother and my sister always recognized me. "How was track today?" my sister would ask in a slightly amused way.

"Fine," I would say in a low voice.

My mother and my sister would exchange glances. I must have seemed comic to them, stilted, and slightly absurd, like all males.

Almost every evening, Sonny Bruster used to drive up to our house in his yellow convertible. The large car would glide to a stop at the curb, and Sonny would glance quickly at himself in the rear-view mirror, running his hand over his hair. Then he'd climb out and brush his pants off, too occupied with his own shyness to notice the children playing on the block. But they would stop what they were doing and watch him.

I would wait for him at the front door and let him in and lead him into the living room. I walked ahead of Sonny because I had noticed that he could not keep himself from looking up the stairs as we passed through the hallway, as if to conjure up my sister then and there with the intensity of his longing, and I hated to see him do this. I would sit in the high-backed yellow chair, and Sonny would settle himself on the couch

and ask me about track, or if I'd picked a college yet. "You ought to think carefully about college," he would say. "I think Princeton is more civilized than Yale." His gentle, well-bred voice was carefully inexpressive. In his manner there was a touch of stiffness to remind you, and himself, that he was rich and if some disrespect was intended for him he wouldn't necessarily put up with it. But I liked him. He treated me with great politeness, and I liked the idea of his being my brother-in-law, and I sometimes thought of the benefits that would fall to me if my sister married him.

Then my sister would appear at the head of the stairs, dressed to go out, and Sonny would leap to his feet. "Are you ready?" he'd cry, as if he had never dared hope she would be. My sister would hand him her coat, and with elaborate care he'd hold it for her. It would be perhaps eight o'clock or a little after. The street lamps would be on, but looking pallid because it wasn't quite dark. Usually, Sonny would open the car door for my sister, but sometimes, with a quick maneuver, she would forestall him; she would hurry the last few steps, open the door, and slip inside before he could lift his hand.

Sonny was not the first rich boy who had loved my sister; he was the fourth or fifth. And in the other cases there had been scenes between my mother and sister in which my mother extolled the boy's eligibility and my sister argued that she was too young to marry and didn't want to stop having a good time yet. Each time she had won, and each time the boy had been sent packing, while my mother looked heartbroken and said my sister was throwing her chances away.

With Sonny, the same thing seemed about to happen. My sister missed going out with a lot of boys instead of with just one. She complained once or twice that Sonny was jealous and spoiled. There were times when she seemed to like him very much, but there were other times when she would greet him blankly in the evening when she came downstairs, and he would be apologetic and fearful, and I could see that her disapproval was the thing he feared most in the world.

My mother didn't seem to notice, or if she did, she hid her feelings. Then one night I was sitting in my room doing my homework and I heard my mother and sister come upstairs. They went into my sister's room.

"I think Sonny's becoming very serious," my mother said.

"Sonny's so short," I heard my sister say. "He's not really interesting, either, Mother."

"He seems to be very fond of you," my mother said.

"He's no fun," my sister said. "Mother, be careful! You're brushing too hard! You're hurting me!"

I stopped trying to work, and listened.

"Sonny's a very intelligent boy," my mother said. "He comes from a good family."

"I don't care," my sister said. "I don't want to waste myself on him."

"Waste yourself?" My mother laughed derisively. I got up and went to the door of my sister's room. My sister was sitting at her dressing table, her hair shining like glass and her eyes closed. My mother was walking back and forth, gesturing with the hairbrush. "He's the one who's throwing himself away," she said. "Who do you think we are, anyway? We're nobodies."

"I'm pretty!" my sister objected angrily.

My mother shrugged. "The woods are full of pretty girls. What's more, they're full of pretty, rich girls. Now, Sonny's a very *nice* boy—"

"Leave me alone!" My sister pulled her hair up from her shoulders and held it in a soft mop on the top of her head. "Sonny's a jerk! A jerk!"

"He's nice-looking!" my mother cried.

"Oh, what do *you* know about it?" my sister cried. "You're old, for God's sake!"

The air vibrated. My sister rose and looked at my mother, horrified at what she had said. She took her hands from her hair, and it fell tumbling to her shoulders, dry and pale and soft. "I don't care," she said suddenly, and brushed past me, and fled into the bathroom and locked the door. There was no further sound from her. The only trace of her in the house at that moment was the faint odor in her room of the flowery perfume she used that spring.

"Oh, she's so foolish," my mother said, and I saw that she was crying. "She doesn't know what she's doing. . . . Why is she so foolish?" Then she put the hairbrush down and raised her hands to her cheeks and began to pinch them.

I went back to my room and closed the door.

When I came out again, an hour later, my mother was in bed reading a magazine; she looked as if she had been wounded in a dozen places. My sister sat in her room, in front of the mirror. Her hair streamed down the back of her neck and lay in touching, defenseless little curls on the towel she had over her shoulders. She was studying her reflection thoughtfully. (Are flowers vain? Are trees? Are they consumed with vanity during those days when they are in bloom?) She raised her finger and pressed it against her lower lip to see, I think, if she would be prettier if her lip, instead of being so smooth, had a slight break in the center as some girls' did.

Shortly after this, my mother, who was neither stupid nor cruel, suggested that my sister stop seeing Sonny for a while. "Until you make up your mind," she said. "Otherwise you might break his heart, you know. Tell him you need some time to think. He'll understand. He'll think you're grown-up and responsible."

Sonny vanished from our house. In the evenings now, after dinner, the three of us would sit on the screened porch. My sister would look up eagerly when the phone rang, but the calls were never for her. None of her old boy friends knew she had stopped dating Sonny, and after a while, when the phone rang, she would compose her face and pretend she wasn't interested, or she would say irritably, "Who can that be?" She began to answer the phone herself (she never had before, because it wasn't good for a girl to seem too eager) and she would look sadly at herself in the hall mirror while she said, "Yes, Preston, he's here." She tried to read. She'd skim a few pages and then put the book down and gaze out through the screens at the night and the patches of light on the trees. She would listen with my mother to the comedians on the radio and laugh vaguely when my mother laughed. She picked on me. "Your posture's no good," she'd say. Or "Where do you learn your manners? Mother, he behaves like a zoot-suiter or something." Another time, she said, "If I don't make a good marriage, you'll be in trouble. You're too lazy to do anything on your own." She grew more and more restless. Tying with her necklace, she broke the string, and the beads

rolled all over the floor, and there was something frantic in the way she went about retrieving the small rolling bits of glitter. It occurred to me that she didn't know what she was doing; she was not really as sure of everything as she seemed. It was a painfully difficult thought to arrive at, and it clung to me. Why hadn't I realized it before? Also, she sort of hated me, it seemed to me. I had never noticed that before, either. How could I have been so wrong, I wondered. Knowing how wrong I had been about this, I felt that no idea I had ever held was safe. For instance, we were not necessarily a happy family, with the most wonderful destinies waiting for my sister and me. We might make mistakes and choose wrong. Unhappiness was real. It was even likely. . . . How tired I became of studying my sister's face. I got so I would do anything to keep from joining the two women on the porch.

After three weeks of this, Sonny returned. I was never told whether he came of his own accord or whether he was summoned; but one night the yellow convertible drove up in front of our house and he was back. Now when my mother would watch my sister and Sonny getting into Sonny's car in the evenings, she would turn away from the window smiling. "I think your sister has found a boy she can respect," she would say, or "They'll be very happy together," or some such hopeful observation, which I could see no basis for, but which my mother believed with all the years and memories at her disposal, with all the weight of her past and her love for my sister. And I would go and call Preston.

I used to lie under the dining-room table, sheltered and private like that, looking up at the way the pieces of mahogany were joined together, while we talked. I would cup the telephone to my ear with my shoulder and hold my textbook up in the air, over my head, as we went over physics, which was a hard subject for me. "Preston," I asked one night, "what in God's name makes a siphon work?" They did work—everyone knew that—and I groaned as I asked it. Preston explained the theory to me, and I frowned, breathed heavily through my nose, squinted at the incomprehensible diagrams in the book, and thought of sex, of the dignity of man, of the wonders of the mind, as he talked. Every few minutes, he asked "Do you see" and I would sigh. It was spring, and there

was meaning all around me, if only I were free—free of school, free of my mother, free of duties and inhibitions—if only I were mounted on a horse. . . . Where was the world? Not here, not near me, not under the dining-room table. . . . “Not quite,” I’d say, untruthfully, afraid that I might discourage him. “But I almost get it. Just tell me once more.” And on and on he went, while I frowned, breathed hard, and squinted. And then it happened! “I see!” I cried. “I see! I see!” It was air pressure! How in the world had I failed to visualize air pressure? I could see it now. I would never again not see it; it was there in my mind, solid and indestructible, a whitish column sitting on the water. “God damn but science is wonderful!” I said, and heaved my physics book into the living room. “Really wonderful!”

“It’s natural law,” Preston said reprovingly. “Don’t get emotion mixed up with it.”

One evening when my sister and Sonny didn’t have a date to go out, my mother tapped lightly on my foot, which protruded from under the dining-room table. “I have a feeling Sonny may call,” she whispered. I told Preston I had to hang up, and crawled out from beneath the table. “I have a feeling that they’re getting to the point,” my mother said. “Your sister’s nervous.”

I put the phone back on the telephone table. “But, Mother—” I said, and the phone rang.

“Sh-h-h,” she said.

The phone rang three times. My sister, on the extension upstairs, said, “Hello. . . . Oh, Sonny. . . .”

My mother looked at me and smiled. Then she pulled at my sleeve until I bent my head down, and she whispered in my ear, “They’ll be so happy. . . .” She went into the hall, to the foot of the stairs. “Tell him he can come over,” she whispered passionately.

“Sure,” my sister was saying on the phone. “I’d like that. . . . If you want. . . . Sure. . . .”

My mother went on listening, her head tilted to one side, the light falling on her aging face, and then she began to pantomime the answers my sister ought to be making—sweet yeses, dignified noes, and little bursts of alluring laughter.

I plunged down the hall and out the screen door. The street lamps were on, and there was a moon. I could hear the children: "I see Digger. One-two-three, you're caught, Digger. . . ." Two blocks away, the clock on the Presbyterian church was striking the hour. Just then a little girl left her hiding place in our hedge and ran shrieking for the tree trunk that was home-free base: "I'm home safe! I'm home safe! Everybody free!" All the prisoners, who had been sitting disconsolately on the bumpers of Mr. Karmgut's Oldsmobile, jumped up with joyful cries and scattered abruptly in the darkness.

I lifted my face—that exasperating factor, my face—and stared entranced at the night, at the waving tops of the trees, and the branches blowing back and forth, and the round moon embedded in the night sky, turning the nearby streamers of cloud into mother-of-pearl. It was all very rare and eternal-seeming. What a dreadful unhappiness I felt.

I walked along the curb, balancing with my arms outspread. Leaves hung over the sidewalk. The air was filled with their rustling, and they caught the light of the street lamps. I looked into the lighted houses. There was Mrs. Kearns, tucked girlishly into a corner of the living-room couch, reading a book. Next door, through the leaves of a tall plant, I saw the Lewises all standing in the middle of the floor. When I reached the corner, I put one arm around the post that held the street sign, and leaned there, above the sewer grating, where my friends and I had lost perhaps a hundred tennis balls, over the years. In numberless dusks, we had abandoned our games of catch and handball and gathered around the grating and stared into it at our ball, floating down in the darkness.

The Cullens' porch light was on, in the next block, and I saw Mr. and Mrs. Cullen getting into their car. Eleanor Cullen was in my class at school, and she had been dating Joel. Her parents were going out, and that meant she'd be home alone—if she was home. She might have gone to the library, I thought as the car started up; or to a sorority meeting. While I stood there looking at the Cullens' house, the porch light went off. A minute later, out of breath from running, I stood on the dark porch and rang the doorbell. There was no light on in the front hall, but the front door was open, and I could hear someone coming. It was Eleanor. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Me," I said. "Are you busy? Would you like to come out for a little while and talk?"

She drifted closer to the screen door and pressed her nose against it. She looked pale without makeup.

"Sure," she said. "I'll have to go put my shoes on. I'm not in a good mood or anything."

"That's all right," I said. "Neither am I. I just want to talk to somebody."

While I waited for Eleanor to come out, Mattie Seaton appeared, striding along the sidewalk. He was on the track team. "Hey, Mattie," I called out to him.

"Hi," he said.

"What's new?"

"Nothing much," he said. "You got your trig done?"

"No, not yet."

"You going with *her*?" he asked, pointing to the house.

"Naw," I said.

"Well, I got to get my homework done," he said.

"See you later," I called after him. I knew where he was going: Nancy Ellis's house, two blocks down.

"Who was that?" Eleanor asked. She stepped out on the porch. She had combed her hair and put on lipstick.

"Mattie Seaton," I said.

"He's pinned to Nancy," Eleanor said. "He likes her a lot. . . ." She sat down in a white metal chair. I sat on the porch railing, facing her. She fumbled in her pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "You want a cigarette?" she asked.

"No. I'm in training."

We looked at each other, and then she looked away, and I looked down at my shoes. I sat there liking her more and more.

"How come you're in a bad mood?" I asked her.

"Me? Oh, I don't know. How did you know I was in a bad mood?"

"You told me." I could barely make out her face and the dull color of her hands in the darkness.

"You know, I think I'm not basically a happy person," Eleanor said

suddenly. "I always thought I was. . . . People expect you to be, especially if you're a girl."

"It doesn't surprise *me*," I said.

A breeze set all the leaves in motion again. "It's going to rain," I said.

Eleanor stood up, smoothing her yellow skirt, and threw her cigarette off the porch; the glowing tip landed on the grass. She realized I was staring at her. She lifted her hand and pressed it against her hair. "You may have noticed I look unusually plain tonight," she said. She leaned over the porch railing beside me, supporting herself on her hands. "I was trying to do my geometry," she said in a low voice. "I couldn't do it. I felt stupid," she said. "So I cried. That's why I look so awful."

"I think you look all right," I said. "I think you look fine." I leaned forward and laid my cheek on her shoulder. Then I sat up quickly, flushing. "I don't like to hear you being so dissatisfied with yourself," I mumbled. "You could undermine your self-confidence that way."

Eleanor straightened and faced me, in the moonlight. "You're beautiful," I burst out longingly. "I never noticed before. But you are."

"Wait," Eleanor said. Tears gathered in her eyes. "Don't like me yet. I have to tell you something first. It's about Joel."

"You don't have to tell me," I said. "I know you're going with him. I understand."

"Listen to me!" she said impatiently, stamping her foot. "I'm *not* going with him. He—" She suddenly pressed her hands against her eyes. "Oh, it's awful!" she cried.

A little shudder of interest passed through me. "O.K.," I said. "But I don't care if you don't tell me."

"I want to!" she cried. "I'm just a little embarrassed. I'll be all right in a minute—"

"We went out Sunday night . . ." she began after a few seconds. They had gone to Medart's, in Clayton, for a hamburger. Joel had talked her into drinking a bottle of beer, and it had made her so drowsy that she had put her head on the back of the seat and closed her eyes. "What kind of car does Joel have?" I asked.

"A Buick," Eleanor said, surprised at my question.

"I see," I said. I pictured the dashboard of a Buick, and Joel's handsome face, and then, daringly, I added Eleanor's hand, with its bitten fingernails, holding Joel's hand. I was only half listening, because I felt the preliminary stirrings of an envy so deep it would make me miserable for weeks. I looked up at the sky over my shoulder; clouds had blotted out the moon, and everything had got darker. From the next block, in the sudden stillness, I heard the children shouting, uttering their Babylonian cries as they played kick-the-can. Their voices were growing tired and fretful.

"And then I felt his hand on my—" Eleanor, half-drowned in shadow, was showing me, on her breast, where Joel had touched her.

"Is that all?" I said, suddenly smiling. Now I would not have to die of envy. "That's nothing!"

"I—I slapped his face!" She exclaimed. Her lip trembled. "Oh, I didn't mean—I sort of wanted—Oh, it's all so terrible!" she burst out. She ran down the front steps and onto the lawn, and leaned against the trunk of an oak tree. I followed her. The pre-storm stillness filled the sky, the air between the trees, the dark spaces among the shrubbery. "Oh, God!" Eleanor cried. "How I hate everything!"

My heart was pounding, and I didn't know why. I hadn't known I could feel like this—that I could pause on the edge of such feeling, which lay stretched like an enormous meadow all in shadow inside me. It seemed to me a miracle that human beings could be so elaborate. "Listen, Eleanor," I said, "you're all right! I've *always* liked you." I swallowed and moved closer to her; there were two moist streaks running down her face. I raised my arm and, with the sleeve of my shirt, I wiped away her tears. "I think you're wonderful! I think you're really something!"

"You look down on me," she said. "I know you do. I can tell."

"How can I, Eleanor. How *can* I?" I cried. "I'm nobody. I've been damaged by my heredity."

"You, too!" she exclaimed happily. "Oh, that's what's wrong with me!"

A sudden hiss swept through the air and then the first raindrops struck the street. "Quick!" Eleanor cried, and we ran up on her porch. Two bursts of lightning lit up the dark sky, and the rain streamed down.

I held Eleanor's hand, and we stood watching the rain. "It's a real thundershower," she said.

"Do you feel bad because we only started being friends tonight? I mean, do you feel you're on the rebound and settling on the second-best?" I asked. There was a long silence and all around it was the sound of the rain.

"I don't think so," Eleanor said at last. "How about you?"

I raised my eyebrows and said, "Oh, no, it doesn't bother me at all."

"That's good," she said.

We were standing very close to one another. We talked industriously. "I don't like geometry," Eleanor said. "I don't see what use it is. It's supposed to train your mind, but I don't believe it. . . ."

I took my glasses off. "Eleanor—" I said. I kissed her, passionately, and then I turned away, pounding my fists on top of each other. "Excuse me," I whispered hoarsely. That kiss had lasted a long time, and I thought I would die.

Eleanor was watching the long, slanting lines of rain falling just outside the porch, gray in the darkness; she was breathing very rapidly. "You know what?" she said. "I could make you scrambled eggs. I'm a good cook." I leaned my head against the brick wall of the house and said I'd like some.

In the kitchen, she put on an apron and bustled about, rattling pans and silverware, and talking in spurts. "I think a girl should know how to cook, don't you?" She let me break the eggs into a bowl—three eggs, which I cracked with a flourish. "Oh, you're good at it," she said, and began to beat them with a fork while I sat on the kitchen table and watched her. "Did you know most eggs *aren't* baby chickens?" she asked me. She passed so close to me on her way to the stove that, because her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright, I couldn't help leaning forward and kissing her. She turned pink and hurried to the stove. I sat on the kitchen table, swinging my legs and smiling to myself. Suddenly we heard a noise just outside the back door. I leaped off the table and took up a polite position by the sink. Eleanor froze. But no one opened the door; no one appeared.

"Maybe it was a branch falling," I said.

Eleanor nodded. Then she made a face and looked down at her hands. "I don't know why we got so nervous. We aren't doing anything wrong."

"It's the way they look at you," I said.

"Yes, that's it," she said. "You know, I think my parents are ashamed of me. But someday I'll show them. I'll do something wonderful, and they'll be amazed." She went back to the stove.

"When are your parents coming home?" I asked.

"They went to a double feature. They can't possibly be out before eleven."

"They might walk out on it," I said.

"Oh no!" Eleanor said. "Not if they pay for it . . ."

We ate our scrambled eggs and washed the dishes, and watched the rain from the dining-room windows without turning the light on. We kissed for a while, and then we both grew restless and uncomfortable. Her lips were swollen, and she went into the kitchen, and I heard her running the water; when she returned, her hair was combed and she had put on fresh lipstick. "I don't like being in the house," she said, and led me out on the porch. We stood with our arms around each other. The rain was slackening. "Goodbye, rain," Eleanor said sadly. It was as if we were watching a curtain slowly being lifted from around the house. The trees gleamed wetly near the street lamps.

When I started home, the rain had stopped. Water dripped on the leaves of the trees. Little plumes of mist hung over the wet macadam of the street. I walked very gently in order not to disturb anything.

I didn't want to run into anybody, and so I went home the back way, through the alley. At the entrance to the alley there was a tall cast-iron pseudo-Victorian lamppost, with an urn-shaped head and panes of frosted glass; the milky light it shed trickled part way down the alley, illuminating a few curiously still garage fronts and, here and there, the wet leaves of the bushes and vines that bordered the back yards and spilled in such profusion over the fences, hiding the ashpits and making the alley so pretty a place in spring. When I was younger, I had climbed on those ashpits, those brick squares nearly smothered under the intrica-

cies of growing things, and I had searched in the debris for old, broken mirrors, discarded scarves with fringes, bits of torn decorated wrapping paper, and such treasures. But now I drifted down the alley, walking absently on the wet asphalt. I was having a sort of daydream where I was lying with my head on Eleanor's shoulder—which was bare—and I could hear the slow, even sound of her breathing as I began to fall asleep. I was now in the darkest part of the alley, the very center where no light reached, and in my daydream I turned over and kissed Eleanor's hands, her throat—and then I broke into a sprint down the alley, slipping and sliding on the puddles and wet places. I came out the other end of the alley and stood underneath the lamppost. I was breathing with difficulty.

Across the street from me, two women stood, one on the sidewalk, the other on the front steps of a house, hugging her arms. "It's not a bad pain," the woman on the sidewalk said, "but it persists."

"My dear, my dear," said the other. "Don't take any chances—not at our age . . ."

And a couple, a boy and a girl, were walking up the street, coming home from the Tivoli Theatre. The girl was slouching in order not to seem taller than the boy, who was very short and who sprang up and down on the balls of his feet as he walked.

I picked a spray of lilac and smelled it, but then I didn't know what to do with it—I didn't want to throw it away—and finally I put it in my pants pocket.

I vaulted our back fence and landed in our back yard, frightening a cat, who leaped out of the hedge and ran in zigzags across the dark lawn. It startled me so much I felt weak. I tucked my shirt in carefully and smoothed my hair. Suddenly, I looked down at my fingertips; they were blurred in the darkness and moist from the lilac, and I swept them to my mouth and kissed them.

The kitchen was dark. There was no sound in the house, no sound at all, and a tremor passed through me. I turned the kitchen light on and hurriedly examined myself for marks of what had happened to me. I peered at my shirt, my pants. I rubbed my face with both hands. Then I turned

the light off and slipped into the dining room, which was dark, too, and so was the hallway. The porch light was on. I ran up the front stairs and stopped short at the top; there was a light on in my mother's room. She was sitting up in bed, with pillows at her back, a magazine across her lap, and a pad of paper on the magazine.

"Hello," I said.

I expected her to bawl me out for being late, but she just looked at me solemnly for a moment, and then she said, "Sonny proposed to your sister."

Because I hadn't had a chance to wash my face, I raised one hand and held it over my cheek and chin, to hide whatever traces of lipstick there might be.

She said, "They're going to be married in June. They went over to the Brusters' to get the ring. He proposed practically the first thing when he came. They were *both* so—they were both so *happy!*" she said. "They make such a lovely couple. . . . Oh, if you could have seen them."

She was in a very emotional state.

I started to back out the door.

"Where are you going?" my mother asked.

"To bed," I said, surprised. "I'm in training—"

"Oh, you ought to wait up for your sister."

"I'll leave her a note," I said.

I went to my room and took the white lilac out of my pocket and put it on my desk. I wrote, "I heard the news and think it's swell. Congratulations. Wake me up when you come in." I stuck the note in the mirror of her dressing table. Then I went back to my room and got undressed. Usually I slept raw, but I decided I'd better wear pajamas if my sister was going to come in and wake me up. I don't know how much later it was that I heard a noise and sat bolt upright in bed. I had been asleep. My sister was standing in the door of my room. She was wearing a blue dress that had little white buttons all the way down the front and she had white gloves on. "Are you awake?" she whispered.

"Yes," I said. "Where's Mother?"

"Downstairs," my sister said, coming into the room. "Sending telegrams. Do you want to see my ring?" She took her gloves off.

I turned the bedside-table lamp on, and she held her hand out. The ring was gold, and there was an emerald and four diamonds around it.

"It was his grandmother's," my sister said. I nodded. "It's not what I—" she said, and sat down on the edge of the bed, and forgot to finish her sentence. "Tell me," she said, "do you think he's really rich?" Then she turned a sad gaze on me, through her lashes. "Do you want to know something awful? I don't like my ring. . . ."

"Are you unhappy?" I asked.

"No, just upset. It's scary getting married. You have no idea. I kept getting chills all evening. I may get pneumonia. Do you have a cigarette?"

I said I'd get her one downstairs.

"No, there's some in my room," she said. "I'll get them. You know, Sonny and I talked about you. We're going to send you to college and everything. We planned it all out tonight." She played with her gloves for a while, and then she said, looking at the toes of her shoes, "I'm scared. What if Sonny's not good at business?" She turned to me. "You know what I mean? He's so young. . . ."

"You don't have to marry him," I said. "After all, you're—"

"You don't understand," my sister said hurriedly, warding off advice she didn't want. "You're too young yet." She laughed. "You know what he said to me?"

Just then, my mother called out from the bottom of the stairs, "Listen, how does this sound to you? 'Dear Greta—' It's a night letter, and we get a lot of words, and I thought Greta would like it better if I started that way. Greta's so touchy, you know. Can you hear me?"

"I have to go," my sister whispered. She looked at me, and then suddenly she leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. "Go to sleep," she said. "Have nice dreams." She got up and went out into the hall.

"—Dodie got engaged tonight," my mother read. "Is 'got engaged' the right way to say it?"

"Became engaged," my sister said, in a distant voice.

I put on my bathrobe and slippers and went out into the hall. My sister was leaning over the banister, talking to my mother at the bottom of the stairs about the night letter. I slipped past her and down the back

stairs and into the kitchen. I found a cold chicken in the icebox, put the platter on the kitchen table, and tore off a leg and began to eat.

The door to the back stairs swung open, and my sister appeared. "I'm hungry, too," she said. "I don't know why." She drifted over to the table, and bent over the chicken. "I guess emotion makes people hungry."

My mother pushed open the swinging door, from the dining-room side. "There you are," she said. She looked flustered. "I'll have to think some more, and then I'll write the whole thing over," she said to my sister. To me she said, "Are you *eating* at this time of night?"

My sister said that she was hungry, too.

"There's some soup," my mother said. "Why don't I heat it up." And suddenly her eyes filled with tears, and all at once we fell to kissing one another—to embracing and smiling and making cheerful predictions about one another—there in the white, brightly lighted kitchen. We had known each other for so long, and there were so many things that we all three remembered. . . . Our smiles, our approving glances, wandered from face to face. There was a feeling of politeness in the air. We were behaving the way we would in railway stations, at my sister's wedding, at the birth of her first child, at my graduation from college. This was the first of our reunions.

THE LADY WITH THE LITTLE DOG

ANTON CHEKHOV

I

The talk was that a new face had appeared on the embankment: a lady with a little dog. Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov, who had already spent two weeks in Yalta and was used to it, also began to take an interest in new faces. Sitting in a pavilion at Vernet's, he saw a young woman, not very tall, blond, in a beret, walking along the embankment; behind her ran a white spitz.

And after that he met her several times a day in the town garden or in the square. She went strolling alone, in the same beret, with the white spitz; nobody knew who she was, and they called her simply "the lady with the little dog."

"If she's here with no husband or friends," Gurov reflected, "it wouldn't be a bad idea to make her acquaintance."

He was not yet forty, but he had a twelve-year-old daughter and two sons in school. He had married young, while still a second-year student, and now his wife seemed half again his age. She was a tall woman with dark eyebrows, erect, imposing, dignified, and a thinking person, as she called herself. She read a great deal, used the new orthography, called her husband not Dmitri but Dimitri, but he secretly considered her none too bright, narrow-minded, graceless, was afraid of her, and disliked being at home. He had begun to be unfaithful to her long ago, was unfaithful often, and, probably for that reason, almost always spoke ill of women, and when they were discussed in his presence, he would say of them:

"An inferior race!"

It seemed to him that he had been taught enough by bitter experience

to call them anything he liked, and yet he could not have lived without the "inferior race" even for two days. In the company of men he was bored, ill at ease, with them he was taciturn and cold, but when he was among women, he felt himself free and knew what to talk about with them and how to behave; and he was at ease even being silent with them. In his appearance, in his character, in his whole nature there was something attractive and elusive that disposed women towards him and enticed them; he knew that, and he himself was attracted to them by some force.

Repeated experience, and bitter experience indeed, had long since taught him that every intimacy, which in the beginning lends life such pleasant diversity and presents itself as a nice and light adventure, inevitably, with decent people—especially irresolute Muscovites, who are slow starters—grows into a major task, extremely complicated, and the situation finally becomes burdensome. But at every new meeting with an interesting woman, this experience somehow slipped from his memory, and he wanted to live, and everything seemed quite simple and amusing.

And so one time, towards evening, he was having dinner in the garden, and the lady in the beret came over unhurriedly to take the table next to his. Her expression, her walk, her dress, her hair told him that she belonged to decent society, was married, in Yalta for the first time, and alone, and that she was bored here . . . In the stories about the impurity of local morals there was much untruth, he despised them and knew that these stories were mostly invented by people who would eagerly have sinned themselves had they known how; but when the lady sat down at the next table, three steps away from him, he remembered those stories of easy conquests, of trips to the mountains, and the tempting thought of a quick, fleeting liaison, a romance with an unknown woman, of whose very name you are ignorant, suddenly took possession of him.

He gently called the spitz, and when the dog came over, he shook his finger at it. The spitz growled. Gurov shook his finger again.

The lady glanced at him and immediately lowered her eyes.

"He doesn't bite," she said and blushed.

"May I give him a bone?" and, when she nodded in the affirmative, he asked affably: "Have you been in Yalta long?"

"About five days."

"And I'm already dragging through my second week here."

They were silent for a while.

"The time passes quickly, and yet it's so boring here!" she said without looking at him.

"It's merely the accepted thing to say it's boring here. The ordinary man lives somewhere in his Beleva or Zhizdra and isn't bored, then he comes here: 'Ah, how boring! Ah, how dusty!' You'd think he came from Granada."

She laughed. Then they went on eating in silence, like strangers; but after dinner they walked off together—and a light, bantering conversation began, of free, contented people, who do not care where they go or what they talk about. They strolled and talked of how strange the light was on the sea; the water was of a lilac color, so soft and warm, and over it the moon cast a golden strip. They talked of how sultry it was after the hot day. Gurov told her he was a Muscovite, a philologist by education, but worked in a bank; had once been preparing to sing in an opera company, but had dropped it, owned two houses in Moscow . . . And from her he learned that she grew up in Petersburg, but was married in S., where she had now been living for two years, that she would be staying in Yalta for about a month, and that her husband might come to fetch her, because he also wanted to get some rest. She was quite unable to explain where her husband served—in the provincial administration or the zemstvo council—and she herself found that funny. And Gurov also learned that her name was Anna Sergeevna.

Afterwards, in his hotel room, he thought about her, that tomorrow she would probably meet him again. It had to be so. Going to bed, he recalled that still quite recently she had been a schoolgirl, had studied just as his daughter was studying now, recalled how much timorousness and angularity there was in her laughter, her conversation with a stranger—it must have been the first time in her life that she was alone in such a situation, when she was followed, looked at, and spoken to with

only one secret purpose, which she could not fail to guess. He recalled her slender, weak neck, her beautiful gray eyes.

"There's something pathetic in her all the same," he thought and began to fall asleep.

II

A week had passed since they became acquainted. It was Sunday. Inside it was stuffy, but outside the dust flew in whirls, hats blew off. They felt thirsty all day, and Gurov often stopped at the pavilion, offering Anna Sergeevna now a soft drink, now ice cream. There was no escape.

In the evening when it relented a little, they went to the jetty to watch the steamer come in. There were many strollers on the pier; they had come to meet people, they were holding bouquets. And here two particularities of the smartly dressed Yalta crowd distinctly struck one's eye: the elderly ladies were dressed like young ones, and there were many generals.

Owing to the roughness of the sea, the steamer arrived late, when the sun had already gone down, and it was a long time turning before it tied up. Anna Sergeevna looked at the ship and the passengers through her lorgnette, as if searching for acquaintances, and when she turned to Gurov, her eyes shone. She talked a lot, and her questions were abrupt, and she herself immediately forgot what she had asked; then she lost her lorgnette in the crowd.

The smartly dressed crowd was dispersing, the faces could no longer be seen, the wind had died down completely, and Gurov and Anna Sergeevna stood as if they were expecting someone else to get off the steamer. Anna Sergeevna was silent now and smelled the flowers, not looking at Gurov.

"The weather's improved towards evening," he said. "Where shall we go now? Shall we take a drive somewhere?"

She made no answer.

Then he looked at her intently and suddenly embraced her and kissed her on the lips, and he was showered with the fragrance and moisture of

the flowers, and at once looked around timorously—had anyone seen them?

“Let’s go to your place . . .” he said softly.

And they both walked quickly.

Her hotel room was stuffy and smelled of the perfumes she had bought in a Japanese shop. Gurov, looking at her now, thought: “What meetings there are in life!” From the past he had kept the memory of carefree, good-natured women, cheerful with love, grateful to him for their happiness, however brief; and of women—his wife, for example—who loved without sincerity, with superfluous talk, affectedly, with hysteria, with an expression as if it were not love, not passion, but something more significant; and of those two or three very beautiful, cold ones, in whose faces a predatory expression would suddenly flash, a stubborn wish to take, to snatch from life more than it could give, and these were women not in their first youth, capricious, unreasonable, domineering, unintelligent, and when Gurov cooled towards them, their beauty aroused hatred in him, and the lace of their underwear seemed to him like scales.

But here was all the timorousness and angularity of inexperienced youth, a feeling of awkwardness, and an impression of bewilderment, as if someone had suddenly knocked at the door. Anna Sergeevna, the “lady with the little dog,” somehow took a special, very serious attitude towards what had happened, as if it were her fall—so it seemed, and that was strange and inopportune. Her features drooped and faded, and her long hair hung down sadly on both sides of her face, she sat pondering in a dejected pose, like the sinful woman in an old painting.

“It’s not good,” she said. “You’ll be the first not to respect me now.”

There was a watermelon on the table in the hotel room. Gurov cut himself a slice and unhurriedly began to eat it. At least half an hour passed in silence.

Anna Sergeevna was touching, she had about her a breath of the purity of a proper, naïve, little-experienced woman; the solitary candle burning on the table barely lit up her face, but it was clear that her heart was uneasy.

"Why should I stop respecting you?" asked Gurov. "You don't know what you're saying yourself."

"God forgive me!" she said, and her eyes filled with tears. "This is terrible."

"It's like you're justifying yourself."

"How can I justify myself? I'm a bad, low woman, I despise myself and am not even thinking of any justification. It's not my husband I've deceived, but my own self! And not only now, I've been deceiving myself for a long time. My husband may be an honest and good man, but he's a lackey! I don't know what he does there, how he serves, I only know that he's a lackey. I married him when I was twenty, I was tormented by curiosity, I wanted something better. I told myself there must be a different life. I wanted to live! To live and live . . . I was burning with curiosity . . . you won't understand it, but I swear to God that I couldn't control myself any longer, something was happening to me, I couldn't restrain myself, I told my husband I was ill and came here . . . And here I go about as if in a daze, as if I'm out of my mind . . . and now I've become a trite, trashy woman, whom anyone can despise."

Gurov was bored listening, he was annoyed by the naïve tone, by this repentance, so unexpected and out of place; had it not been for the tears in her eyes, one might have thought she was joking or playing a role.

"I don't understand," he said softly, "what is it you want?"

She hid her face on his chest and pressed herself to him.

"Believe me, believe me, I beg you . . ." she said. "I love an honest, pure life, sin is vile to me, I myself don't know what I'm doing. Simple people say, 'The unclean one beguiled me.' And now I can say of myself that the unclean one has beguiled me."

"Enough, enough . . ." he muttered.

He looked into her fixed, frightened eyes, kissed her, spoke softly and tenderly, and she gradually calmed down, and her gaiety returned. They both began to laugh.

Later, when they went out, there was not a soul on the embankment, the town with its cypresses looked completely dead, but the sea still beat noisily against the shore; one barge was rocking on the waves, and the lantern on it glimmered sleepily.

They found a cab and drove to Oreanda.

"I just learned your last name downstairs in the lobby: it was written on the board—von Dideritz," said Gurov. "Is your husband German?"

"No, his grandfather was German, I think, but he himself is Orthodox."

In Oreanda they sat on a bench not far from the church, looked down on the sea, and were silent. Yalta was barely visible through the morning mist, white clouds stood motionless on the mountaintops. The leaves of the trees did not stir, cicadas called, and the monotonous, dull noise of the sea, coming from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep that awaits us. So it had sounded below when neither Yalta nor Oreanda were there, so it sounded now and would go on sounding with the same dull indifference when we are no longer here. And in this constancy, in this utter indifference to the life and death of each of us, there perhaps lies hidden the pledge of our eternal salvation, the unceasing movement of life on earth, of unceasing perfection. Sitting beside the young woman, who looked so beautiful in the dawn, appeased and enchanted by the view of this magical décor—sea, mountains, clouds, the open sky—Gurov reflected that, essentially, if you thought of it, everything was beautiful in this world, everything except for what we ourselves think and do when we forget the higher goals of being and our human dignity.

Some man came up—it must have been a watchman—looked at them, and went away. And this detail seemed such a mysterious thing, and also beautiful. The steamer from Feodosia could be seen approaching in the glow of the early dawn, its lights out.

"There's dew on the grass," said Anna Sergeevna after a silence.

"Yes. It's time to go home."

They went back to town.

After that they met on the embankment every noon, had lunch together, dined, strolled, admired the sea. She complained that she slept poorly and that her heart beat anxiously, kept asking the same questions, troubled now by jealousy, now by fear that he did not respect her enough. And often on the square or in the garden, when there was no one near them, he would suddenly draw her to him and kiss her passionately. Their complete idleness, those kisses in broad daylight, with a

furtive look around and the fear that someone might see them, the heat, the smell of the sea, and the constant flashing before their eyes of idle, smartly dressed, well-fed people, seemed to transform him; he repeatedly told Anna Sergeevna how beautiful she was, and how seductive, was impatiently passionate, never left her side, while she often brooded and kept asking him to admit that he did not respect her, did not love her at all, and saw in her only a trite woman. Late almost every evening they went somewhere out of town, to Oreanda or the cascade; these outings were successful, their impressions each time were beautiful, majestic.

They were expecting her husband to arrive. But a letter came from him in which he said that his eyes hurt and begged his wife to come home quickly. Anna Sergeevna began to hurry.

"It's good that I'm leaving," she said to Gurov. "It's fate itself."

She went by carriage, and he accompanied her. They drove for a whole day. When she had taken her seat in the express train and the second bell had rung, she said:

"Let me have one more look at you . . . One more look. There."

She did not cry, but was sad, as if ill, and her face trembled.

"I'll think of you . . . remember you," she said. "God be with you. Don't think ill of me. We're saying good-bye forever, it must be so, because we should never have met. Well, God be with you."

The train left quickly, its lights soon disappeared, and a moment later the noise could no longer be heard, as if everything were conspiring on purpose to put a speedy end to this sweet oblivion, this madness. And, left alone on the platform and gazing into the dark distance, Gurov listened to the chirring of the grasshoppers and the hum of the telegraph wires with a feeling as if he had just woken up. And he thought that now there was one more affair or adventure in his life, and it, too, was now over, and all that was left was the memory . . . He was touched, saddened, and felt some slight remorse; this young woman whom he was never to see again had not been happy with him; he had been affectionate with her, and sincere, but all the same, in his treatment of her, in his tone and caresses, there had been a slight shade of mockery, the somewhat coarse arrogance of a happy man, who was, moreover, almost twice her age. She had all the while called him kind, extraordinary, lofty;

obviously, he had appeared to her not as he was in reality, and therefore he had involuntarily deceived her . . .

Here at the station there was already a breath of autumn, the wind was cool.

"It's time I headed north, too," thought Gurov, leaving the platform. "High time!"

III

At home in Moscow everything was already wintry, the stoves were heated, and in the morning, when the children were getting ready for school and drinking their tea, it was dark, and the nanny would light a lamp for a short time. The frosts had already set in. When the first snow falls, on the first day of riding in sleighs, it is pleasant to see the white ground, the white roofs; one's breath feels soft and pleasant, and in those moments one remembers one's youth. The old lindens and birches, white with hoarfrost, have a good-natured look, they are nearer one's heart than cypresses and palms, and near them one no longer wants to think of mountains and the sea.

Gurov was a Muscovite. He returned to Moscow on a fine, frosty day, and when he put on his fur coat and warm gloves and strolled down Petrovka, and when on Saturday evening he heard the bells ringing, his recent trip and the places he had visited lost all their charm for him. He gradually became immersed in Moscow life, now greedily read three newspapers a day and said that he never read the Moscow newspapers on principle. He was drawn to restaurants, clubs, to dinner parties, celebrations, and felt flattered that he had famous lawyers and actors among his clients, and that at the Doctors' Club he played cards with a professor. He could eat a whole portion of selyanka from the pan . . .

A month would pass and Anna Sergeevna, as it seemed to him, would be covered by mist in his memory and would only appear to him in dreams with a touching smile, as other women did. But more than a month passed, deep winter came, and yet everything was as clear in his memory as if he had parted with Anna Sergeevna only the day before.

And the memories burned brighter and brighter. Whether from the voices of his children doing their homework, which reached him in his study in the evening quiet, or from hearing a romance, or an organ in a restaurant, or the blizzard howling in the chimney, everything would suddenly rise up in his memory: what had happened on the jetty, and the early morning with mist on the mountains, and the steamer from Feodosia, and the kisses. He would pace the room for a long time, and remember, and smile, and then his memories would turn to reveries, and in his imagination the past would mingle with what was still to be. Anna Sergeevna was not a dream, she followed him everywhere like a shadow and watched him. Closing his eyes, he saw her as if alive, and she seemed younger, more beautiful, more tender than she was; and he also seemed better to himself than he had been then, in Yalta. In the evenings she gazed at him from the bookcase, the fireplace, the corner, he could hear her breathing, the gentle rustle of her skirts. In the street he followed women with his eyes, looking for one who resembled her . . .

And he was tormented now by a strong desire to tell someone his memories. But at home it was impossible to talk of his love, and away from home there was no one to talk with. Certainly not among his tenants nor at the bank. And what was there to say? Had he been in love then? Was there anything beautiful, poetic, or instructive, or merely interesting, in his relations with Anna Sergeevna? And he found himself speaking vaguely of love, of women, and no one could guess what it was about, and only his wife raised her dark eyebrows and said:

"You know, Dimitri, the role of fop doesn't suit you at all."

One night, as he was leaving the Doctors' Club together with his partner, an official, he could not help himself and said:

"If you only knew what a charming woman I met in Yalta!"

The official got into a sleigh and drove off, but suddenly turned around and called out:

"Dmitri Dmitrich!"

"What?"

"You were right earlier: the sturgeon was a bit off!"

Those words, so very ordinary, for some reason suddenly made Gurov indignant, struck him as humiliating, impure. Such savage man-

ners, such faces! These senseless nights, and such uninteresting, unremarkable days! Frenzied card-playing, gluttony, drunkenness, constant talk about the same thing. Useless matters and conversations about the same thing took for their share the best part of one's time, the best of one's powers, and what was left in the end was some sort of curtailed, wingless life, some sort of nonsense, and it was impossible to get away or flee, as if you were sitting in a madhouse or a prison camp!

Gurov did not sleep all night and felt indignant, and as a result had a headache all the next day. And the following nights he slept poorly, sitting up in bed all the time and thinking, or pacing up and down. He was sick of the children, sick of the bank, did not want to go anywhere or talk about anything.

In December, during the holidays, he got ready to travel and told his wife he was leaving for Petersburg to solicit for a certain young man—and went to S. Why? He did not know very well himself. He wanted to see Anna Sergeevna and talk with her, to arrange a meeting, if he could.

He arrived at S. in the morning and took the best room in the hotel, where the whole floor was covered with gray army flannel and there was an inkstand on the table, gray with dust, with a horseback rider, who held his hat in his raised hand, but whose head was broken off. The hall porter gave him the necessary information: von Dideritz lives in his own house on Staro-Goncharnaya Street, not far from the hotel; he has a good life, is wealthy, keeps his own horses, everybody in town knows him. The porter pronounced it "Dridiritz."

Gurov walked unhurriedly to Staro-Goncharnaya Street, found the house. Just opposite the house stretched a fence, long, gray, with spikes.

"You could flee from such a fence," thought Gurov, looking now at the windows, now at the fence.

He reflected: today was not a workday, and the husband was probably at home. And anyhow it would be tactless to go in and cause embarrassment. If he sent a message, it might fall into the husband's hands, and that would ruin everything. It would be best to trust to chance. And he kept pacing up and down the street and near the fence and waited for his chance. He saw a beggar go in the gates and saw the dogs attack him,

then, an hour later, he heard someone playing a piano, and the sounds reached him faintly, indistinctly. It must have been Anna Sergeevna playing. The front door suddenly opened and some old woman came out, the familiar white spitz running after her. Gurov wanted to call the dog, but his heart suddenly throbbed, and in his excitement he was unable to remember the spitz's name.

He paced up and down, and hated the gray fence more and more, and now he thought with vexation that Anna Sergeevna had forgotten him, and was perhaps amusing herself with another man, and that that was so natural in the situation of a young woman who had to look at this cursed fence from morning till evening. He went back to his hotel room and sat on the sofa for a long time, not knowing what to do, then had dinner, then took a long nap.

"How stupid and upsetting this all is," he thought, when he woke up and looked at the dark windows: it was already evening. "So I've had my sleep. Now what am I to do for the night?"

He sat on the bed, which was covered with a cheap, gray, hospital-like blanket, and taunted himself in vexation:

"Here's the lady with the little dog for you . . . Here's an adventure for you . . . Yes, here you sit."

That morning, at the train station, a poster with very big lettering had caught his eye: it was the opening night of *The Geisha*. He remembered it and went to the theater.

"It's very likely that she goes to opening nights," he thought.

The theater was full. And here, too, as in all provincial theaters generally, a haze hung over the chandeliers, the gallery stirred noisily; the local dandies stood in the front row before the performance started, their hands behind their backs; and here, too, in the governor's box, the governor's daughter sat in front, wearing a boa, while the governor himself modestly hid behind the portière, and only his hands could be seen; the curtain swayed, the orchestra spent a long time tuning up. All the while the public came in and took their seats, Gurov kept searching greedily with his eyes.

Anna Sergeevna came in. She sat in the third row, and when Gurov looked at her, his heart was wrung, and he realized clearly that there was

now no person closer, dearer, or more important for him in the whole world; this small woman, lost in the provincial crowd, not remarkable for anything, with a vulgar lorgnette in her hand, now filled his whole life, was his grief, his joy, the only happiness he now wished for himself; and to the sounds of the bad orchestra, with its trashy local violins, he thought how beautiful she was. He thought and dreamed.

A man came in with Anna Sergeevna and sat down next to her, a young man with little side-whiskers, very tall, stooping; he nodded his head at every step, and it seemed he was perpetually bowing. This was probably her husband, whom she, in an outburst of bitter feeling that time in Yalta, had called a lackey. And indeed, in his long figure, his side-whiskers, his little bald spot, there was something of lackeyish modesty; he had a sweet smile, and the badge of some learned society gleamed in his buttonhole, like the badge of a lackey.

During the first intermission the husband went to smoke; she remained in her seat. Gurov, who was also sitting in the stalls, went up to her and said in a trembling voice and with a forced smile:

“How do you do?”

She looked at him and paled, then looked again in horror, not believing her eyes, and tightly clutched her fan and lorgnette in her hand, obviously struggling with herself to keep from fainting. Both were silent. She sat, he stood, alarmed at her confusion, not venturing to sit down next to her. The tuning-up violins and flutes sang out, it suddenly became frightening, it seemed that people were gazing at them from all the boxes. But then she got up and quickly walked to the exit, he followed her, and they both went confusedly through corridors and stairways, going up, then down, and the uniforms of the courts, the schools, and the imperial estates flashed before them, all with badges; ladies flashed by, fur coats on hangers, a drafty wind blew, drenching them with the smell of cigar stubs. And Gurov, whose heart was pounding, thought: “Oh, Lord! Why these people, this orchestra . . .”

And just then he suddenly recalled how, at the station in the evening after he had seen Anna Sergeevna off, he had said to himself that everything was over and they would never see each other again. But how far it still was from being over!

On a narrow, dark stairway with the sign "To the Amphitheater," she stopped.

"How you frightened me!" she said, breathing heavily, still pale, stunned. "Oh, how you frightened me! I'm barely alive. Why did you come? Why?"

"But understand, Anna, understand . . ." he said in a low voice, hurrying. "I beg you to understand . . ."

She looked at him with fear, with entreaty, with love, looked at him intently, the better to keep his features in her memory.

"I've been suffering so!" she went on, not listening to him. "I think only of you all the time, I've lived by my thoughts of you. And I've tried to forget, to forget, but why, why did you come?"

Further up, on the landing, two high-school boys were smoking and looking down, but Gurov did not care, he drew Anna Sergeevna to him and began kissing her face, her cheeks, her hands.

"What are you doing, what are you doing!" she repeated in horror, pushing him away from her. "We've both lost our minds. Leave today, leave at once . . . I adjure you by all that's holy, I implore you . . . Somebody's coming!"

Someone was climbing the stairs.

"You must leave . . ." Anna Sergeevna went on in a whisper. "Do you hear, Dmitri Dmitrich? I'll come to you in Moscow. I've never been happy, I'm unhappy now, and I'll never, never be happy, never! Don't make me suffer still more! I swear I'll come to Moscow. But we must part now! My dear one, my good one, my darling, we must part!"

She pressed his hand and quickly began going downstairs, turning back to look at him, and it was clear from her eyes that she was indeed not happy . . . Gurov stood for a little while, listened, then, when everything was quiet, found his coat and left the theater.

IV

And Anna Sergeevna began coming to see him in Moscow. Once every two or three months she left S., and told her husband she was going to

consult a professor about her female disorder—and her husband did and did not believe her. Arriving in Moscow, she stayed at the Slavyansky Bazaar and at once sent a man in a red hat to Gurov. Gurov came to see her, and nobody in Moscow knew of it.

Once he was going to see her in that way on a winter morning (the messenger had come the previous evening but had not found him in). With him was his daughter, whom he wanted to see off to school, which was on the way. Big, wet snow was falling.

“It’s now three degrees above freezing, and yet it’s snowing,” Gurov said to his daughter. “But it’s warm only near the surface of the earth, while in the upper layers of the atmosphere the temperature is quite different.”

“And why is there no thunder in winter, papa?”

He explained that, too. He spoke and thought that here he was going to a rendezvous, and not a single soul knew of it or probably would ever know. He had two lives: an apparent one, seen and known by all who needed it, filled with conventional truth and conventional deceit, which perfectly resembled the lives of his acquaintances and friends, and another that went on in secret. And by some strange coincidence, perhaps an accidental one, everything that he found important, interesting, necessary, in which he was sincere and did not deceive himself, which constituted the core of his life, occurred in secret from others, while everything that made up his lie, his shell, in which he hid in order to conceal the truth—for instance, his work at the bank, his arguments at the club, his “inferior race,” his attending official celebrations with his wife—all this was in full view. And he judged others by himself, did not believe what he saw, and always supposed that every man led his own real and very interesting life under the cover of secrecy, as under the cover of night. Every personal existence was upheld by a secret, and it was perhaps partly for that reason that every cultivated man took such anxious care that his personal secret should be respected.

After taking his daughter to school, Gurov went to the Slavyansky Bazaar. He took his fur coat off downstairs, went up, and knocked softly at the door. Anna Sergeevna, wearing his favorite gray dress, tired from

the trip and the expectation, had been waiting for him since the previous evening; she was pale, looked at him and did not smile, and he had barely come in when she was already leaning on his chest. Their kiss was long, lingering, as if they had not seen each other for two years.

"Well, how is your life there?" he asked. "What's new?"

"Wait, I'll tell you . . . I can't."

She could not speak because she was crying. She turned away from him and pressed a handkerchief to her eyes.

"Well, let her cry a little, and meanwhile I'll sit down," he thought, and sat down in an armchair.

Then he rang and ordered tea; and then, while he drank tea, she went on standing with her face turned to the window . . . She was crying from anxiety, from a sorrowful awareness that their life had turned out so sadly; they only saw each other in secret, they hid from people like thieves! Was their life not broken?

"Well, stop now," he said.

For him it was obvious that this love of theirs would not end soon, that there was no knowing when. Anna Sergeevna's attachment to him grew ever stronger, she adored him, and it would have been unthinkable to tell her that it all really had to end at some point; and she would not have believed it.

He went up to her and took her by the shoulders to caress her, to make a joke, and at that moment he saw himself in the mirror.

His head was beginning to turn gray. And it seemed strange to him that he had aged so much in those last years, had lost so much of his good looks. The shoulders on which his hands lay were warm and trembled. He felt compassion for this life, still so warm and beautiful, but probably already near the point where it would begin to fade and wither, like his own life. Why did she love him so? Women had always taken him to be other than he was, and they had loved in him, not himself, but a man their imagination had created, whom they had greedily sought all their lives; and then, when they had noticed their mistake, they had still loved him. And not one of them had been happy with him. Time passed, he met women, became intimate, parted, but not once did he love; there was anything else, but not love.

And only now, when his head was gray, had he really fallen in love as one ought to—for the first time in his life.

He and Anna Sergeevna loved each other like very close, dear people, like husband and wife, like tender friends; it seemed to them that fate itself had destined them for each other, and they could not understand why he had a wife and she a husband; and it was as if they were two birds of passage, a male and a female, who had been caught and forced to live in separate cages. They had forgiven each other the things they were ashamed of in the past, they forgave everything in the present, and they felt that this love of theirs had changed them both.

Formerly, in sad moments, he had calmed himself with all sorts of arguments, whatever had come into his head, but now he did not care about any arguments, he felt deep compassion, he wanted to be sincere, tender . . .

“Stop, my good one,” he said, “you’ve had your cry—and enough . . . Let’s talk now, we’ll think up something.”

Then they had a long discussion, talked about how to rid themselves of the need for hiding, for deception, for living in different towns and not seeing each other for long periods. How could they free themselves from these unbearable bonds?

“How? How?” he asked, clutching his head. “How?”

And it seemed that, just a little more—and the solution would be found, and then a new, beautiful life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far, far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning.

LOVE

GRACE PALEY

First I wrote this poem:

*Walking up the slate path of the college park
under the nearly full moon the brown oak leaves are red as maples
and I have been looking at the young people
they speak and embrace one another
because of them I thought I would descend
into remembering love so I let myself down hand over hand
until my feet touched the earth of the gardens of Vesey Street*

I told my husband, I've just written a poem about love.

What a good idea, he said.

Then he told me about Sally Johnson on Lake Winnepesaukee, who was twelve and a half when he was fourteen. Then he told me about Rosemarie Johanson on Lake Sunapee. Then he told me about Jane Marston in Concord High, and then he told me about Mary Smythe of Radcliffe when he was a poet at Harvard. Then he told me about two famous poets, one fair and one dark, both now dead, when he was a secret poet working at an acceptable trade in an office without windows. When at last he came to my time—that is, the past fifteen years or so—he told me about Dotty Wasserman.

Hold on, I said. What do you mean, Dotty Wasserman? She's a character in a book. She's not even a person.

O.K., he said. Then why Vesey Street? What's that?

Well, it's nothing special. I used to be in love with a guy who was a shrub buyer. Vesey Street was the downtown garden center of the city

when the city still had wonderful centers of commerce. I used to walk the kids there when they were little carriage babies half asleep, maybe take the ferry to Hoboken. Years later I'd bike down there Sundays, ride round and round. I even saw him about three times.

No kidding, said my husband. How come I don't know the guy?

Ugh, the stupidity of the beloved. It's you, I said. Anyway, what's this baloney about you and Dotty Wasserman?

Nothing much. She was this crazy kid who hung around the bars. But she didn't drink. Really it was for the men, you know. Neither did I—drink too much, I mean. I was just hoping to get laid once in a while or maybe meet someone and fall madly in love.

He is that romantic. Sometimes I wonder if loving me in this homey life in middle age with two sets of bedroom slippers, one a skin of sandal for summer and the other pair lined with cozy sheepskin—it must be a disappointing experience for him.

He made a polite bridge over my conjectures. He said, She was also this funny mother in the park, years later, when we were all doing that municipal politics and I was married to Josephine. Dotty and I were both delegates to that famous Kansas City National Meeting of Town Meetings. NMTM. Remember? Some woman.

No, I said, that's not true. She was made up, just plain invented in the late fifties.

Oh, he said, then it was after that. I must have met her afterward.

He is stubborn, so I dropped the subject and went to get the groceries. Our shrinking family requires more coffee, more eggs, more cheese, less butter, less meat, less orange juice, more grapefruit.

Walking along the street, encountering no neighbor, I hummed a little up-and-down tune and continued jostling time with the help of my nice reconnoitering brain. Here I was, experiencing the old earth of Vesey Street, breathing in and out with more attention to the process than is usual in the late morning—all because of love, probably. How interesting the way it glides to solid invented figures from true remembered wraiths. By God, I thought, the lover is real. The heart of the lover continues; it has been propagandized from birth.

I passed our local bookstore, which was doing well, with *The Joy of*

All Sex underpinning its prosperity. The owner gave me, a dependable customer of poorly advertised books, an affectionate smile. He was a great success. (He didn't know that three years later his rent would be tripled, he would become a sad failure, and the landlord, feeling himself brilliant, an outwitting entrepreneur, a star in the microeconomic heavens, would be the famous success.)

From half a block away I could see the kale in the grocer's bin, crumbles of ice shining the dark leaves. In interior counterview I imagined my husband's north-country fields, the late-autumn frost in the curly green. I began to mumble a new poem:

*In the grocer's bin, the green kale shines
in the north country it stands
/ sweet with frost
dark and curly in a garden of tan hay
and light white snow . . .*

Light white . . . I said that a couple of questioning times. Suddenly my outside eyes saw a fine-looking woman named Margaret, who hadn't spoken to me in two years. We'd had many years of political agreement before some matters relating to the Soviet Union separated us. In the angry months during which we were both right in many ways, she took away with her to her political position and daily friendship my own best friend, Louise—my lifelong park, P.T.A., and antiwar-movement sister, Louise.

In a hazy litter of love and leafy green vegetables I saw Margaret's good face, and before I remembered our serious difference, I smiled. At the same moment, she knew me and smiled. So foolish is the true lover when responded to that I took her hand as we passed, bent to it, pressed it to my cheek, and touched it with my lips.

I described all this to my husband at suppertime. Well of course, he said. Don't you know? The smile was for Margaret but really you do miss Louise a lot and the kiss was for Louise. We both said, Ah! Then we talked over the way the SALT treaty looked more like a floor than

a ceiling, read a poem written by one of his daughters, looked at a TV show telling the destruction of the European textile industry, and then made love.

In the morning he said, You're some lover, you know. He said, You really are. You remind me a lot of Dotty Wasserman.

A ROSE FOR EMILY

WILLIAM FAULKNER

I

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years.

It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily light-some style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores. And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson.

Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor—he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron—remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity. Not that Miss Emily would have accepted charity. Colonel Sartoris invented an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business,

preferred this way of repaying. Only a man of Colonel Sartoris' generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it.

When the next generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen, this arrangement created some little dissatisfaction. On the first of the year they mailed her a tax notice. February came, and there was no reply. They wrote her a formal letter, asking her to call at the sheriff's office at her convenience. A week later the mayor wrote her himself, offering to call or to send his car for her, and received in reply a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink, to the effect that she no longer went out at all. The tax notice was also enclosed, without comment.

They called a special meeting of the Board of Aldermen. A deputation waited upon her, knocked at the door through which no visitor had passed since she ceased giving china-painting lessons eight or ten years earlier. They were admitted by the old Negro into a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow. It smelled of dust and disuse—a close, dank smell. The Negro led them into the parlor. It was furnished in heavy, leather-covered furniture. When the Negro opened the blinds of one window, they could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray. On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father.

They rose when she entered—a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand.

She did not ask them to sit. She just stood in the door and listened quietly until the spokesman came to a stumbling halt. Then they could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain.

Her voice was dry and cold. "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps one of you can gain access to the city records and satisfy yourselves."

"But we have. We are the city authorities, Miss Emily. Didn't you get a notice from the sheriff, signed by him?"

"I received a paper, yes," Miss Emily said. "Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff . . . I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But there is nothing on the books to show that, you see. We must go by the—"

"See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But, Miss Emily—"

"See Colonel Sartoris." (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years.) "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Tobel!" The Negro appeared. "Show these gentlemen out."

II

So she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell. That was two years after her father's death and a short time after her sweetheart—the one we believed would marry her—had deserted her. After her father's death she went out very little; after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all. A few of the ladies had the temerity to call, but were not received, and the only sign of life about the place was the Negro man—a young man then—going in and out with a market basket.

"Just as if a man—any man—could keep a kitchen properly," the ladies said; so they were not surprised when the smell developed. It was another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons.

A neighbor, a woman, complained to the mayor, Judge Stevens, eighty years old.

"But what will you have me do about it, madam?" he said.

"Why, send her word to stop it," the woman said. "Isn't there a law?"

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," Judge Stevens said. "It's probably just a snake or a rat that nigger of hers killed in the yard. I'll speak to him about it."

The next day he received two more complaints, one from a man who came in diffident deprecation. "We really must do something about it, Judge. I'd be the last one in the world to bother Miss Emily, but we've got to do something." That night the Board of Aldermen met—three graybeards and one younger man, a member of the rising generation.

"It's simple enough," he said. "Send her word to have her place cleaned up. Give her a certain time to do it in, and if she don't . . ."

"Dammit, sir," Judge Stevens said, "will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?"

So the next night, after midnight, four men crossed Miss Emily's lawn and slunk about the house like burglars, sniffing along the base of the brickwork and at the cellar openings while one of them performed a regular sowing motion with his hand out of a sack slung from his shoulder. They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the outbuildings. As they recrossed the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol. They crept quietly across the lawn and into the shadow of the locusts that lined the street. After a week or two the smell went away.

That was when people had begun to feel really sorry for her. People in our town, remembering how old lady Wyatt, her great-aunt, had gone completely crazy at last, believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such. We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door. So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated; even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized.

When her father died, it got about that the house was all that was

left to her; and in a way, people were glad. At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized. Now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less.

The day after his death all the ladies prepared to call at the house and offer condolence and aid, as is our custom. Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days, with the ministers calling on her, and the doctors, trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body. Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down, and they buried her father quickly.

We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.

III

She was sick for a long time. When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene.

The town had just let the contracts for paving the sidewalks, and in the summer after her father's death they began the work. The construction company came with niggers and mules and machinery, and a foreman named Homer Barron, a Yankee—a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face. The little boys would follow in groups to hear him cuss the niggers, and the niggers singing in time to the rise and fall of picks. Pretty soon he knew everybody in town. Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group. Presently we began to see him and Miss Emily on Sunday afternoons driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays from the livery stable.

At first we were glad that Miss Emily would have an interest, because the ladies all said, "Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of

a Northerner, a day laborer.” But there were still others, older people, who said that even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige*—without calling it *noblesse oblige*. They just said, “Poor Emily. Her kinsfolk should come to her.” She had some kin in Alabama; but years ago her father had fallen out with them over the estate of old lady Wyatt, the crazy woman, and there was no communication between the two families. They had not even been represented at the funeral.

And as soon as the old people said, “Poor Emily,” the whispering began. “Do you suppose it’s really so?” they said to one another. “Of course it is. What else could . . .” This behind their hands; rustling of craned silk and satin behind jalousies closed upon the sun of Sunday afternoon as the thin, swift clop-clop-clop of the matched team passed: “Poor Emily.”

She carried her head high enough—even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness. Like when she bought the rat poison, the arsenic. That was over a year after they had begun to say “Poor Emily,” and while the two female cousins were visiting her.

“I want some poison,” she said to the druggist. She was over thirty then, still a slight woman, though thinner than usual, with cold, haughty black eyes in a face the flesh of which was strained across the temples and about the eyesockets as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper’s face ought to look. “I want some poison,” she said.

“Yes, Miss Emily. What kind? For rats and such? I’d recom—”

“I want the best you have. I don’t care what kind.”

The druggist named several. “They’ll kill anything up to an elephant. But what you want is—”

“Arsenic,” Miss Emily said. “Is that a good one?”

“Is . . . arsenic? Yes, ma’am. But what you want—”

“I want arsenic.”

The druggist looked down at her. She looked back at him, erect, her face like a strained flag. “Why, of course,” the druggist said. “If that’s what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for.”

Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up. The Negro delivery boy brought her the package; the druggist didn't come back. When she opened the package at home there was written on the box, under the skull and bones: "For rats."

IV

So the next day we all said, "She will kill herself"; and we said it would be the best thing. When she had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, we had said, "She will marry him." Then we said, "She will persuade him yet," because Homer himself had remarked—he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club—that he was not a marrying man. Later we said, "Poor Emily" behind the jealousies as they passed on Sunday afternoon in the glittering buggy, Miss Emily with her head high and Homer Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove.

Then some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people. The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister—Miss Emily's people were Episcopal—to call upon her. He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again. The next Sunday they again drove about the streets, and the following day the minister's wife wrote to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama.

So she had blood-kin under her roof again and we sat back to watch developments. At first nothing happened. Then we were sure that they were to be married. We learned that Miss Emily had been to the jeweler's and ordered a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H. B. on each piece. Two days later we learned that she had bought a complete outfit of men's clothing, including a nightshirt, and we said, "They are married." We were really glad. We were glad because the two female cousins were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been.

So we were not surprised when Homer Barron—the streets had been finished some time since—was gone. We were a little disappointed that

there was not a public blowing-off, but we believed that he had gone on to prepare for Miss Emily's coming, or to give her a chance to get rid of the cousins. (By that time it was a cabal, and we were all Miss Emily's allies to help circumvent the cousins.) Sure enough, after another week they departed. And, as we had expected all along, within three days Homer Barron was back in town. A neighbor saw the Negro man admit him at the kitchen door at dusk one evening.

And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron. And of Miss Emily for some time. The Negro man went in and out with the market basket, but the front door remained closed. Now and then we would see her at a window for a moment, as the men did that night when they sprinkled the lime, but for almost six months she did not appear on the streets. Then we knew that this was to be expected too; as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die.

When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning. Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still that vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man.

From that time on her front door remained closed, save for a period of six or seven years, when she was about forty, during which she gave lessons in china-painting. She fitted up a studio in one of the downstairs rooms, where the daughters and granddaughters of Colonel Sartoris' contemporaries were sent to her with the same regularity and in the same spirit that they were sent to church on Sundays with a twenty-five-cent piece for the collection plate. Meanwhile her taxes had been remitted.

Then the newer generation became the backbone and the spirit of the town, and the painting pupils grew up and fell away and did not send their children to her with boxes of color and tedious brushes and pictures cut from the ladies' magazines. The front door closed upon the last one and remained closed for good. When the town got free postal delivery, Miss Emily alone refused to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mailbox to it. She would not listen to them.

Daily, monthly, yearly we watched the Negro grow grayer and more

stooped, going in and out with the market basket. Each December we sent her a tax notice, which would be returned by the post office a week later, unclaimed. Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows—she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house—like the carved torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which. Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse.

And so she died. Fell ill in the house filled with dust and shadows, with only a doddering Negro man to wait on her. We did not even know she was sick; we had long since given up trying to get any information from the Negro. He talked to no one, probably not even to her, for his voice had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse.

She died in one of the downstairs rooms, in a heavy walnut bed with a curtain, her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight.

V

The Negro met the first of the ladies at the front door and let them in, with their hushed, sibilant voices and their quick, curious glances, and then he disappeared. He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again.

The two female cousins came at once. They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre; and the very old men—some in their brushed Confederate uniforms—on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years.

Already we knew that there was one room in that region above

stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced. They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it.

The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust. A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured. Among them lay a collar and tie, as if they had just been removed, which, lifted, left upon the surface a pale crescent in the dust. Upon a chair hung the suit, carefully folded; beneath it the two mute shoes and the discarded socks.

The man himself lay in the bed.

For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin. The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust.

Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair.

THE DEAD

JAMES JOYCE

Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet. Hardly had she brought one gentleman into the little pantry behind the office on the groundfloor and helped him off with his overcoat when the wheezy halldoor bell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest. It was well for her she had not to attend to the ladies also. But Miss Kate and Miss Julia had thought of that and had converted the bathroom upstairs into a ladies' dressingroom. Miss Kate and Miss Julia were there, gossiping and laughing and fussing, walking after each other to the head of the stairs, peering down over the banisters and calling down to Lily to ask her who had come.

It was always a great affair, the Misses Morkan's annual dance. Everybody who knew them came to it, members of the family, old friends of the family, the members of Julia's choir, any of Kate's pupils that were grown up enough and even some of Mary Jane's pupils too. Never once had it fallen flat. For years and years it had gone off in splendid style as long as anyone could remember, ever since Kate and Julia, after the death of their brother Pat, had left the house in Stony Batter and taken Mary Jane, their only niece, to live with them in the dark gaunt house on Usher's Island, the upper part of which they had rented from Mr Fulham, the corn factor on the groundfloor. That was a good thirty years ago if it was a day. Mary Jane, who was then a little girl in short clothes, was now the main prop of the household for she had the organ in Haddington Road. She had been through the academy and gave a pupils' concert every year in the upper room of the Antient Concert Rooms. Many of her pupils belonged to better class families on the Kingstown and Dalkey line. Old as they were, her aunts also did their share. Julia,

though she was quite grey, was still the leading soprano in Adam and Eve's and Kate, being too feeble to go about much, gave music lessons to beginners on the old square piano in the back room. Lily, the caretaker's daughter, did housemaid work for them. Though their life was modest they believed in eating well, the best of everything: diamond bone sirloins, three shilling tea and the best bottled stout. But Lily seldom made a mistake in the orders so that she got on well with her three mistresses. They were fussy, that was all. But the only thing they would not stand was back answers.

Of course they had good reason to be fussy on such a night. And then it was long after ten o'clock and yet there was no sign of Gabriel and his wife. Besides they were dreadfully afraid that Freddy Malins might turn up screwed. They would not wish for worlds that any of Mary Jane's pupils should see him under the influence: and when he was like that it was sometimes very hard to manage him. Freddy Malins always came late but they wondered what could be keeping Gabriel: and that was what brought them every two minutes to the banisters to ask Lily had Gabriel or Freddy come.

—O, Mr Conroy, said Lily to Gabriel when she opened the door for him, Miss Kate and Miss Julia thought you were never coming. Good night, Mrs Conroy.

—I'll engage they did, said Gabriel, but they forget that my wife here takes three mortal hours to dress herself.

He stood on the mat, scraping the snow from his goloshes, while Lily led his wife to the foot of the stairs and called out:

—Miss Kate, here's Mrs Conroy.

Kate and Julia came toddling down the dark stairs at once. Both of them kissed Gabriel's wife, said she must be perished alive and asked was Gabriel with her.

—Here I am as right as the mail, aunt Kate! Go on up. I'll follow, called out Gabriel from the dark.

He continued scraping his feet vigorously while the three women went upstairs, laughing, to the ladies' dressingroom. A light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his goloshes; and, as the buttons of his overcoat slipped with

a squeaking noise through the snowstiffened frieze, a cold fragrant air from out of doors escaped from crevices and folds.

—Is it snowing again, Mr Conroy? asked Lily.

She had preceded him into the pantry to help him off with his overcoat. Gabriel smiled at the three syllables she had given his surname and glanced at her. She was a slim growing girl, pale in complexion and with haycoloured hair. The gas in the pantry made her look still paler. Gabriel had known her when she was a child and used to sit on the lowest step nursing a rag doll.

—Yes, Lily, he answered, and I think we're in for a night of it.

He looked up at the pantry ceiling which was shaking with the stamping and shuffling of feet on the floor above, listened for a moment to the piano and then glanced at the girl who was folding his overcoat carefully at the end of a shelf.

—Tell me, Lily, he said in a friendly tone, do you still go to school?

—O no, sir, she answered, I'm done schooling this year and more.

—O then, said Gabriel gaily, I suppose we'll be going to your wedding one of these fine days with your young man—eh?

The girl glanced back at him over her shoulder and said with great bitterness:

—The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.

Gabriel coloured as if he felt he had made a mistake and, without looking at her, kicked off his goloshes and flicked actively with his muffler at his patent leather shoes.

He was a stout tallish young man. The high colour of his cheeks pushed upwards even to his forehead where it scattered itself in a few formless patches of pale red; and on his hairless face there scintillated restlessly the polished lenses and bright gilt rims of the glasses which screened his delicate and restless eyes. His glossy black hair was parted in the middle and brushed in a long curve behind his ears where it curled slightly beneath the groove left by his hat.

When he had flicked lustre into his shoes he stood up and pulled his waistcoat down more tightly on his plump body. Then he took a coin rapidly from his pocket.

—O Lily, he said, thrusting it into her hand, it's Christmas time, isn't it? Just . . . here's a little . . .

He walked rapidly towards the door.

—O no, sir! cried the girl, following him. Really, sir, I wouldn't take it.

—Christmas time! Christmas time! said Gabriel, almost trotting to the stairs and waving his hand to her in deprecation.

The girl, seeing that he had gained the stairs, called out after him:

—Well, thank you, sir.

He waited outside the drawingroom door until the waltz should finish, listening to the skirts that swept against it and to the shuffling of feet. He was still discomposed by the girl's bitter and sudden retort. It had cast a gloom over him which he tried to dispel by arranging his cuffs and the bows of his tie. Then he took from his waistcoat pocket a little paper and glanced at the headings he had made for his speech. He was undecided about the lines from Robert Browning for he feared they would be above the heads of his hearers. Some quotation that they could recognise from Shakespeare or from the melodies would be better. The indelicate clacking of the men's heels and the shuffling of their soles reminded him that their grade of culture differed from his. He would only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand. They would think that he was airing his superior education. He would fail with them just as he had failed with the girl in the pantry. He had taken up a wrong tone. His whole speech was a mistake from first to last, an utter failure.

Just then his aunts and his wife came out of the ladies' dressingroom. His aunts were two small plainly dressed old women. Aunt Julia was an inch or so the taller. Her hair, drawn low over the tops of her ears, was grey; and grey also, with darker shadows, was her large flaccid face. Though she was stout in build and stood erect her slow eyes and parted lips gave her the appearance of a woman who did not know where she was or where she was going. Aunt Kate was more vivacious. Her face, healthier than her sister's, was all puckers and creases like a shrivelled red apple and her hair, braided in the same oldfashioned way, had not lost its ripe nut colour.

They both kissed Gabriel frankly. He was their favourite nephew, the son of their dead elder sister Ellen who had married T J Conroy of the Port and Docks.

—Gretta tells me you're not going to take a cab back to Monkstown tonight, Gabriel, said Aunt Kate.

—No, said Gabriel, turning to his wife, we had quite enough of that last year, hadn't we? Don't you remember, Aunt Kate, what a cold Gretta got out of it? Cab windows rattling all the way and the east wind blowing in after we passed Merrion. Very jolly it was. Gretta caught a dreadful cold.

Aunt Kate frowned severely and nodded her head at every word.

—Quite right, Gabriel, quite right, she said. You can't be too careful.

—But as for Gretta there, said Gabriel, she'd walk home in the snow if she were let.

Mrs Conroy laughed.

—Don't mind him, aunt Kate, she said. He's really an awful bother, what with green shades for Tom's eyes at night and making him do the dumbbells and forcing Lottie to eat the stirabout. The poor child! And she simply hates the sight of it! . . . O, but you'll never guess what he makes me wear now!

She broke out into a peal of laughter and glanced at her husband whose admiring and happy eyes had been wandering from her dress to her face and hair. The two aunts laughed heartily too for Gabriel's solicitude was a standing joke with them.

—Goloshes! said Mrs Conroy. That's the latest. Whenever it's wet underfoot I must put on my goloshes. Tonight even he wanted me to put them on but I wouldn't. The next thing he'll buy me will be a diving suit.

Gabriel laughed nervously and patted his tie reassuringly while aunt Kate nearly doubled herself so heartily did she enjoy the joke. The smile soon faded from aunt Julia's face and her mirthless eyes were directed towards her nephew's face. After a pause she asked:

—And what are goloshes, Gabriel?

—Goloshes, Julia! exclaimed her sister. Goodness me, don't you

know what goloshes are? You wear them over your . . . over your boots, Gretta, isn't it?

—Yes, said Mrs Conroy. Guttapercha things. We both have a pair now. Gabriel says everyone wears them on the continent.

—O, on the continent, murmured aunt Julia, nodding her head slowly.

Gabriel knitted his brows and said, as if he were slightly angered:

—It's nothing very wonderful but Gretta thinks it very funny because she says the word reminds her of christy minstrels.

—But tell me, Gabriel, said aunt Kate with brisk tact. Of course you've seen about the room. Gretta was saying . . .

—O, the room is all right, replied Gabriel. I've taken one in the Gresham.

—To be sure, said aunt Kate, by far the best thing to do. And the children, Gretta, you're not anxious about them?

—O, for one night, said Mrs Conroy. Besides Bessie will look after them.

—To be sure, said aunt Kate again. What a comfort it is to have a girl like that, one you can depend on! There's that Lily, I'm sure I don't know what has come over her lately. She's not the girl she was at all.

Gabriel was about to ask his aunt some questions on this point but she broke off suddenly to gaze after her sister who had wandered down the stairs and was craning her neck over the banisters.

—Now, I ask you, she said almost testily, where is Julia going. Julia! Julia! Where are you going?

Julia who had gone half way down one flight came back and announced blandly:

—Here's Freddy!

At the same moment a clapping of hands and a final flourish of the pianist told that the waltz had ended. The drawingroom door was opened from within and some couples came out. Aunt Kate drew Gabriel aside hurriedly and whispered into his ear:

—Slip down, Gabriel, like a good fellow and see if he's all right and don't let him up if he's screwed. I'm sure he's screwed. I'm sure he is.

Gabriel went to the stairs and listened over the banisters. He could

hear two persons talking in the pantry. Then he recognised Freddy Malins' laugh. He went down the stairs noisily.

—It's such a relief, said aunt Kate to Mrs Conroy, that Gabriel is here. I always feel easier in my mind when he's here. . . . Julia, there's Miss Daly and Miss Power will take some refreshment. Thanks for your beautiful waltz, Miss Daly. It made lovely time.

A tall wizenfaced man with a stiff grizzled moustache and swarthy skin who was passing out with his partner said:

—And may we have some refreshment too, Miss Morkan?

—Julia, said aunt Kate summarily, and here's Mr Browne and Miss Furlong. Take them in, Julia, with Miss Daly and Miss Power.

—I'm the man for the ladies, said Mr Browne, pursing his lips until his moustache bristled and smiling in all his wrinkles. You know, Miss Morkan, the reason they are so fond of me is . . .

He did not finish his sentence but, seeing that aunt Kate was out of earshot, at once led the three young ladies into the back room. The middle of the room was occupied by two square tables placed end to end and on these aunt Julia and the caretaker were straightening and smoothing a large cloth. On the sideboard were arrayed dishes and plates and glasses and bundles of knives and forks and spoons. The top of the closed square piano served also as a sideboard for viands and sweets. At a smaller sideboard in one corner two young men were standing, drinking hop bitters.

Mr Browne led his charges thither and invited them all, in jest, to some ladies' punch, hot, strong and sweet. As they said they never took anything strong he opened three bottles of lemonade for them. Then he asked one of the young men to move aside and, taking hold of the decanter, filled out for himself a goodly measure of whisky. The young men eyed him respectfully while he took a trial sip.

—God help me, he said smiling, it's the doctor's orders.

His wizened face broke into a broader smile and the three young ladies laughed in musical echo to his pleasantry, swaying their bodies to and fro, with nervous jerks of their shoulders. The boldest said:

—O, now, Mr Browne, I'm sure the doctor never ordered anything of the kind.

Mr Browne took another sip of his whisky and said, with sidling mimicry:

—Well, you see, I'm like the famous Mrs Cassidy who is reported to have said: *Now, Mary Grimes, if I don't take it make me take it for I feel I want it.*

His hot face had leaned forward a little too confidentially and he had assumed a very low Dublin accent so that the young ladies, with one instinct, received his speech in silence. Miss Furlong, who was one of Mary Jane's pupils, asked Miss Daly what was the name of the pretty waltz she had played; and Mr Browne, seeing that he was ignored, turned promptly to the two young men who were more appreciative.

A redfaced young woman, dressed in pansy, came into the room, excitedly clapping her hands and crying:

—Quadrilles! Quadrilles!

Close on her heels came aunt Kate, crying:

—Two gentlemen and three ladies, Mary Jane!

—O, here's Mr Bergin and Mr Kerrigan, said Mary Jane. Mr Kerrigan, will you take Miss Power. Miss Furlong, may I get you a partner, Mr Bergin. O, that'll just do now.

—Three ladies, Mary Jane, said aunt Kate.

The two young gentlemen asked the ladies if they might have the pleasure and Mary Jane turned to Miss Daly.

—O, Miss Daly, you're really awfully good after playing for the last two dances but really we're so short of ladies tonight.

—I don't mind in the least, Miss Morkan.

—But I've a nice partner for you, Mr Bartell D'Arcy, the tenor. I'll get him to sing later on. All Dublin is raving about him.

—Lovely voice, lovely voice! said aunt Kate.

As the piano had twice begun the prelude to the first figure Mary Jane led her recruits quickly from the room. They had hardly gone when aunt Julia wandered slowly into the room, looking behind her at something.

—What is the matter, Julia? asked aunt Kate anxiously. Who is it?

Julia, who was carrying in a column of table-napkins, turned to her sister and said simply, as if the question had surprised her:

—It's only Freddy, Kate, and Gabriel with him.

In fact right behind her Gabriel could be seen piloting Freddy Malins across the landing. The latter, a young man of about forty, was of Gabriel's size and build with very round shoulders. His face was fleshy and pallid, touched with colour only at the thick hanging lobes of his ears and at the wide wings of his nose. He had coarse features, a blunt nose, a convex and receding brow, tumid and protruded lips. His heavily-lidded eyes and the disorder of his scanty hair made him look sleepy. He was laughing heartily in a high key at a story which he had been telling Gabriel on the stairs and at the same time rubbing the knuckles of his left fist backwards and forwards into his left eye.

—Good evening, Freddy, said aunt Julia.

Freddy Malins bade the Misses Morkan good evening in what seemed an offhand fashion by reason of the habitual catch in his voice and then, seeing that Mr Browne was grinning at him from the sideboard, crossed the room on rather shaky legs and began to repeat in an undertone the story he had just told to Gabriel.

—He's not so bad, is he? said aunt Kate to Gabriel.

Gabriel's brows were dark but he raised them quickly and answered:

—O no, hardly noticeable.

—Now, isn't he a terrible fellow! she said. And his poor mother made him take the pledge on New Year's Eve. But come on, Gabriel, into the drawingroom.

Before leaving the room with Gabriel she signalled to Mr Browne by frowning and shaking her forefinger in warning to and fro. Mr Browne nodded in answer and, when she had gone, said to Freddy Malins:

—Now then, Teddy, I'm going to fill you out a good glass of lemonade just to buck you up.

Freddy Malins, who was nearing the climax of his story, waved the offer aside impatiently but Mr Browne, having first called Freddy Malins' attention to a disarray in his dress, filled out and handed him a full glass of lemonade. Freddy Malins' left hand accepted the glass mechanically, his right hand being engaged in the mechanical readjustment of his dress. Mr Browne, whose face was once more wrinkling with mirth, poured out for himself a glass of whisky while Freddy Malins

exploded, before he had well reached the climax of his story, in a kink of highpitched bronchitic laughter and, setting down his untasted and overflowing glass, began to rub the knuckles of his left fist backwards and forwards into his left eye, repeating words of his last phrase as well as his fit of laughter would allow him.

Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing her academy piece, full of runs and difficult passages, to the hushed drawingroom. He liked music but the piece she was playing had no melody for him and he doubted whether it had any melody for the other listeners though they had begged Mary Jane to play something. Four young men, who had come from the refreshment room to stand in the doorway at the sound of the piano, had gone away quietly in couples after a few minutes. The only persons who seemed to follow the music were Mary Jane herself, her hands racing along the keyboard or lifted from it at the pauses like those of a priestess in momentary imprecation, and aunt Kate standing at her elbow to turn the page.

Gabriel's eyes, irritated by the floor which glittered with beeswax under the heavy chandelier, wandered to the wall above the piano. A picture of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* hung there and beside it was a picture of the two murdered princes in the tower which aunt Julia had worked in red, blue and brown wools when she was a girl. Probably in the school they had gone to as girls that kind of work had been taught, for one year his mother had worked for him as a birthday present a waistcoat of purple tabinet with little foxes' heads upon it, lined with brown satin and having round mulberry buttons. It was strange that his mother had had no musical talent though aunt Kate used to call her the brains-carrier of the Morkan family. Both she and Julia had always seemed a little proud of their serious and matronly sister. Her photograph stood before the pierglass. She held an open book on her knees and was pointing out something in it to Constantine who, dressed in a man-o'-war suit, lay at her feet. It was she who had chosen the names for her sons for she was very sensible of the dignity of family life. Thanks to her, Constantine was now senior curate in Balbriggan and, thanks to her, Gabriel himself had taken his degree in

the royal university. A shadow passed over his face as he remembered her sullen opposition to his marriage. Some slighting phrases she had used still rankled in his memory. She had once spoken of Gretta as being country cute and that was not true of Gretta at all. It was Gretta who had nursed her all during her last long illness in their house at Monkstown.

He knew that Mary Jane must be near the end of her piece for she was playing again the opening melody with runs of scales after every bar and while he waited for the end the resentment died down in his heart. The piece ended with a trill of octaves in the treble and a final deep octave in the bass. Great applause greeted Mary Jane as, blushing and rolling up her music nervously, she escaped from the room. The most vigorous clapping came from the four young men in the doorway who had gone away to the refreshment room at the beginning of the piece but had come back when the piano had stopped.

Lancers were arranged. Gabriel found himself partnered with Miss Ivors. She was a frankmannered talkative young lady with a freckled face and prominent brown eyes. She did not wear a lowcut bodice and the large brooch which was fixed in the front of her collar bore on it an Irish device.

When they had taken their places she said abruptly:

—I have a crow to pluck with you.

—With me? said Gabriel.

She nodded her head gravely.

—What is it? asked Gabriel, smiling at her solemn manner.

—Who is G. C.? answered Miss Ivors turning her eyes upon him.

Gabriel coloured and was about to knit his brows as if he did not understand when she said bluntly:

—O, innocent Amy! I have found out that you write for the *Daily Express*. Now aren't you ashamed of yourself?

—Why should I be ashamed of myself? asked Gabriel blinking his eyes and trying to smile.

—Well, I'm ashamed of you, said Miss Ivors frankly. To say you'd write for a rag like that. I didn't think you were a west Briton.

A look of perplexity appeared on Gabriel's face. It was true that he

wrote a literary column every Wednesday in the *Daily Express* for which he was paid fifteen shillings. But that did not make him a west Briton surely. The books he received for review were almost more welcome than the paltry cheque. He loved to feel the covers and turn over the pages of newly printed books. Nearly every day when his teaching in the college was ended he used to wander down the quays to the secondhand booksellers, to Hickey's on Bachelor's Walk, to Webb's or Massey's on Aston's Quay or to Clohissey's in the bystreet. He did not know how to meet her charge. He wanted to say that literature was above politics. But they were friends of many years' standing and their careers had been parallel, first at the university and then as teachers: he could not risk a grandiose phrase with her. He continued blinking his eyes and trying to smile and murmured lamely that he saw nothing political in writing reviews of books.

When their turn to cross had come he was still perplexed and inattentive. Miss Ivors promptly took his hand in a warm grasp and said in a soft friendly tone:

—Of course, I was only joking. Come, we cross now.

When they were together again she spoke of the university question and Gabriel felt more at ease. A friend of hers had shown her his review of Browning's poems. That was how she had found out the secret: but she liked the review immensely. Then she said suddenly:

—O, Mr Conroy, will you come for an excursion to the Aran Isles this summer? We're going to stay there a whole month. It will be splendid out in the Atlantic. You ought to come. Mr Clancy is coming and Mr Kilkelly and Kathleen Kearney. It would be splendid for Gretta too if she'd come. She's from Connacht, isn't she?

—Her people are, said Gabriel shortly.

—But you will come, won't you? said Miss Ivors, laying her warm hand eagerly on his arm.

—The fact is, said Gabriel, I have already arranged to go . . .

—Go where? asked Miss Ivors.

—Well, you know, every year I go for a cycling tour with some fellows and so . . .

—But where? asked Miss Ivors.

—Well, we usually go to France or Belgium or perhaps Germany, said Gabriel awkwardly.

—And why do you go to France and Belgium, said Miss Ivors, instead of visiting your own land?

—Well, said Gabriel, it's partly to keep in touch with the languages and partly for a change.

—And haven't you your own language to keep in touch with, Irish? asked Miss Ivors.

—Well, said Gabriel, if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language.

Their neighbours had turned to listen to the crossexamination. Gabriel glanced right and left nervously and tried to keep his good humour under the ordeal which was making a blush invade his forehead.

—And haven't you your own land to visit, continued Miss Ivors, that you know nothing of, your own people and your own country?

—O, to tell you the truth, retorted Gabriel suddenly, I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!

—Why? asked Miss Ivors.

Gabriel did not answer for his retort had heated him.

—Why? repeated Miss Ivors.

They had to go visiting together and, as he had not answered her, Miss Ivors said warmly:

—Of course, you've no answer.

Gabriel tried to cover his agitation by taking part in the dance with great energy. He avoided her eyes for he had seen a sour expression on her face. But when they met in the long chain he was surprised to feel his hand firmly pressed. She looked at him from under her brows for a moment quizzically until he smiled. Then, just as the chain was about to start again, she stood on tiptoe and whispered into his ear:

—West Briton!

When the lancers were over Gabriel went away to a remote corner of the room where Freddy Malins' mother was sitting. She was a stout feeble old woman with white hair. Her voice had a catch in it like her son's and she stuttered slightly. She had been told that Freddy had come

and that he was nearly all right. Gabriel asked her whether she had had a good crossing. She lived with her married daughter in Glasgow and came to Dublin on a visit once a year. She answered placidly that she had had a beautiful crossing and that the captain had been most attentive to her. She spoke also of the beautiful house her daughter kept in Glasgow and of the nice friends they had there. While her tongue rambled on Gabriel tried to banish from his mind all memory of the unpleasant incident with Miss Ivors. Of course the girl or woman or whatever she was was an enthusiast but there was a time for all things. Perhaps he ought not to have answered her like that. But she had no right to call him a west Briton before people, even in joke. She had tried to make him ridiculous before people, heckling him and staring at him with her rabbit's eyes.

He saw his wife making her way towards him through the waltzing couples. When she reached him she said into his ear:

—Gabriel, aunt Kate wants to know won't you carve the goose as usual. Miss Daly will carve the ham and I'll do the pudding.

—All right, said Gabriel.

—She's sending in the younger ones first as soon as this waltz is over so that we'll have the table to ourselves.

—Were you dancing? asked Gabriel.

—Of course I was. Didn't you see me? What words had you with Molly Ivors?

—No words. Why! Did she say so?

—Something like that. I'm trying to get that Mr D'Arcy to sing. He's full of conceit, I think.

—There were no words, said Gabriel moodily, only she wanted me to go for a trip to the west of Ireland and I said I wouldn't.

His wife clasped her hands excitedly and gave a little jump.

—O, do go, Gabriel, she cried. I'd love to see Galway again.

—You can go if you like, said Gabriel coldly.

She looked at him for a moment, then turned to Mrs Malins and said:

—There's a nice husband for you, Mrs Malins.

While she was threading her way back across the room Mrs Malins, without adverting to the interruption, went on to tell Gabriel what beau-

tiful places there were in Scotland and beautiful scenery. Her son-in-law brought them every year to the lakes and they used to go fishing. Her son-in-law was a splendid fisher. One day he caught a fish, a beautiful big big fish: and the man in the hotel boiled it for their dinner.

Gabriel hardly heard what she said. Now that supper was coming near he began to think again about his speech and about the quotation. When he saw Freddy Malins coming across the room to visit his mother Gabriel left the chair free for him and retired into the embrasure of the window. The room had already cleared and from the back room came the clatter of plates and knives. Those who still remained in the drawingroom seemed tired of dancing and were conversing quietly in little groups. Gabriel's warm trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park! The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper table!

He ran over the headings of his speech: Irish hospitality, sad memories, the Three Graces, Paris, the quotation from Browning. He repeated to himself a phrase he had written in his review: *One feels that one is listening to a thoughttortured music*. Miss Ivors had praised the review. Was she sincere? Had she really any life of her own behind all her propagandism? There had never been any ill feeling between them until that night. It unnerved him to think that she would be at the supper table, looking up at him while he spoke with her critical quizzing eyes. Perhaps she would not be sorry to see him fail in his speech. An idea came into his mind and gave him courage. He would say, alluding to aunt Kate and aunt Julia: *Ladies and gentlemen, the generation which is now on the wane among us may have had its faults but for my part I think it had certain qualities of hospitality, of humour, of humanity, which the new and very serious and hypereducated generation that is growing up around us seems to me to lack*. Very good: that was one for Miss Ivors. What did he care that his aunts were only two ignorant old women?

A murmur in the room attracted his attention. Mr Browne was advancing from the door, gallantly escorting aunt Julia who leaned

upon his arm, smiling and hanging her head. An irregular musketry of applause escorted her also as far as the piano and then, as Mary Jane seated herself on the stool and aunt Julia, no longer smiling, half turned so as to pitch her voice fairly into the room, gradually ceased. Gabriel recognised the prelude. It was that of an old song of aunt Julia's, *Arrayed for the Bridal*. Her voice strong and clear in tone attacked with great spirit the runs which embellish the air and, though she sang very rapidly, she did not miss even the smallest of the grace notes. To follow the voice, without looking at the singer's face, was to feel and share the excitement of swift and secure flight. Gabriel applauded loudly with all the others at the close of the song and loud applause was borne in from the invisible supper table. It sounded so genuine that a little colour struggled into aunt Julia's face as she bent to replace in the music stand the old leatherbound songbook that had her initials on the cover. Freddy Malins, who had listened with his head perched sideways to hear the better, was still applauding when everyone else had ceased and talking animatedly to his mother who nodded her head gravely and slowly in acquiescence. At last, when he could clap no more, he stood up suddenly and hurried across the room to aunt Julia, whose hand he seized and held in both his hands, shaking it when words failed him or the catch in his voice proved too much for him.

—I was just telling my mother, he said, I never heard you sing so well, never. No, I never heard your voice so good as it is tonight. Now! Would you believe that now? That's the truth. Upon my word and honour that's the truth. I never heard your voice sound so fresh and so . . . so clear and fresh, never.

Aunt Julia smiled broadly and murmured something about compliments as she released her hand from his grasp. Mr Browne extended his open hand towards her and said to those who were near him in the manner of a showman introducing a prodigy to an audience:

—Miss Julia Morkan, my latest discovery!

He was laughing very heartily at this himself when Freddy Malins turned to him and said:

—Well, Browne, if you're serious you might make a worse discov-

ery. All I can say is I never heard her sing half so well as long as I am coming here. And that's the honest truth.

—Neither did I, said Mr Browne. I think her voice has greatly improved.

Aunt Julia shrugged her shoulders and said with meek pride:

—Thirty years ago I hadn't a bad voice as voices go.

—I often told Julia, said aunt Kate emphatically, that she was simply thrown away in that choir. But she never would be said by me.

She turned as if to appeal to the good sense of the others against a refractory child while aunt Julia gazed in front of her, a vague smile of reminiscence playing on her face.

—No, continued aunt Kate, she wouldn't be said or led by anyone, slaving there in that choir night and day, night and day. Six o'clock on Christmas morning! And all for what?

—Well, isn't it for the honour of God, aunt Kate? asked Mary Jane twisting round on the piano stool and smiling.

Aunt Kate turned fiercely on her niece and said:

—I know all about the honour of God, Mary Jane, but I think it's not at all honourable for the pope to turn out the women out of the choirs that have slaved there all their lives and put little whippersnappers of boys over their heads. I suppose it is for the good of the church if the pope does it. But it's not just, Mary Jane, and it's not right.

She had worked herself into a passion and would have continued in defence of her sister for it was a sore subject with her but Mary Jane, seeing that all the dancers had come back, intervened pacifically:

—Now, aunt Kate, you're giving scandal to Mr Browne who is of the other persuasion.

Aunt Kate turned to Mr Browne, who was grinning at this allusion to his religion, and said hastily:

—O, I don't question the pope's being right. I'm only a stupid old woman and I wouldn't presume to do such a thing. But there's such a thing as common everyday politeness and gratitude. And if I were in Julia's place I'd tell that Father Healy straight up to his face . . .

—And besides, aunt Kate, said Mary Jane, we really are all hungry and when we are hungry we are all very quarrelsome.

—And when we are thirsty we are also quarrelsome, added Mr Browne.

—So that we had better go to supper, said Mary Jane, and finish the discussion afterwards.

On the landing outside the drawingroom Gabriel found his wife and Mary Jane trying to persuade Miss Ivors to stay for supper. But Miss Ivors, who had put on her hat and was buttoning her cloak, would not stay. She did not feel in the least hungry and she had already overstayed her time.

—But only for ten minutes, Molly, said Mrs Conroy. That won't delay you.

—To take a pick itself, said Mary Jane, after all your dancing.

—I really couldn't, said Miss Ivors.

—I am afraid you didn't enjoy yourself at all, said Mary Jane hopelessly.

—Ever so much, I assure you, said Miss Ivors, but you really must let me run off now.

—But how can you get home? asked Mrs Conroy.

—O, it's only two steps up the quay.

Gabriel hesitated a moment and said:

—If you will allow me, Miss Ivors, I'll see you home if you really are obliged to go.

But Miss Ivors broke away from them.

—I won't hear of it, she cried. For goodness' sake go in to your supper and don't mind me. I'm quite well able to take care of myself.

—Well, you're the comical girl, Molly, said Mrs Conroy frankly.

—*Beannacht libh*, cried Miss Ivors with a laugh as she ran down the staircase.

Mary Jane gazed after her, a moody puzzled expression on her face, while Mrs Conroy leaned over the banisters to listen for the halldoor. Gabriel asked himself was he the cause of her abrupt departure. But she did not seem to be in ill humour: she had gone away laughing. He stared blankly down the staircase.

At that moment aunt Kate came toddling out of the supper room, almost wringing her hands in despair.

—Where is Gabriel? she cried. Where on earth is Gabriel? There's everyone waiting in there, stage to let, and nobody to carve the goose!

—Here I am, aunt Kate! cried Gabriel with sudden animation, ready to carve a flock of geese, if necessary.

A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table and at the other end, on a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham, stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs, a neat paper frill round its shin, and beside this was a round of spiced beef. Between these rival ends ran parallel lines of side dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow, a shallow dish full of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leafshaped dish with a stalkshaped handle on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid rectangle of Smyrna figs, a dish of custard topped with grated nutmeg, a small bowl full of chocolates and sweets wrapped in gold and silver papers and a glass vase in which stood some tall celery stalks. In the centre of the table there stood, as sentries to a fruit stand which upheld a pyramid of oranges and American apples, two squat oldfashioned decanters of cut glass, one containing port and the other dark sherry. On the closed square piano a pudding in a huge yellow dish lay in waiting and behind it were three squads of bottles of stout and ale and minerals drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms, the first two black with brown and red labels, the third and smallest squad white, with transverse green sashes.

Gabriel took his seat boldly at the head of the table and, having looked to the edge of the carver, plunged his fork firmly into the goose. He felt quite at ease now for he was an expert carver and liked nothing better than to find himself at the head of a well laden table.

—Miss Furlong, what shall I send you? he asked. A wing or a slice of the breast?

—Just a small slice of the breast.

—Miss Higgins, what for you?

—O, anything at all, Mr Conroy.

While Gabriel and Miss Daly exchanged plates of goose and plates of ham and spiced beef Lily went from guest to guest with a dish of hot floury potatoes wrapped in a white napkin. This was Mary Jane's

idea and she had also suggested apple sauce for the goose but aunt Kate had said that plain roast goose without any apple sauce had always been good enough for her and she hoped she might never eat worse. Mary Jane waited on her pupils and saw that they got the best slices and aunt Kate and aunt Julia opened and carried across from the piano bottles of stout and ale for the gentlemen and bottles of minerals for the ladies. There was a great deal of confusion and laughter and noise, the noise of orders and counterorders, of knives and forks, of corks and glass stoppers. Gabriel began to carve second helpings as soon as he had finished the first round without serving himself. Everyone protested loudly so that he compromised by taking a long draught of stout for he had found the carving hot work. Mary Jane settled down quietly to her supper but aunt Kate and aunt Julia were still toddling round the table, walking on each other's heels, getting in each other's way and giving each other unheeded orders. Mr Browne begged of them to sit down and eat their supper and so did Gabriel but they said they were time enough so that, at last, Freddy Malins stood up and, capturing aunt Kate, plumped her down on her chair amid general laughter.

When everyone had been well served Gabriel said smiling:

—Now if anyone wants a little more of what vulgar people call stuffing let him or her speak.

A chorus of voices invited him to begin his own supper and Lily came forward with three potatoes which she had reserved for him.

—Very well, said Gabriel amiably as he took another preparatory draught, kindly forget my existence, ladies and gentlemen, for a few minutes.

He set to his supper and took no part in the conversation with which the table covered Lily's removal of the plates. The subject of talk was the opera company which was then at the Theatre Royal. Mr Bartell D'Arcy, the tenor, a dark-complexioned young man with a smart moustache, praised very highly the leading contralto of the company but Miss Furlong thought she had a rather vulgar style of production. Freddy Malins said there was a negro chieftain singing in the second part of the Gaiety pantomime who had one of the finest tenor voices he had ever heard.

—Have you heard him? he asked Mr Bartell D'Arcy across the table.

—No, answered Mr Bartell D'Arcy carelessly.

—Because, Freddy Malins explained, now I'd be curious to hear your opinion of him. I think he has a grand voice.

—It takes Teddy to find out the really good things, said Mr Browne familiarly to the table.

—And why couldn't he have a voice too? asked Freddy Malins sharply. Is it because he's only a black?

Nobody answered this question and Mary Jane led the table back to the legitimate opera. One of her pupils had given her a pass for *Mignon*. Of course, it was very fine, she said, but it made her think of poor Georgina Burns. Mr Browne could go back farther still to the old Italian companies that used to come to Dublin, Tietjens, Trebelli, Ilma de Murzka, Campanini, the great Giuglini, Ravelli, Aramburo. Those were the days, he said, when there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin. He told too of how the top gallery of the old Royal used to be packed night after night, of how one night an Italian tenor had sung five encores to *Let Me Like a Soldier Fall*, introducing a high C every time, and of how the gallery boys would sometimes in their enthusiasm unyoke the horses from the carriage of some great *prima donna* and pull her themselves through the streets to her hotel. Why did they never play the grand old operas now, he asked. *Dinorah*, *Lucrezia Borgia*? Because they could not get the voices to sing them: that was why.

—O, well, said Mr Bartell D'Arcy, I presume there are as good singers today as there were then.

—Where are they? asked Mr Browne defiantly.

—In London, Paris, Milan, said Mr Bartell D'Arcy warmly. I suppose Caruso, for example, is quite as good, if not better than any of the men you have mentioned.

—Maybe so, said Mr Browne. But I may tell you I doubt it strongly.

—O, I'd give anything to hear Caruso sing, said Mary Jane.

—For me, said aunt Kate, who had been picking a bone, there was only one tenor. To please me, I mean. But I suppose none of you ever heard of him.

—Who was he, Miss Morkan? asked Mr Bartell D’Arcy politely.

—His name, said aunt Kate, was Parkinson. I heard him when he was in his prime and I think he had then the purest tenor voice that was ever put into a man’s throat.

—Strange, said Mr Bartell D’Arcy. I never even heard of him.

—Yes, yes, Miss Morkan is right, said Mr Browne. I remember hearing of old Parkinson but he’s too far back for me.

—A beautiful pure sweet mellow English tenor, said aunt Kate with enthusiasm.

Gabriel having finished, the huge pudding was transferred to the table. The clatter of forks and spoons began again. Gabriel’s wife served out spoonfuls of the pudding and passed the plates down the table. Midway down they were held up by Mary Jane who replenished them with raspberry or orange jelly or with blancmange and jam. The pudding was of aunt Julia’s making and she received praises for it from all quarters. She herself said that it was not quite brown enough.

—Well, I hope, Miss Morkan, said Mr Browne, that I’m brown enough for you because, you know, I’m all brown.

All the gentlemen, except Gabriel, ate some of the pudding out of compliment to aunt Julia. As Gabriel never ate sweets the celery had been left for him. Freddy Malins also took a stalk of celery and ate it with his pudding. He had been told that celery was a capital thing for the blood and he was just then under doctor’s care. Mrs Malins, who had been silent all through the supper, said that her son was going down to Mount Melleray in a week or so. The table then spoke of Mount Melleray, how bracing the air was down there, how hospitable the monks were and how they never asked for a penny-piece from their guests.

—And do you mean to say, asked Mr Browne incredulously, that a chap can go down there and put up there as if it were a hotel and live on the fat of the land and then come away without paying a far-thing?

—O, most people give some donation to the monastery when they leave, said Mary Jane.

—I wish we had an institution like that in our church, said Mr Browne candidly.

He was astonished to hear that the monks never spoke, got up at two in the morning and slept in their coffins. He asked what they did it for.

—That's the rule of the order, said aunt Kate firmly.

—Yes, but why? asked Mr Browne.

Aunt Kate repeated that it was the rule, that was all. Mr Browne still seemed not to understand. Freddy Malins explained to him, as best he could, that the monks were trying to make up for the sins committed by all the sinners in the outside world. The explanation was not very clear for Mr Browne grinned and said:

—I like that idea very much but wouldn't a comfortable spring bed do them as well as a coffin?

—The coffin, said Mary Jane, is to remind them of their last end.

As the subject had grown lugubrious it was buried in a silence of the table during which Mrs Malins could be heard saying to her neighbour in an indistinct undertone:

—They are very good men, the monks, very pious men.

The raisins and almonds and figs and apples and oranges and chocolates and sweets were now passed about the table and aunt Julia invited all the guests to have either port or sherry. At first Mr Bartell D'Arcy refused to take either but one of his neighbours nudged him and whispered something to him upon which he allowed his glass to be filled. Gradually as the last glasses were being filled the conversation ceased. A pause followed, broken only by the noise of the wine and by unsettlings of chairs. The Misses Morkan, all three, looked down at the tablecloth. Someone coughed once or twice and then a few gentlemen patted the table gently as a signal for silence. The silence came and Gabriel pushed back his chair and stood up.

The patting at once grew louder in encouragement and then ceased altogether. Gabriel leaned his ten trembling fingers on the tablecloth and smiled nervously at the company. Meeting a row of upturned faces he raised his eyes to the chandelier. The piano was playing a waltz tune and he could hear the skirts sweeping against the drawingroom door. People perhaps were standing in the snow on the quay outside, gazing up at the lighted windows and listening to the waltz music. The air was pure there. In the distance lay the park where the trees were weighted with

snow. The Wellington monument wore a gleaming cap of snow that flashed westward over the white field of Fifteen Acres.

He began:

—Ladies and gentlemen.

It has fallen to my lot this evening as in years past to perform a very pleasing task, but a task for which I am afraid my poor powers as a speaker are all too inadequate.

—No, no, said Mr Browne.

—But, however that may be, I can only ask you tonight to take the will for the deed and to lend me your attention for a few moments while I endeavour to express to you in words what my feelings are on this occasion.

—Ladies and gentlemen. It is not the first time that we have gathered together under this hospitable roof, around this hospitable board. It is not the first time that we have been the recipients—or, perhaps I had better say, the victims—of the hospitality of certain good ladies.

He made a circle in the air with his arm and paused. Everyone laughed or smiled at aunt Kate and aunt Julia and Mary Jane who all turned crimson with pleasure. Gabriel went on more boldly:

—I feel more strongly with every recurring year that our country has no tradition which does it so much honour and which it should guard so jealously as that of its hospitality. It is a tradition that is unique so far as my experience goes (and I have visited not a few places abroad) among the modern nations. Some would say, perhaps, that with us it is rather a failing than anything to be boasted of. But granted even that, it is, to my mind, a princely failing and one that I trust will long be cultivated among us. Of one thing, at least, I am sure. As long as this one roof shelters the good ladies aforesaid—and I wish from my heart it may do so for many and many a long year to come—the tradition of genuine warmhearted courteous Irish hospitality, which our forefathers have handed down to us and which we in turn must hand down to our descendants, is still alive among us.

A hearty murmur of assent ran round the table. It shot through Gabriel's mind that Miss Ivors was not there and that she had gone away discourteously: and he said with confidence in himself:

—Ladies and gentlemen.

A new generation is growing up in our midst, a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles. It is serious and enthusiastic for these new ideas and its enthusiasm, even when it is misdirected, is, I believe, in the main sincere. But we are living in a sceptical and, if I may use the phrase, a thoughttortured age: and sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hypereducated as it is, will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day. Listening tonight to the names of all those great singers of the past it seemed to me, I must confess, that we were living in a less spacious age. Those days might without exaggeration be called spacious days: and if they are gone beyond recall let us hope, at least, that in gatherings such as this we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die.

—Hear! hear! said Mr Browne loudly.

—But yet, continued Gabriel, his voice falling into a softer inflection, there are always in gatherings such as this sadder thoughts that will recur to our minds: thoughts of the past, of youth, of changes, of absent faces that we miss here tonight. Our path through life is strewn with many such sad memories: and were we to brood upon them always we could not find the heart to go on bravely with our work among the living. We have all of us living duties and living affections which claim, and rightly claim, our strenuous endeavours.

Therefore I will not linger on the past. I will not let any gloomy moralising intrude upon us here tonight. Here we are gathered together for a brief moment from the bustle and rush of our everyday routine. We are met here as friends, in the spirit of good fellowship, as colleagues also, to a certain extent, in the true spirit of *camaraderie*, and as the guests of—what shall I call them?—the three Graces of the Dublin musical world.

The table burst into applause and laughter at this sally. Aunt Julia vainly asked each of her neighbours in turn to tell her what Gabriel had said.

—He says we are the three Graces, aunt Julia, said Mary Jane.

Aunt Julia did not understand but she looked up, smiling, at Gabriel who continued in the same vein:

—Ladies and gentlemen.

I will not attempt to play tonight the part that Paris played on another occasion. I will not attempt to choose between them. The task would be an invidious one and one beyond my poor powers. For when I view them in turn, whether it be our chief hostess herself, whose good heart, whose too good heart, has become a byword with all who know her, or her sister, who seems to be gifted with perennial youth and whose singing must have been a surprise and a revelation to us all tonight, or, last but not least, when I consider our youngest hostess, talented, cheerful, hard-working and the best of nieces, I confess, ladies and gentlemen, that I do not know to which of them I should award the prize.

Gabriel glanced down at his aunts and, seeing the large smile on aunt Julia's face and the tears which had risen to aunt Kate's eyes, hastened to his close. He raised his glass of port gallantly while every member of the company fingered a glass expectantly and said loudly:

—Let us toast them all three together. Let us drink to their health, wealth, long life, happiness and prosperity and may they long continue to hold the proud and selfwon position which they hold in their profession and the position of honour and affection which they hold in our hearts.

All the guests stood up, glass in hand and, turning towards the three seated ladies, sang in unison with Mr Browne as leader:

*—For they are jolly gay fellows,
For they are jolly gay fellows,
For they are jolly gay fellows
Which nobody can deny.*

Aunt Kate was making frank use of her handkerchief and even aunt Julia seemed moved. Freddy Malins beat time with his pudding fork and the singers turned towards one another as if in melodious conference, while they sang with emphasis:

*—Unless he tells a lie,
Unless he tells a lie.*

Then turning once more towards their hostesses they sang:

*—For they are jolly gay fellows,
For they are jolly gay fellows,
For they are jolly gay fellows
Which nobody can deny.*

The acclamation which followed was taken up beyond the door of the supper room by many of the other guests and renewed time after time, Freddy Malins acting as officer with his fork on high.

The piercing morning air came into the hall where they were standing so that aunt Kate said:

—Close the door, somebody. Mrs Malins will get her death of cold.

—Browne is out there, aunt Kate, said Mary Jane.

—Browne is everywhere, said aunt Kate lowering her voice.

Mary Jane laughed at her tone.

—Really, she said archly, he is very attentive.

—He has been laid on here like the gas, said aunt Kate in the same tone, all during the Christmas.

She laughed herself this time good-humouredly and then added quickly:

—But tell him to come in, Mary Jane, and close the door. I hope to goodness he didn't hear me.

At that moment the halldoor was opened and Mr Browne came in from the doorstep, laughing as if his heart would break. He was dressed in a long green overcoat with mock astrakhan cuffs and collar and wore on his head an oval fur cap. He pointed down the snowcovered quay whence the sound of shrill prolonged whistling was borne in.

—Teddy will have all the cabs in Dublin out, he said.

Gabriel advanced from the little pantry behind the office, struggling into his overcoat and, looking round the hall, said:

—Gretta not down yet?

—She's getting on her things, Gabriel, said aunt Kate.

—Who's playing up there? asked Gabriel.

—Nobody. They're all gone.

—O no, aunt Kate, said Mary Jane. Bartell D'Arcy and Miss O'Callaghan aren't gone yet.

—Someone is strumming at the piano, anyhow, said Gabriel.

Mary Jane glanced at Gabriel and Mr Browne and said with a shiver:

—It makes me feel cold to look at you two gentlemen muffled up like that. I wouldn't like to face your journey home at this hour.

—I'd like nothing better this minute, said Mr Browne stoutly, than a rattling fine walk in the country or a fast drive with a good spanking goer between the shafts.

—We used to have a very good horse and trap at home, said aunt Julia sadly.

—The never-to-be-forgotten Johnny, said Mary Jane laughing. Aunt Kate and Gabriel laughed too.

—Why, what was wonderful about Johnny? asked Mr Browne.

—The late lamented Patrick Morkan, our grandfather that is, explained Gabriel, commonly known in his later years as the old gentleman, was a glue boiler.

—O now, Gabriel, said aunt Kate laughing, he had a starch mill.

—Well, glue or starch, said Gabriel, the old gentleman had a horse by the name of Johnny. And Johnny used to work in the old gentleman's mill walking round and round in order to drive the mill. That was all very well; but now comes the tragic part about Johnny. One fine day the old gentleman thought he'd like to drive out with the quality to a military review in the park.

—The Lord have mercy on his soul, said aunt Kate compassionately.

—Amen, said Gabriel. So the old gentleman, as I said, harnessed Johnny and put on his very best tall hat and his very best stock collar and drove out in grand style from his ancestral mansion somewhere near Back Lane, I think.

Everyone laughed, even Mrs Malins, at Gabriel's manner and aunt Kate said:

—O now, Gabriel, he didn't live in Back Lane really. Only the mill was there.

—Out from the mansion of his forefathers, continued Gabriel, he drove with Johnny. And everything went on beautifully until Johnny came in sight of King Billy's statue: and whether he fell in love with the horse King Billy sits on or whether he thought he was back again in the mill, anyhow he began to walk round the statue.

Gabriel paced in a circle round the hall in his goloshes amid the laughter of the others.

—Round and round he went, said Gabriel, and the old gentleman, who was a very pompous old gentleman, was highly indignant. *Go on, sir! What do you mean, sir? Johnny! Johnny! Most extraordinary conduct! Can't understand the horse!*

The peals of laughter which followed Gabriel's imitation of the incident were interrupted by a resounding knock at the halldoor. Mary Jane ran to open it and let in Freddy Malins. Freddy Malins, with his hat well back on his head and his shoulders humped with cold, was puffing and steaming after his exertions.

—I could only get one cab, he said.

—O, we'll find another along the quay, said Gabriel.

—Yes, said aunt Kate. Better not keep Mrs Malins standing in the draught.

Mrs Malins was helped down the front steps by her son and Mr Browne and, after many manoeuvres, hoisted into the cab. Freddy Malins clambered in after her and spent a long time settling her on the seat, Mr Browne helping him with advice. At last she was settled comfortably and Freddy Malins invited Mr Browne into the cab. There was a good deal of confused talk, then Mr Browne got into the cab. The cabman settled his rug over his knees and bent down for the address. The confusion grew greater and the cabman was directed differently by Freddy Malins and Mr Browne, each of whom had his head out through a window of the cab. The difficulty was to know where to drop Mr Browne along the route and aunt Kate, aunt Julia and Mary Jane helped the discussion from the doorstep with cross-directions and contradictions and abundance of laughter. As for Freddy Malins he was speechless with laughter. He popped his head in and out of the window every moment, to the great danger of his hat, and told his mother how the discussion was pro-

gressing till at last Mr Browne shouted to the bewildered cabman above the din of everybody's laughter:

—Do you know Trinity College?

—Yes, sir, said the cabman.

—Well, drive bang up against Trinity College gates, said Mr Browne, and then we'll tell you where to go. You understand now?

—Yes, sir, said the cabman.

—Make like a bird for Trinity College.

—Right, sir, cried the cabman.

The horse was whipped up and the cab rattled off along the quay amid a chorus of laughter and adieus.

Gabriel had not gone to the door with the others. He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terracotta and salmonpink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters listening to something. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords struck on the piano and a few notes of a man's voice singing.

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter.

The halldoor was closed and aunt Kate, aunt Julia and Mary Jane came down the hall, still laughing.

—Well, isn't Freddy terrible? said Mary Jane. He's really terrible.

Gabriel said nothing but pointed up the stairs towards where his wife was standing. Now that the halldoor was closed the voice and the piano could be heard more clearly. Gabriel held up his hand for them to be silent. The song seemed to be in the old Irish tonality and the singer

seemed uncertain both of his words and of his voice. The voice made plaintive by the distance and by the singer's hoarseness faintly illuminated the cadence of the air with words expressing grief:

*—O, the rain falls on my heavy locks
And the dew wets my skin,
My babe lies cold . . .*

—O, exclaimed Mary Jane. It's Bartell D'Arcy singing and he wouldn't sing all the night. O, I'll get him to sing a song before he goes.

—O do, Mary Jane, said aunt Kate.

Mary Jane brushed past the others and ran to the staircase but before she reached it the singing stopped and the piano was closed abruptly.

—O, what a pity! she cried. Is he coming down, Gretta?

Gabriel heard his wife answer yes and saw her come down towards them. A few steps behind her were Mr Bartell D'Arcy and Miss O'Callaghan.

—O, Mr D'Arcy, cried Mary Jane, it's downright mean of you to break off like that when we were all in raptures listening to you.

—I have been at him all the evening, said Miss O'Callaghan, and Mrs Conroy too, and he told us he had a dreadful cold and couldn't sing.

—O, Mr D'Arcy, said aunt Kate, now that was a great fib to tell.

—Can't you see that I'm as hoarse as a crow? said Mr D'Arcy roughly.

He went into the pantry hastily and put on his overcoat. The others, taken aback by his rude speech, could find nothing to say. Aunt Kate wrinkled her brows and made signs to the others to drop the subject. Mr D'Arcy stood swathing his neck carefully and frowning.

—It's the weather, said aunt Julia after a pause.

—Yes, everybody has colds, said aunt Kate readily, everybody.

—They say, said Mary Jane, we haven't had snow like it for thirty years: and I read this morning in the newspaper that the snow is general all over Ireland.

—I love the look of snow, said aunt Julia sadly.

—So do I, said Miss O’Callaghan. I think Christmas is never really Christmas unless we have the snow on the ground.

—But poor Mr D’Arcy doesn’t like the snow, said aunt Kate smiling.

Mr D’Arcy came from the pantry, fully swathed and buttoned, and in a repentant tone told them the history of his cold. Everyone gave him advice and said it was a great pity and urged him to be very careful of his throat in the night air. Gabriel watched his wife who did not join in the conversation. She was standing right under the dusty fanlight and the flame of the gas lit up the rich bronze of her hair which he had seen her drying at the fire a few days before. She was in the same attitude and seemed unaware of the talk about her. At last she turned towards them and Gabriel saw that there was colour on her cheeks and that her eyes were shining. A sudden tide of joy went leaping out of his heart.

—Mr D’Arcy, she said, what is the name of that song you were singing?

—It’s called *The Lass of Aughrim*, said Mr D’Arcy, but I couldn’t remember it properly. Why? Do you know it?

—*The Lass of Aughrim*, she repeated. I couldn’t think of the name.

—It’s a very nice air, said Mary Jane. I’m sorry you were not in voice tonight.

—Now, Mary Jane, said aunt Kate, don’t annoy Mr D’Arcy. I won’t have him annoyed.

Seeing that all were ready to start she shepherded them to the door where goodnight was said:

—Well, goodnight aunt Kate, and thanks for the pleasant evening.

—Goodnight, Gabriel. Goodnight, Gretta!

—Goodnight, aunt Kate, and thanks ever so much. Goodnight, aunt Julia.

—O, goodnight, Gretta, I didn’t see you.

—Goodnight, Mr D’Arcy. Goodnight, Miss O’Callaghan.

—Goodnight, Miss Morkan.

—Goodnight again.

—Goodnight all. Safe home.

—Goodnight. Goodnight.

The morning was still dark. A dull yellow light brooded over the houses and the river and the sky seemed to be descending. It was slushy underfoot and only streaks and patches of snow lay on the roofs, on the parapets of the quay and on the area railings. The lamps were still burning redly in the murky air and, across the river, the palace of the Four Courts stood out menacingly against the heavy sky.

She was walking on before him with Mr Bartell D'Arcy, her shoes in a brown parcel tucked under one arm and her hands holding her skirt up from the slush. She had no longer any grace of attitude but Gabriel's eyes were still bright with happiness. The blood went bounding along his veins and the thoughts went rioting through his brain, proud, joyful, tender, valorous.

She was walking on before him so lightly and so erect that he longed to run after her noiselessly, catch her by the shoulders and say something foolish and affectionate into her ear. She seemed to him so frail that he longed to defend her against something and then to be alone with her. Moments of their secret life together burst like stars upon his memory. A heliotrope envelope was lying beside his breakfast cup and he was caressing it with his hand. Birds were twittering in the ivy and the sunny web of the curtain was shimmering along the floor: he could not eat for happiness. They were standing on the crowded platform and he was placing a ticket inside the warm palm of her glove. He was standing with her in the cold, looking in through a grated window at a man making bottles in a roaring furnace. It was very cold. Her face, fragrant in the cold air, was quite close to his and suddenly she called out to the man at the furnace:

—Is the fire hot, sir?

But the man could not hear her with the noise of the furnace. It was just as well. He might have answered rudely.

A wave of yet more tender joy escaped from his heart and went coursing in warm flood along his arteries. Like the tender fire of stars moments of their life together, that no one knew of or would ever know of, broke upon and illumined his memory. He longed to recall to her those moments, to make her forget the years of their dull existence together and remember only their moments of ecstasy. For the years,

he felt, had not quenched his soul or hers. Their children, his writing, her household cares had not quenched all their souls' tender fire. In one letter that he had written to her then he had said: *Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?*

Like distant music these words that he had written years before were borne towards him from the past. He longed to be alone with her. When the others had gone away, when he and she were in their room in the hotel, then they would be alone together. He would call her softly:

—Gretta!

Perhaps she would not hear at once: she would be undressing. Then something in his voice would strike her. She would turn and look at him . . . At the corner of Winetavern Street they met a cab. He was glad of its rattling noise as it saved him from conversation. She was looking out of the window and seemed tired. The others spoke only a few words, pointing out some building or street. The horse galloped along wearily under the murky morning sky, dragging his old rattling box after his heels, and Gabriel was again in a cab with her galloping to catch the boat, galloping to their honeymoon.

As the cab drove across O'Connell bridge Miss O'Callaghan said:

—They say you never cross O'Connell bridge without seeing a white horse.

—I see a white man this time, said Gabriel.

—Where? asked Mr Bartell D'Arcy.

Gabriel pointed to the statue on which lay patches of snow.

Then he nodded familiarly to it and waved his hand.

—Goodnight, Dan, he said gaily.

When the cab drew up before the hotel Gabriel jumped out and, in spite of Mr Bartell D'Arcy's protest, paid the driver. He gave the man a shilling over his fare. The man saluted and said:

—A prosperous new year to you, sir.

—The same to you, said Gabriel cordially.

She leaned for a moment on his arm in getting out of the cab and while standing at the kerbstone bidding the others goodnight. She leaned lightly on his arm, as lightly as when she had danced with him a few

hours before. He had felt proud and happy then, happy that she was his, proud of her grace and wifely carriage. But now after the kindling again of so many memories, the first touch of her body, musical and strange and perfumed, sent through him a keen pang of lust. Under cover of her silence he pressed her arm closely to his side: and, as they stood at the hotel door, he felt that they had escaped from their lives and duties, escaped from home and friends and run away together with wild and radiant hearts to a new adventure.

An old man was dozing in a great hooded chair in the hall. He lit a candle in the office and went before them to the stairs. They followed him in silence, their feet falling in soft thuds on the thickly carpeted stairs. She mounted the stairs behind the porter, her head bowed in the ascent, her frail shoulders curved as with a burden, her skirt girt tightly about her. He could have flung his arms about her hips and held her still for his arms were trembling with desire to seize her and only the stress of his nails against the palms of his hands held the wild impulse of his body in check. The porter halted on the stairs to settle his guttering candle. They halted too on the steps below him. In the silence Gabriel could hear the falling of the molten wax into the tray and the thumping of his own heart against his ribs.

The porter led them along a corridor and opened a door. Then he set his unstable candle down on a toilet table and asked at what hour they were to be called in the morning.

—Eight, said Gabriel.

The porter pointed to the tap of the electric light and began a muttered apology but Gabriel cut him short.

—We don't want any light. We have light enough from the street. And, I say, he added pointing to the candle, you might remove that handsome article, like a good man.

The porter took up his candle again, but slowly, for he was surprised by such a novel idea. Then he mumbled goodnight and went out. Gabriel shot the lock to.

A ghostly light from the street lamp lay in a long shaft from one window to the door. Gabriel threw his overcoat and hat on a couch and crossed the room towards the window. He looked down into the street

in order that his emotion might calm a little. Then he turned and leaned against a chest of drawers with his back to the light. She had taken off her hat and cloak and was standing before a large swinging mirror, unhooking her waist. Gabriel paused for a few moments, watching her, and then said:

—Gretta!

She turned away from the mirror slowly and walked along the shaft of light towards him. Her face looked so serious and weary that the words would not pass Gabriel's lips. No, it was not the moment yet.

—You look tired, he said.

—I am a little, she answered.

—You don't feel ill or weak?

—No, tired: that's all.

She went on to the window and stood there, looking out.

Gabriel waited again and then, fearing that diffidence was about to conquer him, he said abruptly:

—By the way, Gretta!

—What is it?

—You know that poor fellow Malins? he said quickly.

—Yes, what about him?

—Well, poor fellow, he's a decent sort of chap after all, continued Gabriel in a false voice. He gave me back that sovereign I lent him and I didn't expect it really. It's a pity he wouldn't keep away from that Browne because he's not a bad fellow at heart.

He was trembling now with annoyance. Why did she seem so abstracted? He did not know how he could begin. Was she annoyed too about something? If she would only turn to him or come to him of her own accord! To take her as she was would be brutal. No, he must see some ardour in her eyes first. He longed to be master of her strange mood.

—When did you lend him the pound? she asked after a pause.

Gabriel strove to restrain himself from breaking out into brutal language about the sottish Malins and his pound. He longed to cry to her from his soul, to crush her body against his, to overmaster her. But he said:

—O, at Christmas, when he opened that little Christmas card shop in Henry Street.

He was in such a fever of rage and desire that he did not hear her come from the window. She stood before him for an instant looking at him strangely. Then, suddenly raising herself on tiptoe and resting her hands lightly on his shoulders, she kissed him.

—You are a very generous person, Gabriel, she said.

—Gabriel, trembling with delight at her sudden kiss and at the quaintness of her phrase, put his hands on her hair and began smoothing it back, scarcely touching it with his fingers. The washing had made it fine and brilliant. His heart was brimming over with happiness. Just when he was wishing for it she had come to him of her own accord. Perhaps her thoughts had been running with his. Perhaps she had felt the impetuous desire that was in him and then the yielding mood had come upon her. Now that she had fallen to him so easily he wondered why he had been so diffident.

He stood, holding her head between his hands. Then, slipping one arm swiftly about her body and drawing her towards him, he said softly:

—Gretta dear, what are you thinking about?

She did not answer nor yield wholly to his arm. He said again softly:

—Tell me what it is, Gretta. I think I know what is the matter. Do I know?

She did not answer at once. Then she said in an outburst of tears:

—O, I am thinking about that song, *The Lass of Aughrim*.

She broke loose from him and ran to the bed and, throwing her arms across the bedrail, hid her face. Gabriel stood stockstill for a moment in astonishment and then followed her. As he passed in the way of the cheval glass he caught sight of himself in full length, his broad, wellfilled shirtfront, the face whose expression always puzzled him when he saw it in a mirror and his glimmering giltrimmed eyeglasses. He halted a few paces from her and said:

—What about the song? Why does that make you cry?

She raised her head from her arms and dried her eyes with the back

of her hand like a child. A kinder note than he had intended went into his voice.

—Why, Gretta? he asked.

—I am thinking about a person long ago who used to sing that song.

—And who was the person long ago? asked Gabriel smiling.

—It was a person I used to know in Galway when I was living with my grandmother, she said.

The smile passed away from Gabriel's face. A dull anger began to gather again at the back of his mind and the dull fires of his lust began to glow angrily in his veins.

—Someone you were in love with? he asked ironically.

—It was a young boy I used to know, she answered, named Michael Furey. He used to sing that song, *The Lass of Aughrim*. He was very delicate.

Gabriel was silent. He did not wish her to think that he was interested in this delicate boy.

—I can see him so plainly, she said after a moment. Such eyes as he had, big dark eyes! And such an expression in them—an expression! . . .

—O, then you were in love with him? said Gabriel.

—I used to go out walking with him, she said, when I was in Galway.

A thought flew across Gabriel's mind.

—Perhaps that was why you wanted to go to Galway with that Ivors girl? he said coldly.

She looked at him and asked in surprise:

—What for?

Her eyes made Gabriel feel awkward. He shrugged his shoulders and said:

—How do I know? To see him, perhaps.

She looked away from him along the shaft of light towards the window in silence.

—He is dead, she said at length. He died when he was only seventeen. Isn't it a terrible thing to die so young as that?

—What was he? asked Gabriel, still ironically.

—He was in the gasworks, she said.

Gabriel felt humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy in the gasworks. The irony of his mood soured into sarcasm. While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous wellmeaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror. Instinctively he turned his back more to the light lest she might see the shame that burned upon his forehead.

He tried to keep up his tone of cold interrogation but his voice when he spoke was humble and indifferent.

—I suppose you were in love with this Michael Furey, Gretta, he said.

—I was great with him at that time, she said.

Her voice was veiled and sad. Gabriel, feeling now how vain it would be to try to lead her whither he had purposed, caressed one of her hands and said also sadly:

—And what did he die of so young, Gretta? Consumption, was it?

—I think he died for me, she answered.

A vague terror seized Gabriel at this answer as if, at that hour when he had hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world. But he shook himself free of it with an effort of reason and continued to caress her hand. He did not question her again for he felt that she would tell him of herself. Her hand was warm and moist: it did not respond to his touch but he continued to caress it just as he had caressed her first letter to him that spring morning.

—It was in the winter, she said, about the beginning of the winter when I was going to leave my grandmother's and come up here to the convent. And he was ill at the time in his lodgings in Galway and wouldn't be let out and his people in Oughterard were written to. He was in decline, they said, or something like that. I never knew rightly.

She paused for a moment and sighed.

—Poor fellow, she said, he was very fond of me and he was such a gentle boy. We used to go out together walking, you know, Gabriel, like the way they do in the country. He was going to study singing only for his health. He had a very good voice, poor Michael Furey.

—Well, and then? asked Gabriel.

—And then when it came to the time for me to leave Galway and come up to the convent he was much worse and I wouldn't be let see him so I wrote him a letter saying I was going up to Dublin and would be back in the summer and hoping he would be better then.

She paused for a moment to get her voice under control and then went on:

—Then the night before I left I was in my grandmother's house in Nun's Island, packing up, and I heard gravel thrown up against the window. The window was so wet I couldn't see so I ran downstairs as I was and slipped out the back into the garden and there was the poor fellow at the end of the garden shivering.

—And did you not tell him to go back? asked Gabriel.

—I implored of him to go home at once and told him he would get his death in the rain. But he said he did not want to live. I can see his eyes as well as well! He was standing at the end of the wall where there was a tree.

—And did he go home? asked Gabriel.

—Yes, he went home. And when I was only a week in the convent he died and he was buried in Oughterard where his people came from. O, the day I heard that, that he was dead! . . .

She stopped, choking with sobs and, overcome by emotion, flung herself face downward on the bed, sobbing in the quilt. Gabriel held her hand for a moment longer, irresolutely, and then, shy of intruding on her grief, let it fall gently and walked quietly to the window.

She was fast asleep.

Gabriel, leaning on his elbow, looked for a few moments unresentfully at her tangled hair and half open mouth, listening to her deep drawn breath. So she had had that romance in her life: a man had died for her sake. It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband,

had played in her life. He watched her while she slept as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife. His curious eyes rested long upon her face and on her hair: and as he thought of what she must have been then, in that time of her first girlish beauty, a strange friendly pity for her entered his soul. He did not like to say even to himself that her face was no longer beautiful but he knew that it was no longer the face for which Michael Furey had braved death.

Perhaps she had not told him all the story. His eyes moved to the chair over which she had thrown some of her clothes. A petticoat string dangled to the floor. One boot stood upright, its limp upper fallen down: the fellow of it lay upon its side. He wondered at his riot of emotions of an hour before. From what had it proceeded? From his aunts' supper, from his own foolish speech, from the wine and dancing, the merry-making when saying goodnight in the hall, the pleasure of the walk along the river in the snow. Poor aunt Julia! She too would soon be a shade with the shade of Patrick Morkan and his horse. He had caught that haggard look upon her face for a moment when she was singing *Arrayed for the Bridal*. Soon perhaps he would be sitting in that same drawingroom, dressed in black, his silk hat on his knees. The blinds would be drawn down and aunt Kate would be sitting beside him, crying and blowing her nose and telling him how Julia had died. He would cast about in his mind for some words that might console her and would find only lame and useless ones. Yes, yes: that would happen very soon.

The air of the room chilled his shoulders. He stretched himself cautiously along under the sheets and lay down beside his wife. One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age. He thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live.

Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region

where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling.

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

DIRTY WEDDING

DENIS JOHNSON

I liked to sit up front and ride the fast ones all day long, I liked it when they brushed right up against the buildings north of the Loop and I especially liked it when the buildings dropped away into that bombed-out squalor a little farther north in which people (through windows you'd see a person in his dirty naked kitchen spooning soup toward his face, or twelve children on their bellies on the floor, watching television, but instantly they were gone, wiped away by a movie billboard of a woman winking and touching her upper lip deftly with her tongue, and she in turn erased by a—*wham*, the noise and dark dropped down around your head—tunnel) actually lived.

I was twenty-five, twenty-six, something like that. My fingertips were all yellow from smoking. My girlfriend was with child.

It cost fifty cents, ninety cents, a dollar to ride the train. I really don't remember.

Out in front of the abortion building picketers shook drops of holy water at us and twisted their rosaries around their fingers. A man in dark glasses shadowed Michelle right up the big steps to the door, chanting softly in her ear. I guess he was praying. What were the words of his prayer? I wouldn't mind asking her that question. But it's winter, the mountains around me are tall and deep with snow, and I could never find her now.

Michelle handed her appointment card to the nurse on the third floor. She and the nurse went through a curtain together.

I wandered over across the hall where they were showing a short movie about vasectomies. Much later I told her that I'd actually gotten

a vasectomy a long time ago, and somebody else must have made her pregnant. I also told her once that I had inoperable cancer and would soon be passed away and gone, eternally. But nothing I could think up, no matter how dramatic or completely horrible, ever made her repent or love me the way she had at first, before she really knew me.

Anyway they showed the movie to two or three or four of us who were waiting for women across the hall. The scene was cloudy in my sight because I was frightened of whatever they were doing to Michelle and to the other women and of course to the little fetuses. After the film I talked to a man about vasectomies. A man with a mustache. I didn't like him.

"You have to be sure," he said.

"I'm never getting anybody pregnant again. I know that much."

"Would you like to make an appointment?"

"Would you like to give me the money?"

"It won't take long to save the money."

"It would take me forever to save the money," I corrected him.

Then I sat down in the waiting area across the hall. In forty-five minutes the nurse came out and said to me, "Michelle is comfortable now."

"Is she dead?"

"Of course not."

"I kind of wish she was."

She looked frightened. "I don't know what you mean."

I went in through the curtain to see Michelle. She smelled bad.

"How are you feeling?"

"I feel fine."

"What did they stick up you?"

"What?" she said. "*What?*"

The nurse said, "Hey. Out of here. Out of here."

She went through the curtain and came back with a big black guy wearing a starched white shirt and one of those phony gold badges. "I don't think this man needs to be in the building," she said to him, and then she said to me, "Would you like to wait outside, sir?"

"Yeah yeah yeah," I said, and all the way down the big stairs and out the front I said, "Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah."

It was raining outdoors and most of the Catholics were squashed up under an awning next door with their signs held overhead against the weather. They splashed holy water on my cheek and on the back of my neck, and I didn't feel a thing. Not for many years.

I didn't know what to do now except ride around on the elevated train.

I stepped into one of the cars just as the doors closed; as though the train had waited just for me.

What if there was just snow? Snow everywhere, cold and white, filling every distance? And I just follow my sense of things through this winter until I reach a grove of white trees. And she takes me in.

The wheels screamed, and all I saw suddenly was everybody's big ugly shoes. The sound stopped. We passed solitary, wrenching scenes.

Through the neighborhoods and past the platforms, I felt the cancelled life dreaming after me. Yes, a ghost. A vestige. Something remaining.

At one of the stops down the line there was a problem with the doors. We were delayed, those of us who had destinations, anyway. The train waited and waited in a troubling sleep. Then it hummed softly. You can tell it's going to move before it moves.

A guy stepped in just as the doors closed. The train had waited for him all this time, not a second longer than his arrival, not even half a second, and then it broke the mysterious crystal of its inertia. We'd picked him up and now we were moving. He sat down near the front of the car, completely unaware of his importance. With what kind of miserable or happy fate did he have an appointment across the river?

I decided to follow him.

Several stops later he left the train and went down into a section of squat, repetitive brownstone buildings.

He walked with a bounce, his shoulders looped and his chin scooping forward rhythmically. He didn't look right or left. I supposed he'd walked this route twelve thousand times. He didn't sense or feel me following half a block behind him.

It was a Polish neighborhood somewhere or other. The Polish neigh-

borhoods have that snow. They have that fruit with the light on it, they have that music you can't find. We ended up in a laundromat, where the guy took off his shirt and put it in a washer. He bought some coffee in a paper cup out of a coin machine.

He read the notices on the wall and watched his machine tremble, walking around the place with only his sharkskin sports jacket on. His chest was narrow and white and hair sprouted from around the small nipples.

There were a couple of other men in the laundromat. He chatted with them a little. I could hear one of them say, "The cops wanted to talk to Benny."

"How come? What'd he do?"

"He had a hood up. They were looking for a guy with a hood up."

"What'd he do?"

"Nut'n. Nut'n. Some guy got murdered last night."

And now the man I was following walked right up to me. "You were on the El," he said. He hefted his cup, tossing a sip of coffee between his lips.

I turned away because my throat was closing up. Suddenly I had an erection. I knew men got that way about men, but I didn't know I did. His chest was like Christ's. That's probably who he was.

I could have followed anybody off that train. It would have been the same.

I got back on to ride around some more above the streets.

There was nothing stopping me from going back to where Michelle and I were staying, but these days had reduced us to the Rebel Motel. The maids spat out their chew in the shower stalls. There was a smell of insecticide. I wasn't going back there to sit in the room and wait.

Michelle and I had our drama. It got very dreary sometimes, but it felt like I had to have her. As long as there was one other person at these motels who knew my real name.

Out back they had all these Dumpsters stuffed with God knows what. We can't imagine the shape of our fate, that's for sure.

Think of being curled up and floating in a darkness. Even if you

could think, even if you had an imagination, would you ever imagine its opposite, this miraculous world the Asian Taoists call the “Ten Thousand Things”? And if the darkness just got darker? And then you were dead? What would you care? How would you even know the difference?

I sat up front. Right beside me was the little cubicle filled with the driver. You could feel him materializing and dematerializing in there. In the darkness under the universe it didn't matter that the driver was a blind man. He felt the future with his face. And suddenly the train hushed as if the wind had been kicked out of it, and we came into the evening again.

Catty-corner from me sat a dear little black child maybe sixteen, all messed up on skag. She couldn't keep her head up. She couldn't stay out of her dreams. She knew: shit, we might as well have been drinking a dog's tears. Nothing mattered except that we were alive.

“I never tasted black honey,” I said to her.

She itched her nose and closed her eyes, her face dipping down into Paradise.

I said, “Hey.”

“Black. I ain't black,” she said. “I'm yellow. Don't call me black.”

“I wish I had some of what you have,” I said.

“Gone, boy. Gone, gone, gone.” She laughed like God. I didn't blame her for laughing.

“Any chance of getting some more?”

“How much you want? You got ten?”

“Maybe. Sure.”

“I'll take you down here,” she said. “I'll take you down over to the Savoy.” And after two more stops she led me off the train and down into the streets. A few people stood around trashcans with flames leaping up out of them and that sort of thing, mumbling and singing. The streetlamps and traffic lights had wire mesh screens over them.

I know there are people who believe that wherever you look, all you see is yourself. Episodes like this make me wonder if they aren't right.

The Savoy Hotel was a bad place. The reality of it gave out as it rose

higher above First Avenue, so that the upper floors dribbled away into space. Monsters were dragging themselves up the stairs. In the basement was a bar going three sides of a rectangle, as big as an Olympic pool, and a dancing stage with a thick gold curtain hanging down over it that never moved. Everyone knew what to do. People were paying with bills they'd made by tearing a corner off a twenty and pasting it onto a one. There was a man with a tall black hat, a helmet of thick blond hair, and a sharp blond beard. He seemed to want to be here. How did he know what to do? Beautiful women in the corners of my sight disappeared when I looked directly at them. Winter outside. Night by afternoon. Darkly, darkly the Happy Hour. I didn't know the rules. I didn't know what to do.

The last time I'd been in the Savoy, it had been in Omaha. I hadn't been anywhere near it in over a year, but I was just getting sicker. When I coughed I saw fireflies.

Everything down there but the curtain was red. It was like a movie of something that was actually happening. Black pimps in fur coats. The women were blank, shining areas with photographs of sad girls floating in them. "I'll just take your money and go upstairs," somebody said to me.

Michelle left me permanently for a man called John Smith, or shall I say that during one of the times we were parted she took up with a man and shortly after that had some bad luck and died? Anyway, she never came back to me.

I knew him, this John Smith. Once at a party he tried to sell me a gun, and later at the same party he made everyone quiet down for a few minutes because I was singing along with the radio, and he liked my voice. Michelle went to Kansas City with him and one night when he was out she took a lot of pills, leaving a note beside her on his pillow where he'd be sure to find it and rescue her. But he was so drunk when he got home that night that he just laid his cheek down on the paper she'd written on, and went to sleep. When he woke up the next morning my beautiful Michelle was cold and dead.

She was a woman, a traitor, and a killer. Males and females wanted her. But I was the only one who ever could have loved her.

For many weeks after she died, John Smith confided to people that

Michelle was calling to him from the other side of life. She wooed him. She made herself seem more real than any of the visible people around him, the people who were still breathing, who were supposed to be alive. When I heard, shortly after that, that John Smith was dead, I wasn't surprised.

When we were arguing on my twenty-fourth birthday, she left the kitchen, came back with a pistol, and fired it at me five times from right across the table. But she missed. It wasn't my life she was after. It was more. She wanted to eat my heart and be lost in the desert with what she'd done, she wanted to fall on her knees and give birth from it, she wanted to hurt me as only a child can be hurt by its mother.

I know they argue about whether or not it's right, whether or not the baby is alive at this point or that point in its growth inside the womb. This wasn't about that. It wasn't what the lawyers did. It wasn't what the doctors did, it wasn't what the woman did. It was what the mother and father did together.

NATASHA

DAVID BEZMOZGIS

It is the opposite which is good to us.

—Heraclitus

When I was sixteen I was high most of the time. That year my parents bought a new house at the edge of Toronto's sprawl. A few miles north were cows; south the city. I spent most of my time in basements. The suburbs offered nothing and so I lived a subterranean life. At home, separated from my parents by door and stairs, I smoked hash, watched television, read, and masturbated. In other basements I smoked, watched television, and refined my style with girls.

In the spring, my uncle Fima, my grandmother's youngest brother, married his second wife. She arrived from Moscow for two weeks to get acquainted with him and the rest of the family. Dusa, our dentist, had known the woman in Russia and recommended her. She was almost forty and my uncle was forty-four. The woman was the latest in a string of last chances. A previous last chance had led to his first marriage. That marriage, to a fellow Russian immigrant, had failed within six months. My uncle was a good man, a hard worker, and a polymath. He read books, newspapers, and travel brochures. He could speak with equal authority about the Crimean War and the Toronto Maple Leafs. Short months after arriving in Toronto he took a job giving tours of the city to visiting Russians. But he wasn't rich and never would be. He was also honest to a fault and nervous with people. My grandmother's greatest fear was that he would always be alone in the world.

Zina, the woman, had greasy brown hair cut in a mannish style. She was thin, her body almost without contour. The first time I saw her was

when my uncle brought her to our house for dinner. She wore tight blue pants, high heels, and a yellow silk blouse which accentuated her conspicuously long nipples. The top buttons of her blouse were undone and a thin gold chain with a Star of David clung to her breastbone. When she kissed me in greeting she smelled of sweat and lilac.

Zina strode into our house as if she were on familiar territory, and her confidence had the effect of making my uncle act as though he were the stranger. He stumbled through the introductions and almost knocked over his chair. He faltered as he tried to explain how they had spent the day and Zina chided him and finished his sentences. When my mother served the raspberry torte, Zina fed my uncle from her fork. In Russia she was a “teacher of English” and she sprinkled her conversation with English words and phrases. The soup my mother served was “tasty,” our dining room “divine,” and my father “charming.” After dinner, in the living room, she placed her hand on my uncle’s knee. I was, as usual, high, and I became fixated on the hand. It rested on my uncle’s knee like a small pale animal. Sometimes it would arch or rise completely to make a point, always to settle back on the knee. Under her hand, my uncle’s knee barely moved.

After her two weeks in Canada, Zina returned to Moscow. Before she left, my mother and aunt took her shopping and bought her a new wardrobe. They believed that Zina would be good for my uncle. The last thing he needed was a timid wife. Maybe she was a little aggressive, but to make it in this country you couldn’t apologize at every step like him. My grandmother was anxious because Zina had a young daughter in Moscow, but she conceded that at this age to find a woman without a child probably meant there was something wrong with her. My uncle did not disagree. There were positives and negatives, he said.

The decision was made quickly and days after Zina’s departure my uncle wrote her a letter inviting her to return and become his wife. One month later, Zina was back in Toronto. This time, my entire family went to the airport to greet her. We stood at the gate and waited as a stream of Russian faces filtered by. Near the end of the stream, Zina appeared. She was wearing an outfit my mother had purchased for her. She carried a heavy suitcase. When she saw my uncle she dropped the suitcase and ran

to him and kissed him on his cheeks and on his mouth. A thin blond girl, also carrying a suitcase, picked up Zina's abandoned bag and dragged both suitcases through the gate. The girl had large blue eyes and her straight blond hair was cut into bangs. She strained toward us with the bags and stopped behind Zina. She waited patiently, her face without expression, for her mother to introduce her. Her name was Natasha. She was fourteen. My mother said, Meet your new cousin. Later, as we drove my grandparents home, my grandmother despaired that the girl's father was obviously a shaygets.

One week after their arrival, everyone went down to North York City Hall for the civil ceremony. A retired judge administered the vows and we took photos in the atrium. There was no rabbi, no chuppah, no stomping of the glass. Afterward, we all went to our house for a barbecue. One after another people made toasts. My uncle and Zina sat at the head of the table like a real married couple. For a wedding gift they were given money to help them rent a larger apartment. My uncle's one-bedroom would not do. This wasn't Russia and the girl couldn't continue to sleep in the living room. The one time my grandparents had gone to visit, Natasha emerged from the shower naked and, without so much as acknowledging their presence, went into the kitchen for an apple. While my grandparents tried to listen to my uncle and Zina talk about Zina's plans to get her teaching certificate, Natasha stood in the kitchen and ate the apple.

At the barbecue, my mother seated Natasha between me and my cousin, Jana. It was our duty to make her feel welcome. She was new to the country, she had no friends, she spoke no English, she was now family. Jana, almost two years my senior, had no interest in a fourteen-year-old girl. Especially one who dressed like a Polish hooker, didn't speak English, and wasn't saying anything in Russian either. Midway through the barbecue, a car full of girls came for Jana and Natasha became my responsibility. My mother encouraged me to show her around the house.

Without enthusiasm I led Natasha around the house. Without enthusiasm she followed. For lack of anything else to say, I would enter a room and announce its name in Russian. We entered the kitchen and I

said kitchen, my parents' bedroom and I said bedroom, the living room, which I called the room where we watch television since I had no idea what it was called in Russian. Then I walked her down into the basement. Through the blinds we could see the backyard and the legs of our newly incarnated family. I said, That's it, the whole house. Natasha looked around the room and then shut the blinds, rendering the already dim basement almost dark. She dropped down into one of the two velour beanbag chairs I had in front of the television. Chairs that I had been earnestly and consistently humping since the age of twelve.

—You have all of this to yourself?

—Yes.

—It must be nice.

—It is.

—What do you do here?

—Watch television, read.

—That's it?

—That's most of it.

—Do you bring girls here?

—Not really.

—Have you had sex down here?

—What?

—You don't have to say if you don't want to. I don't really care. It doesn't mean anything.

—You're fourteen.

—So what? That doesn't mean anything either. I've done it a hundred times. If you want, I'll do it with you.

—We're cousins.

—No we're not.

—Your mother married my uncle.

—It's too bad. He's nice.

—He is.

—I feel sorry for him. She'll ruin his life.

—It's hard to imagine his life getting worse.

—She'll make it worse.

—She's your mother.

—She's a whore. Do you want to know how it sounds when they do it?

—Not particularly.

—They do it at least three times a day. He groans like he is being killed and she screams like she is killing him.

A month after the wedding, my uncle, Zina, and Natasha rented a new two-bedroom apartment ten minutes' walk from our house. This was in the early summer and I was on vacation from school. Instead of going off to camp I made an arrangement to work for Rufus, my dealer. Over the course of the year we had become friends. He was twenty and, while keeping up his business, was also studying philosophy at the University of Toronto. Aside from providing me with drugs, he also recommended books. Because of him I graduated from John Irving and Mordecai Richler to Camus, Heraclitus, Catullus, and Kafka. That summer, in exchange for doing the deliveries, I got free dope—plus whatever I shorted off potheads—and a little money. I also got to borrow the books Rufus had been reading over the course of the year. This, to me, was a perfectly legitimate way to spend two months, although my parents insisted that I had to find a job. Telling them about the job I already had was out of the question, and so the summer started off on a point of conflict.

A week into my summer vacation, my mother resolved our conflict. If I had no intention of finding a job, she would put me to good use. Since I was home by myself I would be conscripted into performing an essential service. I was alone and Natasha was alone. She didn't know anyone in the city and was making a nuisance of herself. From what I could understand, she wasn't actually doing anything to be a nuisance, but her mere presence in the apartment was inconvenient. My family felt that my uncle needed time alone with his new wife and having Natasha around made him uncomfortable. Besides, she was difficult. My uncle reported that she refused to speak to her mother and literally hadn't said a word in weeks.

The morning after my mother decided that I would keep Natasha company I was on my way to my uncle's new apartment. I hadn't seen

him, Zina, or Natasha since the wedding and the barbecue. They hadn't been back to our house and I had had no reason to go there. In fact, in all the years that my uncle lived in Toronto I had never been to his apartment. Despite occasional invitations, I avoided the place because I preferred not to see how he lived.

By the time I arrived, my uncle had already left for work. Zina met me at the door wearing a blue Soviet housedress that could have passed for a hospital gown. Again, she wore no bra. I was greeted by nipples, then Zina. She put her hand on my arm and ushered me into the kitchen, where she was filling out forms to obtain credentials from the school board. A stack of forms was laid out on the table along with black bread and cucumbers. She made me a sandwich I did not want and told me what a wonderful man my uncle was. How she was very fortunate to find such a man and how good things would be as soon as Natasha became accustomed to their new life. We were co-conspirators, she and I, both working for Natasha's well-being. She was convinced that I would be able to help her. She sensed that Natasha liked me. Natasha didn't like many people.

—I'm her mother, and no matter what she says, I would cut off my right arm for her. But she has always been different. Even as a baby she hardly smiled.

Zina led me to Natasha's door and knocked. Through the door she announced that I was here. After a brief pause Natasha opened the door. She was wearing blue jeans and a souvenir T-shirt from Niagara Falls. I could see behind her into the room. There was a small bed and a table. On one wall was an old poster of Michael Jackson circa *Thriller*. In bold red letters a phonetic approximation of Michael Jackson's name was written in Cyrillic. I read the name slowly letter by letter since I was effectively illiterate. It gave me something to do while Natasha and Zina glared at each other in acrimonious silence.

—I'm an enemy because I took her away from her criminal friends. I'm an enemy because I wanted to give her a better life. Now she won't say a word, but one day she'll thank me.

Without breaking her silence, Natasha grabbed my hand and led me out of the apartment. As we went past the door Zina called after us tell-

ing me to watch out for Natasha. I was to make sure that she didn't do anything stupid. Natasha should remember what it would do to my uncle if something were to happen to her. Even if she didn't care about how Zina felt, she should at least consider my uncle, for whom she was now like a daughter.

In the stairway Natasha released my hand and we descended to the back of the building and the parking lot. Outside, she turned and spoke what must have been her first words in weeks.

—I can't stand looking at her. I want to scratch out my eyes. In Moscow I never had to see her. Now she's always there.

We wound our way out of the parking lot and toward the subdivisions leading back to my house. On the way I decided to stop at Rufus's and pick up an eighth for one of our regular heads. Rufus had a house not far from us, and since it was still early in the morning I knew that he would be home. I walked ahead and Natasha trailed along, more interested in the uniform lawns and houses than the specifics of where we were going. Aside from the odd Filipina nanny wheeling a little white kid, the streets were quiet. The sun was neither bright nor hot and the outdoors felt conveniently like the indoors: God's thermostat set to "suburban basement."

—In Moscow, everyone lives in apartments. The only time you see houses like this is in the country, where people have their dachas.

—Three years ago this was the country.

We found Rufus on his backyard deck listening to Led Zeppelin, eating an omelette. Although he was alone the table was set for four with a complete set of linen napkins and matching cutlery. Rufus didn't seem at all surprised to see us. That was part of his persona. Rufus never appeared surprised about anything. At twenty years old he had already accomplished more than most men twice his age. It was rumored that aside from dealing Rufus was also a partner in a used car lot/body shop and various other ventures. Nobody who knew him had ever seen him sleep.

Even though I had only intended to see Rufus for as long as it took to get the eighth, he insisted on cooking us breakfast. Natasha and I sat at the kitchen counter as Rufus made more omelettes. He explained that even when he ate alone he liked to set a full table. The mere act of setting

extra places prevented him from receding into solipsism. It also made for good karma, so that even when he was not expecting guests there existed tangible evidence announcing that he was open to the possibility.

While Rufus spoke Natasha's eyes roamed around the house, taking in the spotless kitchen, the copper cookware, the living room with matching leather sofas, the abstract art on the walls. If not for the contents of the basement refrigerator, the house gave no indication that it was owned and inhabited by a drug dealer barely out of his teens. This was no accident. Rufus believed that it helped his business. His clients were all middle-class suburban kids, and despite his bohemian inclinations, a nice house in the suburbs was the perfect location. It kept him local and it meant that, for his customers, a visit to their dealer felt just like coming home.

Back on the deck I explained to Rufus about Natasha, leaving out certain details I didn't think he needed to know. As Rufus and I talked, Natasha sat contentedly with her omelette and orange juice. Since we'd left my uncle's apartment her attitude toward everything had taken a form of benign detachment. She was calibrated somewhere between resignation and joy.

I noticed Rufus looking at her.

—Did I mention she was fourteen?

—My interest, I assure you, is purely anthropological.

—The anthropology of jailbait.

—She's an intense little chick.

—She's Russian. We're born intense.

—With all due respect, Berman, you and her aren't even the same species.

To get her attention Rufus leaned across the table and tapped Natasha on the arm. She looked up from her omelette and returned Rufus's smile. He asked me to translate for him. His own family, he said, could be traced back to Russia. He wanted to know what Russia was like now. What it was really like.

With a shrug Natasha answered.

—Russia is shit but people enjoy themselves.

After that first day, Natasha started coming to our house regularly. I no longer went to pick her up but waited instead for her to arrive. Through my basement window I could see her as she appeared in our backyard and wandered around inspecting my mother's peonies or the raspberry and red currant bushes. If I was in a certain mood I would watch her for a while before going upstairs and opening the sliding glass door in the kitchen. Other times, I would just go and open the door. We spent most of our days in the basement. I read and Natasha studied television English. When I had a delivery to make she accompanied me. Between reading, television English, and deliveries, I taught Natasha how to get high. I showed her how to roll a joint, to light a pipe, or, in a pinch, where to cut the holes in a Coke can or Gatorade bottle. In exchange, Natasha taught me other things. Many of these things had nothing to do with sex.

After our days in the basement we would listen for my mother to arrive home from work. To avoid some serious unpleasantness I made a habit of setting my alarm for five o'clock. If we weren't sleeping, the alarm simply reminded us to open a window or get dressed. By the time my mother came home we were usually in the kitchen or out in the backyard. Chores that had been assigned to me were usually done at this time. It pleased my mother to come home and find me, spade in hand, turning over the earth around the berry bushes. Also, once it was established that Natasha much preferred to stay at our house, my mother grew more than accustomed to having her around. Unlike me and my father, Natasha volunteered to help her in the kitchen. The two of them would stand at the sink peeling potatoes and slicing up radishes and cucumbers for salad. I often came in to overhear my mother telling stories about her childhood in postwar Latvia—a land of outhouses, horse-drawn wagons, and friendly neighbors. In Natasha she found a receptive audience. They spoke the same language—Russian girl to Russian girl. This despite the fact that, in too many ways, Natasha's childhood couldn't have been more different from my mother's if she had been raised by Peruvian cannibals, but there was never any indication of this in our kitchen. Only my mother telling stories and Natasha listening.

Very quickly, our family of three became a family of four. No more than two weeks after I picked her up at my uncle's apartment Natasha

became a fixture at our house. It was a situation that, for different and even perversely conflicting reasons, suited everyone. It solved the Natasha problem for my uncle. It solved the Zina problem for Natasha. It made my mother feel like she was protecting my uncle's last chance at happiness and also satisfying her own latent desire for a daughter. It absolved me of the need to find a job and cast me in a generally favorable light with the rest of my family. And, strangely enough, Natasha's incorporation into the household made the things we did in the basement seem less bad. Or not bad at all. What we did in the basement became only a part of who we were. There were layers upon layers. Which was why, at any one moment, I felt for Natasha the most natural and unusual feelings; to explain the feelings would be impossible, but whatever they were they were never bad.

Since I had been conditioned to approach sex as negotiation, I was amazed to discover that it could be as perfunctory as brushing your teeth. One day, after some but not too many days together, Natasha simply slid out of her jeans and removed her shirt. We were sitting inches apart, each on our own beanbag. Moments before, we had finished smoking a joint and I had gone back to Kafka's diaries. I became aware of what she was doing slower than a sixteen-year-old should have. I looked over as she was wriggling out of her pants. That she saw me looking changed nothing. On the beanbag, naked, she turned to me and said, very simply, as if it were as insignificant to her as it was significant to me: Do you want to? At sixteen, no expert but no virgin, I lived in a permanent state of want to. But for everything I knew, I knew almost nothing. In the middle of the day, Natasha in the basement, was the first time I had seen a live naked girl. All the parts available for viewing. Nothing in my previous dimly lit gropings compared. In my teenage life, what was more elusive than a properly illuminated naked girl? And the fact that it was Natasha—my nominal cousin, fourteen, strange—no longer mattered. After spending days with her and thinking about her at night, I knew very well how I felt. And so, when she asked if I wanted to, I wanted to.

That day was the first of many firsts. With the house to ourselves and no threat of being disturbed, we did everything I had ever dreamed of doing—including some things that hadn't even occurred to me. We

showered together, we slept in the same bed, I watched her walk across the room, I watched her pee. These prosaic things, being new, were as exciting as the sex. And for me the sex was as much about the variation as the pleasure. Much of the pleasure was in the variation. I kept a mental list from position to position, crossing off one accomplishment after another. Nothing was repeated until everything was attempted. That way, in the event that I was struck by a bus, I would feel as though I had lived a full life. Most of the things we did Natasha had already done, but she was perfectly happy to oblige. If she was doing it as a favor, she never expected gratitude and demanded nothing in return.

In our quieter moments Natasha told me about the men who had taken her picture. She had never minded any of it, but she never understood why they couldn't explain why they liked one thing over another. They had always known exactly how they wanted her to look but none of them could give her a reason. Why did they prefer her leg raised this way and not that, why squatting from behind or holding her hand in a certain position? Some of the positions had been practically identical, and yet they had insisted on them. The only explanation they offered was that it looked good, or that it was sexy. And yet she never felt that way about men. She never cared how they looked, or what side she was viewing them from.

—You don't care how I look?

—You look how you look. If you bent over it wouldn't make any difference to me.

I bent over.

—That doesn't make any difference?

—It looks stupid. But what if I bend over? Does it look stupid?

—No, it looks good.

—Why is that?

—It just does.

—You can't explain it?

I thought it had to do with the forbidden. The attraction to the forbidden in the forbidden. The forbiddenest. But it still wasn't much of an answer.

At the same time that things with Natasha were improving my mother started to hear the first rumblings of trouble in my uncle's marriage. My grandparents, who had been accustomed to visiting my uncle frequently, were informed that maybe they shouldn't come over quite so often. Their habit of arriving unannounced was aggravating Zina, who insisted that she had too much to worry about without always having to accommodate my grandparents. My grandmother, although hurt, naturally made excuses for both my uncle and Zina. We were a close family, she said, but not all people can be expected to be the same way. Also, with time, as Zina became more comfortable, she was certain that she would feel differently. In any case, as long as my uncle was happy she was prepared to respect Zina's wishes. My uncle, for his part, said nothing. The signals were mixed. There was what my grandmother said, but my mother also knew that he and Zina took a weekend trip together to Niagara-on-the-Lake and another to Quebec City. After Quebec City my uncle sported a new leather jacket and a gray Stetson. Whatever was happening between them, he wasn't complaining.

I heard all of these things through my mother, but I also heard other things from Natasha. I now knew more about my uncle's life than I ever had, and certainly more than anyone else in my family. I knew, for instance, that he now spent as many nights on the living room couch as he did in the bedroom. I knew that Zina was racking up long-distance bills to Moscow, calling Natasha's father, a drunk who had effectively abandoned them years ago. She called in the mornings as soon as my uncle left for work and made various and emphatic promises. Natasha had seen her father only infrequently as a child, and was perfectly content to go the rest of her life without seeing him again. She could say the same thing about her mother. Essentially, since the age of eight, she had been on her own. Going to school, coming home, cooking her own dinners, running around with friends. Zina, when not at work, was chasing after Natasha's father or bringing random men into the apartment. As much as possible, Natasha avoided her.

When Natasha was twelve a friend of hers told her about a man who paid ten dollars for some pictures of her. The girl had gone and taken a shower in the man's bathroom and he had not only paid her but also

bought her dinner. He had promised her the same again if she could bring a friend. Ten dollars each for taking a shower. Natasha remembered thinking that the man had to be an idiot. She went, took her shower, and collected her ten dollars. There wasn't much to it and it wasn't as boring as hanging out at her friend's apartment. And ten dollars was ten dollars. Zina hardly gave her anything, and so it was good to have some of her own money.

After that man was another who took pictures of her and some friends in the forest. He had them climb birch trees and lie down in a meadow. He asked some of the girls to hold hands and kiss each other. Another man took some photos of her in her school uniform. None of these men touched her, but she wouldn't have cared if they had. They were nice and she felt sorry for them.

All of this led eventually to a Soviet director who had gone from working at the Moscow studios to making pornographic movies for Western businessmen. The man had a dacha on the outskirts of the city and would send a car around to pick up Natasha and her friends. Some of these friends were girls, some boys. They would spend the day at the dacha eating, drinking, having a good time. At some point the director would shoot some movies of them. Aside from teenagers there were also older women. On the first day, Natasha watched the women have sex. She understood that doing it or not doing it was not a serious consideration. In the end, everyone did it. If not in movies, then somewhere else, and it made absolutely no difference one way or the other. The only thing about having sex at the dacha was that it was much more pleasant. The house was beautiful and there was a large lawn and a forest. There was also a *banya* and a Jacuzzi. The filming itself didn't even take very long. The rest of the time they just relaxed. She was never asked to do anything she didn't want to, and she never saw anyone else do something that she wouldn't have done herself. Even though she and her friends knew they wouldn't be at the dacha if it weren't for the movies, the sex never felt as though it were the focus. The director and the other men became their friends. They treated them very well. And if they wanted to sleep with the girls, the girls could see no reason why not. At the end of the day everyone got twenty-five dollars.

Natasha didn't have any of the pictures or movies, which was disappointing since I wanted to see them. But it wasn't like she was a model. She didn't keep an album of pictures to show to prospective photographers. She was the album. They looked at her and preferred not to know about her past. And without having pictures around there was no risk of Zina finding out what Natasha was doing. Not that she thought Zina would care, instead it was that Natasha suspected Zina would want the money. In any case, when Zina did finally find out it was only because she heard something from another girl's mother. And much as Natasha expected, Zina told her that if she was going to be a whore she could at least help out with the rent. Natasha never felt like a whore. She didn't do it for the money, but she also wasn't so stupid as to turn it down. If anyone was a whore, it was Zina. And she came cheap. She sold herself to Natasha's father for nothing, and the men she brought to the apartment treated her like filth. They paid her with curses and bruises.

I carried all this information around like a prize. It was my connection to a larger darker world. At Rufus's parties it allowed me to feel superior to the other stoner acolytes comparing Nietzsche to Bob Marley. I took Natasha to these parties and she stood quietly listening to our incoherent and impassioned conversations. Later she would surprise me with just how much she had understood. By midsummer, if called upon, Natasha could answer basic questions and had learned enough to know when to tell someone to fuck off. The other stoners liked more than anything to hear Natasha say fuck off in her crisp Moscow accent. In crude canine fashion, they accepted Natasha as one of their own. Natasha was cool.

We coasted this way into August when Zina appeared in our backyard one evening during dinner. The way she looked, it was clear that something horrible was about to happen. My mother opened the sliding door and Zina burst into our kitchen and inaccurately described what Natasha and I had been doing. Then screams, sobbing, and hysterics. I watched as my father wrenched Natasha from her mother, her teeth leaving a bloody wound on Zina's hand. Zina let fly a torrent of invective, most of which I couldn't understand. But I understood enough to know that what was happening in the kitchen was nothing compared with what was to come. Zina threatened to call the police, to place an ad

in the Russian newspaper, to personally knock on all of our neighbors' doors. Natasha thrashed in my father's grip and freed herself enough to lunge unsuccessfully for a bread knife. She shrieked that her mother was a liar. I sat in my chair, nauseated, contemplating lies and escape.

After my father bandaged Zina's hand she waited outside while my mother talked with Natasha and me. With Zina outside my mother fumbled for the proper way to pose the question. It was hard to believe that what Zina was saying was true, but why would she make something like this up. Natasha said that it was because her mother hated her and never wanted her to be happy. She was jealous that Natasha was happy with us and wanted to ruin it, just as she had dragged Natasha from Moscow even though she hadn't wanted to go. Zina hated her and wanted to ruin her life, that was all. When my mother turned to me I denied everything. Unless Zina produced pictures or video I wasn't admitting a thing. I was terrified but I wasn't a moron.

When it became obvious that we had reached an impasse, my mother called my uncle. He came to our house in a state of anxiety that was remarkable even for him. He sat down between my mother and Zina on the living room couch. I was beside my father, who was in his armchair, and Natasha stood rigidly with her back against the door. My uncle confessed that he didn't know what was happening. Everything had been fine. What situation doesn't have problems, but on the whole he was content. The only explanation he could propose was that all of this might have had to do with a fight between Zina and Natasha over a phone bill. There had been a very expensive bill to Russia, almost six hundred dollars, which Zina had said were calls to her mother. He could understand that while getting used to a new life Zina would want to talk to her mother. Also, her mother was alone in Moscow and missed her. It was only natural that there would be calls. That there were so many was unfortunately a financial and not a personal problem. If it was within his means, he would be happy if Zina talked to her mother as much as she liked. But as it was, he had suggested that she try to be more careful about the amount of time she spent on the phone. They talked about it and she said she understood. It was then that Natasha accused Zina of lying to him and said she wanted her mother to tell him the truth about

who she had been calling. This started a fight. But at no point did he hear anything about me and Natasha. He was certain it wasn't true and was just something between a mother and daughter. Everyone was still getting used to things and it would be a mistake to make too much of it. In a day or so everyone would calm down and it would be forgotten.

That night my uncle, Zina, and Natasha slept at our house. Natasha in the guest room, Zina on the downstairs couch, and my uncle on the floor beside her. Zina refused to leave the house without Natasha and Natasha refused to leave with Zina. I was relegated to my basement. In the morning Natasha had indeed calmed down and she agreed to return home with Zina and my uncle. Forgoing breakfast, the three of them walked out the door neither looking at or touching one another. As we watched them go my mother announced that she had now seen enough craziness to last a lifetime. Whatever the truth, she knew one thing for certain: Natasha and I were kaput.

The following day, after hours of waiting, I left the house and headed for Rufus's. Books, bong, television; no distraction could eclipse the greater distraction of Natasha's absence. I was alone in my basement, she was up eleven floors with Zina—I couldn't understand why she didn't come. Our afternoons could still be ours. My mother's proscription didn't have to be obeyed between nine and five. Had the situation been reversed, I would not have disappointed her. Despite everything that had happened the previous night, I couldn't see why anything needed to change. Clearly, judging from the teeth marks on Zina's hand, Natasha wasn't Zina's source of information. And even though Zina's accusation happened to be more true than not, it appeared to be an unfortunate raving coincidence rather than something she could confirm. I didn't see why I had to suffer because of a lunatic.

A pool company's van was parked outside Rufus's and I followed the sound of voices into the backyard. In the middle of the yard, Rufus stood with two men from the pool company. Guys in jeans and golf shirts with the pool company's logo stitched on the breast pocket. The three were talking like old friends, each with a beer in hand, discussing the possible dimensions of a possible pool. Rufus invited me to contrib-

ute to the deliberations. If the price was right they could start digging tomorrow.

I had never known Rufus to be much of a swimmer; on nights when some of the other stoners and I would hop the fences of neighborhood pools, he rarely participated.

—Do you even swim?

—Berman, nobody swims in these things. They're for floating. Fill them up with plastic inflatables and free-associate. Gentle swaying stimulates the brainpan.

I watched the pool guys pacing off most of his yard.

—Why not start with a hammock and work your way up?

—Sometimes I'm out here and I need to take a leak. But I don't want to go inside. The weather's nice. I want to stay out but I need to pee. Just for that the pool would be worth the investment.

—You could pee on the bushes.

—I'm a suburban homeowner, there's a social contract. Pissing in the pool is fine but whipping out your dick and irrigating the shrubbery is bad news. It's all about property value.

I settled back on Rufus's deck and waited for the pool guys to leave. I had no deliveries to make that morning and I had neglected to bring along the books I was supposed to return to him. I was there without the veneer of pretext. After escorting the pool guys back to their van Rufus joined me on the deck.

—Where's the girl?

—With her mother.

—I thought she hated her mother.

—She does.

—So what are you doing here? Go liberate her.

—It's forbidden.

—You're sixteen, everything is forbidden. The world expects you to disobey.

—I've been accused of unnatural acts.

—Society was founded on unnatural acts. Read the Bible. You start with Adam and Eve, after that if somebody doesn't boink a sibling it's end of story.

—You mind if I use that argument with my mother?

Rufus got up and looked out across his yard.

—What do you think about a hot tub?

—Instead of the pool?

—With the pool. Do everything in mosaic tile. Give it a real Greek feel. Put up some Doric columns. Get a little fountain. Eat grapes. Play Socrates.

He descended from the deck and walked to the corner of his yard and struck a pose that was either Socrates or the fountain. Our conversation was over.

From Rufus's I walked to my uncle's building and lurked until an old man was buzzed in by another old man. Romeo climbed a trellis, so I took the stairs. Eleven flights later I was in the hallway, passing the smells of other apartments. With one or two exceptions all the doorposts had mezuzahs, just like the hallways above and below. Everyone conveniently assembled for UJA solicitors and neo-Nazis.

I knocked and Zina opened the door. She was wearing the same blue housedress. She blocked the doorway so that it was hard to see beyond her into the apartment. At first she said nothing. I had prepared myself for the worst, but she seemed pleased to see me.

—I wanted to apologize to you myself. I don't blame you for what happened. It wasn't your fault. She has turned grown men inside out and you're just a boy. It was crazy to expect anything else. I know how weak men are. I am to blame. The life in Russia was like a disease to children. Natasha is a very sick girl.

Behind Zina I noticed a movement. It was Natasha. I could see her over Zina's shoulder. She stood at the far end of the apartment, leaning against the living room couch. When I caught her eyes they reflected nothing. They were no less remote than the first time I saw her at the airport. She continued looking in my direction, but I couldn't discern if she was looking at me or the back of Zina's head. Zina, sensing Natasha's presence, turned to look at her daughter. When she looked back at me, her turning was a motion that included the closing of the door.

—It will be best for everybody if you didn't see Natasha anymore.

Late that night, after a day spent missing Natasha, despairing over the black void that was the remainder of my summer and my life in general, Natasha knocked on my basement window. I woke up and cupped my hands against the glass to see out. By the sound of the knock I knew it was her. I looked out and saw her squatting like a Vietnamese peasant in front of the window. In the dark it was hard to see her face. Upstairs in the kitchen I opened the sliding glass door and went into the yard to join her. She was hugging her knees at the base of our pine tree; her suitcase, the same one I had seen at the airport, was lying on the grass beside her. When I got close enough I could see that she had been crying. I joined her on the grass. Already, after only one day apart and remembering the way she had looked at me over Zina's shoulder, I didn't feel as though I could touch her.

—You listened to her lies. Why did you listen to her lies?

—What was I supposed to do?

—You could have knocked her down. You could have broken down the door.

—And what then?

—I don't know. Something. Something else would have happened. But you left me alone with her.

—You looked right at me. Why didn't you say anything?

—But I already told you everything. You saw how she tried to ruin my life and your life and how she was killing your uncle. You knew all of this but you didn't do anything. You're like your uncle. You want people to make decisions for you.

Natasha picked at the grass. Tears welled up in her eyes. She let them fall. I got up and picked up her suitcase. It felt empty and weighed almost nothing. I made a move toward the house.

—What are you doing?

—Taking it inside.

—I can't go inside. I can't stay here. I have to leave.

—You have to leave tonight?

—Do you want to come with me?

—Where?

—Florida. One of the businessmen who came to the dacha lives

there. He is very rich. He promised that if I ever came to Florida he would give me a job. He'll give you one too.

—We have to decide this tonight?

—Yes. I can't stay here and I can't go home. There is no more home. My mother has left your uncle. I can't live with her and I can't stay with him. I have nowhere to go.

—What do you mean your mother left my uncle?

—I forced them to decide.

I put the suitcase back down.

—She made him sleep on the couch again. I went out to the living room. At first he was asleep but when he woke up and understood what was happening he didn't stop me. He knew whose mouth it was. And then she heard and came out of the bedroom. He needed me to do it that way or he would never have gotten away from her. I wasn't going to let her ruin his life. I wasn't going to let her win.

Strangely, my first thought was about my grandmother. My next thought was that my uncle would kill himself.

—He let her insult him, embarrass him, steal his money. But he wouldn't leave her. He was a coward. So I gave him a coward's reason to leave. It's funny, other men would have felt the opposite way. They would have taken it as a reason to stay and spent the next two years fucking me.

I helped Natasha back down into the basement and promised her that I would wake her before my parents got up. I gave her my bed and slept on the floor. When the alarm rang I dug out all the money I had and gave it to her. It amounted to a little more than a hundred dollars. I watched her drag her suitcase down our street, heading in the direction of the bus station and Florida.

When my parents woke up the phones were already ringing. My uncle had arrived on my grandparents' doorstep at seven in the morning. His marriage was over. This confirmed my grandmother's suspicions. From the first she had felt something wasn't right with Zina. That her daughter was the product of a shaygets should have been enough. Now my uncle was without an apartment and he was financially obligated for Zina and Natasha because of the sponsorship papers he had

signed. As to why the separation had to be so drastic, why he couldn't stay in the apartment until he found a new place, my uncle was vague. They could no longer live together. Nobody in my family asked about Natasha or even knew that she had left home. As far as the family was concerned, once my uncle severed his relationship with Zina, she and Natasha ceased to exist.

For days afterward I stayed in my basement. I had no interest in going out, seeing my friends, making deliveries. I was compromised by everything I knew. I knew too much about my uncle. I knew things about him that a sixteen-year-old nephew should not have known. And when my mother invited him to our house for dinner—in an effort to bolster his spirits—I sat across the table from him and tried to suppress the feeling of an awkward bond. The bond two men have when they have been with the same woman. It wasn't the sort of bond I wanted to share with my forty-four-year-old uncle, especially under the circumstances. But the feeling was more powerful than my desire not to feel it. It was too easy to picture him with her. Everything my uncle did during dinner—talking, eating, drinking—reminded me that he had been with Natasha. The mouth he spoke with, the hands he ate with, his physical self, were the same mouth, hands, self that had been with Natasha.

Of those first few depressing days after Natasha left, the dinner with my uncle was the worst. During that dinner he avoided the subject of Zina and Natasha entirely. It was the only thing on everyone's mind and so, characteristically, it was the only thing nobody mentioned. Instead my uncle gave a very long and detailed history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Arafat, Rabin, Ben-Gurion, Balfour, Begin, Nasser, Sadat. I wondered what kept my uncle going. What life offered him. Why he didn't kill himself. Watching him, listening to him talk, I realized that there was nothing I could do for him. I felt better.

The following morning I ended my self-imposed seclusion and took the familiar walk to Rufus's. Weeks remained in my summer. There were books to read and whatever else the summer still had to offer. During my seclusion I had avoided all phone calls. Rufus had left typically cryptic messages, as did some of my other friends. Something in their voices intimated that there was excitement in our world. Activity was

taking place without me. Conversations, discoveries, all sorts of important new things. Because of Natasha, I had removed myself from the common equation, and I was ready to return and accept my place within the social order.

Approaching Rufus's house, I wasn't surprised to see the pool company's van as well as a large truck brimming with dirt. Guys with wheelbarrows were carting dirt out from Rufus's yard and shoveling it into the truck. Teams of six landscapers shouldered ten-foot-long Doric columns in the opposite direction. The strains of Bizet's *Carmen* wafted from the backyard. The neighborhood had never seen anything like it.

In the backyard, I spotted most of my friends. Guys that had never held down a real job, guys like me who spent their days in basements reading, smoking, and engaging in self-abuse. They were fanned out across Rufus's yard, straining, digging, smoothing, lifting, side by side with the landscapers and pool installers. They looked very happy. Intimately involved. And already they had succeeded in transforming Rufus's yard. A massive hole, many feet deep, dominated the property. An orange plastic fence had been erected around the hole's circumference to keep the workmen and stoners from accidentally falling in.

Up on the deck, seated with one of the pool guys I had seen on my last visit, was Rufus. A blueprint was laid out on the table and both of them were hunched over it as though it were a battle plan. I mounted the steps to the deck and stood behind Rufus and waited for him to acknowledge me. Over his shoulder I could see the detail of the blueprint. There were columns, cypress trees, a fountain, and Rufus's hot tub. Rufus looked up as I bent closer to get a better look. For the briefest instant his face assumed an expression I had never seen before. At that moment I didn't understand what it meant, but I later recognized it as pity.

—Berman, what's the matter, you don't return calls anymore?

He rose and had me follow him down into the yard. I felt the onset of dread. Something about Rufus's posture alerted me to tragedy. It was then that I also realized that none of my friends had said anything to me. The yard was busy, but not so busy that none of them would have seen me. I had, after all, seen them. The sum of these impressions began to register. I knew that whatever it was, it was very bad and that

I was trapped and helpless to avoid the damage. I sensed all of this as I descended from the deck and heard the screen door open. Using her hip, Natasha slid the door closed. She was carrying a tray with a pitcher of water and multicolored plastic glasses. Rufus watched me for a reaction and then took me gently by the shoulder and out to the front of the house.

—Berman, this is why I asked you to call. I wanted to tell you on the phone, but it wasn't exactly the sort of thing I could leave on an answering machine.

Another team of landscapers passed us with a Doric column. I felt a compulsion to stick out my foot and trip them. To start a brawl, draw blood, break bones.

—She doesn't want to see you. I'm sorry about this, Berman. It's just the way it is.

I made way for the Doric column.

—How much do those things weigh?

—Not as much as you'd think. They're masonry and plaster, not marble. If they were marble I'd need slaves.

—I thought she was going to Florida.

—Come on, Berman, she's a fucking kid. How is she supposed to get to Florida? She barely speaks English. Either she's here or she's on the street.

—Right.

—She thinks you betrayed her. She's very principled. Anyway, she'll be safe here.

—That's one way to look at it.

—I hope you're not mad. It's not personal.

—I still have some of your books and maybe a few grams of weed.

—That's cool. Don't sweat it. Consider them yours.

—What a great deal for me.

—That's a shitty attitude, Berman. You're smarter than that.

—I'm a fucking genius.

—Take care of yourself, Berman.

I lingered in front of Rufus's house after he left and watched the wheelbarrows come and go. I waited for the workmen to bring in the last

of the Doric columns and then walked home. In another country, under another code, it would have been my duty to return to Rufus's with a gun. But in the suburbs, at the end of my sixteenth summer, this was not an option. Instead, I resorted to a form of civilized murder. By the time I reached my house everyone in Rufus's yard was dead. Rufus, Natasha, my stoner friends. I would never see them again. By the time I got home I had already crafted a new identity. I would switch schools, change my wardrobe, move to another city. Later I would avenge myself with beautiful women, learn martial arts, and cultivate exotic experiences. I saw my future clearly. I had it all planned out. And yet, standing in our backyard, drawn by a strange impulse, I crouched and peered through the window into my basement. I had never seen it from this perspective. I saw what Natasha must have seen every time she came to the house. In the full light of summer, I looked into darkness. It was the end of my subterranean life.

SOME OTHER, BETTER OTTO

DEBORAH EISENBERG

I don't know why I committed us to any of those things," Otto said. "I'd much prefer to be working or reading, and you'll want all the time you can get this week to practice."

"It's fine with me," William said. "I always like to see Sharon. And we'll survive the evening with your—"

Otto winced.

"Well, we will," William said. "And don't you want to see Naomi and Margaret and the baby as soon as they get back?"

"Everyone always says, 'Don't you want to see the baby, don't you want to see the baby,' but if I did want to see a fat, bald, confused person, obviously I'd have only to look in the mirror."

"I was reading a remarkable article in the paper this morning about holiday depression," William said. "Should I clip it for you? The statistics were amazing."

"The statistics cannot have been amazing, the article cannot have been remarkable, and I am not 'depressed.' I just happen to be bored sick by these inane— Waving our little antennae, joining our little paws in indication of— Oh, what is the point? Why did I agree to any of this?"

"Well," William said. "I mean, this is what we do."

Hmm. Well, true. And the further truth was, Otto saw, that he himself wanted, in some way, to see Sharon; he himself wanted, in some way, to see Naomi and Margaret and the baby as soon as possible. And it was even he himself who had agreed to join his family for Thanksgiving. It would be straining some concept—possibly the concept of "wanted," possibly the concept of "self"—to say that he himself had wanted to

join them, and yet there clearly must have been an implicit alternative to joining them that was even less desirable, or he would not, after all, have agreed to it.

It had taken him—how long?—years and years to establish a viable, if not pristine, degree of estrangement from his family. Which was no doubt why, he once explained to William, he had tended, over the decades, to be so irascible and easily exhausted. The sustained effort, the subliminal concentration that was required to detach the stubborn prehensile hold was enough to wear a person right out and keep him from ever getting down to anything of real substance.

Weddings had lapsed entirely, birthdays were a phone call at the most, and at Christmas, Otto and William sent lavish gifts of out-of-season fruits, in the wake of which would arrive recriminatory little thank-you notes. From mid-December to mid-January they would absent themselves, not merely from the perilous vicinity of Otto's family, but from the entire country, to frolic in blue water under sunny skies.

When his mother died, Otto experienced an exhilarating melancholy; most of the painful encounters and obligations would now be a thing of the past. Life, with its humorous theatricality, had bestowed and revoked with one gesture, and there he abruptly was, in the position he felt he'd been born for: he was alone in the world.

Or alone in the world, anyway, with William. Marching ahead of his sisters and brother—Corinne, Martin, and Sharon—Otto was in the front ranks now, death's cannon fodder and so on; he had become old overnight, and free.

Old and free! Old and free . . .

Still, he made himself available to provide legal advice or to arrange a summer internship for some child or nephew. He saw Sharon from time to time. From time to time there were calls: "Of course you're too busy, but . . ."

"Of course you're not interested, but . . ." was how they began. This was the one thing Corinne and her husband and Martin and whichever wife were always all in accord about—that Otto seemed to feel he was too good for the rest of them, despite the obvious indications to the contrary.

Who was too good for whom? It often came down to a show of force.

When Corinne had called a week or so earlier about Thanksgiving, Otto, addled by alarm, said, "We're having people ourselves, I'm afraid."

Corinne's silence was like a mirror, flashing his tiny, harmless lie back to him in huge magnification, all covered with sticky hairs and microbes.

"Well, I'll see what I can do," he said.

"Please try," Corinne said. The phrase had the unassailable authority of a road sign appearing suddenly around the bend: FALLING ROCK. "Otto, the children are growing up."

"Children! What children? Your children grew up years ago, Corinne. Your children are old now, like us."

"I meant, of course, Martin's. The new ones. Martin and Laurie's. And there's Portia."

Portia? Oh, yes. The little girl. The sole, thank heavens, issue, of Martin's marriage to that crazy Viola.

"I'll see what I can do," Otto said again, this time less cravenly. It was Corinne's own fault. A person of finer sensibilities would have written a note, or used e-mail—or would face-savily have left a message at his office, giving him time to prepare some well-crafted deterrent rather than whatever makeshift explosive he would obviously be forced to lob back at her under direct attack.

"Wesley and I are having it in the city this year," Corinne was saying. "No need to come all the way out to the nasty country. A few hours and it will all be over with. Seriously, Otto, you're an integral element. We're keeping it simple this year."

" 'This year?' Corinne, there have been no other years. You do not observe Thanksgiving."

"In fact, Otto, we do. And we all used to."

"Who?"

"All of us."

"Never. When? Can you imagine Mother being thankful for anything?"

"We always celebrated Thanksgiving when Father was alive."

"I remember no such thing."

"I do. I remember, and so does Martin."

"Martin was four when Father died!"

"Well, you were little, too."

"I was twice Martin's age."

"Oh, Otto—I just feel sad, sometimes, to tell you the truth, don't you? It's all going so fast! I'd like to see everyone in the same room once a century or so. I want to see everybody well and happy. I mean, you and Martin and Sharon were my brothers and sister. What was that all about? Don't you remember? Playing together all the time?"

"I just remember Martin throwing up all the time."

"You'll be nice to him, won't you, Otto? He's still very sensitive. He won't want to talk about the lawsuit."

"Have you spoken to Sharon?"

"Well, that's something I wanted to talk to you about, actually. I'm afraid I might have offended her. I stressed the fact that it was only to be us this year. No aunts or uncles, no cousins, no friends. Just us. And husbands or wives. Husband. And wife. Or whatever. And children, naturally, but she became very hostile."

"Assuming William to be 'whatever,' " Otto said, "why shouldn't Sharon bring a friend if she wants to?"

"William is *family*. And surely you remember when she brought that person to Christmas! The person with the feet? I wish you'd go by and talk to her in the next few days. She seems to listen to you."

Otto fished up a magazine from the floor—one of the popular science magazines William always left lying around—and idly opened it.

"Wesley and I reach out to her," Corinne was saying. "And so does Martin, but she doesn't respond. I know it can be hard for her to be with people, but we're not people—we're family."

"I'm sure she understands that, Corinne."

"I hope you do, too, Otto."

How clearly he could see, through the phone line, this little sister of his—in her fifties now—the six-year-old's expression of aggrieved anxiety long etched decisively on her face.

"In any case," she said, "I've called."

And yet there was something to what Corinne had said; they had been one another's environs as children. The distance between them had been

as great, in any important way, as it was now, but there had been no other beings close by, no other beings through whom they could probe or illumine the mystifying chasms and absences and yearnings within themselves. They had been born into the arid clutter of one another's behavior, good and bad, their measles, skinned knees, report cards . . .

A barren landscape dotted with clutter. Perhaps the life of the last dinosaurs, as they ranged, puzzled and sorrowful, across the comet-singed planet, was similar to childhood. It hadn't been a pleasant time, surely, and yet one did have an impulse to acknowledge one's antecedents, now and again. Hello, that was us, it still is, good-bye.

"I don't know," William said. "It doesn't seem fair to put any pressure on Sharon."

"Heaven forfend. But I did promise Corinne I'd speak with Sharon. And, after all, I haven't actually seen her for some time."

"We could just go have a plain old visit, though. I don't know. Urging her to go to Corinne's—I'm not really comfortable with that."

"Oof, William, phrase, please, jargon."

"Why is that jargon?"

"Why? How should I know why? Because it is. You can say, 'I'm uncomfortable *about* that,' or 'That makes me uncomfortable.' But 'I'm uncomfortable *with* that' is simply jargon." He picked up a book sitting next to him on the table and opened it. *Relativity for Dummies*. "Good heavens," he said, snapping the book shut. "*Obviously* Martin doesn't want to talk about the lawsuit. Why bother to mention that to me? Does she think I'm going to ask Martin whether it's true that he's been misrepresenting the value of his client's stock? Am I likely to talk about it? I'm perfectly happy to read about it in the *Times* every day, like everyone else."

"You know," William said, "we could go away early this year. We could just pick up and leave on Wednesday, if you'd like."

"I would not like. I would like you to play in your concert, as always."

William took the book from Otto and held Otto's hand between his own. "They're not really so bad, you know, your family," he said.

Sometimes William's consolations were oddly like provocations. "Easy for you to say," Otto said.

"Not that easy."

"I'm sorry," Otto said. "I know."

Just like William to suggest going away early for Otto's sake, when he looked forward so much to his concert! The little orchestra played publicly only once a year, the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Otto endured the grating preparatory practicing, not exactly with equanimity, it had to be admitted, but with relative forbearance, just for the pleasure of seeing William's radiant face on the occasion. William in his suit, William fussing over the programs, William busily arranging tickets for friends. Otto's sunny, his patient, his deeply good William. Toward the end of every year, when the city lights glimmered through the fuzzy winter dark, on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, William with his glowing violin, urging the good-natured, timid audience into passionate explorations of the unseen world. And every year now, from the audience, Otto felt William's impress stamped on the planet, more legible and valuable by one year; all the more legible and valuable for the one year's diminution in William's beauty.

How spectacular he had been the first time Otto brought him to a family event, that gladiatorial Christmas thirty-odd years earlier. How had Otto ever marshaled the nerve to do it?

Oh, one could say till one was blue in the face that Christmas was a day like any other, what difference would it make if he and William were to spend that particular day apart, and so on. And yet.

Yes, the occasion forced the issue, didn't it. Either he and William would both attend, or Otto would attend alone, or they would not attend together. But whatever it was that one decided to do, it would be a declaration—to the family, and to the other. And, the fact was, to oneself.

Steeled by new love, in giddy defiance, Otto had arrived at the house with William, to all intents and purposes, on his arm.

A tidal wave of nervous prurience had practically blown the door out from inside the instant he and William ascended the front step. And all evening aunts, uncles, cousins, mother, and siblings had stared at William beadily, as if a little bunny had loped out into a clearing in front of them.

William's beauty, and the fact that he was scarcely twenty, had embarrassed Otto on other occasions, but never so searingly. "How *intelligent* he is!" Otto's relatives kept whispering to one another loudly, meaning, apparently, that it was a marvel he could speak. Unlike, the further implication was, the men they'd evidently been imagining all these years.

Otto had brought someone to a family event only once before—also on a Christmas, with everyone in attendance: Diandra Fetlin, a feverishly brilliant colleague, far less beautiful than William. During the turkey, she thumped Otto on the arm whenever he made a good point in the argument he was having with Wesley, and continued to eat with solemn assiduity. Then, while the others applied themselves to dessert, a stuccolike fantasy requiring vigilance, Diandra had delivered an explication of one of the firm's recent cases that was worth three semesters of law school. No one commented on *her* intelligence. And no one had been in the least deceived by Otto's tepid display of interest in her.

"So," Corinne had said in a loud and artificially genial tone as if she were speaking to an armed high-school student, "where did you and William meet, Otto?"

The table fell silent; Otto looked out at the wolfish ring of faces. "On Third Avenue," he said distinctly, and returned to his meal.

"Sorry," he said, as he and William climbed into the car afterward. "Sorry to have embarrassed you. Sorry to have shocked them. Sorry, sorry, sorry. But what was I supposed to say? All that completely fraudulent *interest*. The *solicitude*. The truth is, they've *never* sanctioned my way of life. Or, alternately, they've always *sanctioned* it. Oh, what on earth good is it to have a word that means only itself and its opposite!"

Driving back to the city, through the assaultively scenic and demographically uniform little towns, they were silent. William had witnessed; his power over Otto had been substantially increased by the preceding several hours, and yet he was exhibiting no signs of triumph. On the contrary, his habitual chipper mood was—where? Simply eclipsed. Otto glanced at him; no glance was returned.

Back in the apartment, they sat for a while in the dark. Tears stung

Otto's eyes and nose. He would miss William terribly. "It was a mistake," he said.

William gestured absently. "Well, we had to do it sooner or later."

We? We did? It was as if snow had begun to fall in the apartment—a gentle, chiming, twinkling snow. And sitting there, looking at one another silently, it became apparent that what each was facing was his future.

Marvelous to watch William out in the garden, now with the late chrysanthemums. It was a flower Otto had never liked until William instructed him to look again. Well, all right, so it wasn't a merry flower. But flowers could comfortably embrace a range of qualities, it seemed. And now, how Otto loved the imperial colors, the tensely arched blossoms, the cleansing scent that seemed dipped up from the pure well of winter, nature's ceremony of end and beginning.

The flat little disk of autumn sun was retreating, high up over the neighbors' buildings. As Otto gazed out the window, William straightened, shaded his eyes, waved, and bent back to work. Late in the year, William in the garden . . .

Otto bought the brownstone when he and William had decided to truly move in together. Over twenty-five years ago, that was. The place was in disrepair and cost comparatively little at the time. While Otto hacked his way through the barbed thickets of intellectual property rights issues that had begun to spring up everywhere, struggling to disentangle tiny shoots of weak, drab good from vibrant, hardy evil, William worked in the garden and on the house. And to earn, as he insisted on doing, a modest living of his own, he proofread for a small company that published books about music. Eventually they rented out the top story of the brownstone, for a purely nominal sum, to Naomi, whom they'd met around the neighborhood and liked. It was nice to come home late and see her light on, to run into her on the stairs.

She'd been just a girl when she'd moved in, really, nodding and smiling and ducking her head when she encountered them at the door or on

the way up with intractable brown paper bags, bulging as if they were full of cats but tufted with peculiar groceries—vegetables sprouting globular appendages and sloshing cartons of mysterious liquids. Then, farther along in the distant past, Margaret had appeared.

Where there had been one in the market, at the corner bar, on the stairs, now there were two. Naomi, short and lively, given to boots and charming cowgirl skirts; tall, arrestingly bony Margaret with arched eyebrows and bright red hair. Now there were lines around Naomi's eyes; she had widened and settled downward. One rarely recalled Margaret's early, sylvan loveliness.

So long ago! Though it felt that way only at moments—when Otto passed by a mirror unprepared, or when he bothered to register the probable ages (in comparison with his own) of people whom—so recently!—he would have taken for contemporaries, or when he caught a glimpse of a middle-aged person coming toward him on the street who turned into William. Or sometimes when he thought of Sharon.

And right this moment, Naomi and Margaret were on their way back from China with their baby. The adoption went through! Naomi's recent, ecstatic e-mail had announced. Adoption. Had the girls upstairs failed to notice that they had slid into their late forties?

Sharon's apartment looked, as always, as if it had been sealed up in some innocent period against approaching catastrophes. There were several blond wood chairs, and a sofa, all slipcovered in a nubby, unexceptionable fabric that suggested nuns' sleepwear, and a plastic hassock. The simple, undemanding shapes of the furnishings portrayed the humility of daily life—or at least, Otto thought, of Sharon's daily life. The Formica counter was blankly unstained, and in the cupboards there was a set of heavy, functional, white dishes.

It was just possible, if you craned, and scrunched yourself properly, to glimpse through the window a corner of Sharon's beloved planetarium, where she spent many of her waking hours; the light that made its way to the window around the encircling buildings was pale and tender, an elegy from a distant sun. Sharon herself sometimes seemed to Otto like an apparition from the past. As the rest of them aged, her small

frame continued to look like a young girl's; her hair remained an infantine flaxen. To hold it back she wore bright, plastic barrettes.

A large computer, a gift from Otto, sat in the living room, its screen permanently alive. Charts of the constellations were pinned to one of the bedroom walls, and on the facing wall were topographical maps. Peeking into the room, one felt as if one were traveling with Sharon in some zone between earth and sky; yes, down there, so far away—that was our planet.

Why did he need so many things in his life, Otto wondered; why did all these things have to be so special? Special, beautiful plates; special, beautiful furniture; special, beautiful everything. And all that specialness, it occurred to him, intended only to ensure that no one—especially himself—could possibly underestimate his value. Yet it actually served to illustrate how corroded he was, how threadbare his native resources, how impoverished his discourse with everything that lived and was human.

Sharon filled a teakettle with water and lit one of the stove burners. The kettle was dented, but oddly bright, as if she'd just scrubbed it. "I'm thinking of buying a sculpture," she said. "Nothing big. Sit down, Otto, if you'd like. With some pleasant vertical bits."

"Good plan," Otto said. "Where did you find it?"

"Find it?" she said. "Oh. It's a theoretical sculpture. Abstract in that sense, at least. Because I realized you were right."

About what? Well, it was certainly plausible that he had once idly said something about a sculpture, possibly when he'd helped her find the place and move in, decades earlier. She remembered encyclopedically her years of education, pages of print, apparently arbitrary details of their histories. And some trivial incident or phrase from their childhood might at any time fetch up from her mind and flop down in front of her, alive and thrashing.

No, but it couldn't be called "remembering" at all, really, could it? That simply wasn't what people meant by "remembering." No act of mind or the psyche was needed for Sharon to reclaim anything, because nothing in her brain ever sifted down out of precedence. The passage of time failed to distance, blur, or diminish her experiences. The nacre-

ous layers that formed around the events in one's history to smoothe, distinguish, and beautify them never materialized around Sharon's; her history skittered here and there in its original sharp grains on a depthless plane that resembled neither calendar nor clock.

"I just had the most intense episode of *déjà vu*," William said, as if Otto's thoughts had sideswiped him. "We were all sitting here—"

"We *are* all sitting here," Otto said.

"But that's what I mean," William said. "It's supposed to be some kind of synaptic glitch, isn't it? So you feel as if you've already had the experience just as you're having it?"

"In the view of many neurologists," Sharon said. "But our understanding of time is dim. It's patchy. We really don't know to what degree time is linear, and under what circumstances. Is it actually, in fact, manifold? Or pleated? Is it frilly? And what is our relationship to it? Our relationship to it is extremely problematical."

"I think it's a fine idea for you to have a sculpture," Otto said. "But I don't consider it a necessity."

Her face was as transparent as a child's. Or at least as hers had been as a child, reflecting every passing cloud, rippling at the tiniest disturbance. And her smile! The sheer wattage—no one over eleven smiled like that. "We're using the teabag-in-the-cup method," she said. "Greater scope for the exercise of free will, streamlined technology . . ."

"Oh, goody," William said. "Darjeeling."

Otto stared morosely at his immersed bag and the dark halo spreading from it. How long would Sharon need them to stay? When would she want them to go? It was tricky, weaving a course between what might cause her to feel rejected and what might cause her to feel embattled . . . Actually, though, how did these things work? Did bits of water escort bits of tea from the bag, or what? "How is flavor disseminated?" he said.

"It has to do with oils," Sharon said.

Strange, you really couldn't tell, half the time, whether someone was knowledgeable or insane. At school Sharon had shown an astounding talent for the sciences—for everything. For mathematics, especially. Her mind was so rarefied, so crystalline, so adventurous, that none of

the rest of them could begin to follow. She soared into graduate school, practically still a child; she was one of the few blessed people, it seemed, whose destiny was clear.

Her professors were astonished by her leaps of thought, by the finesse and elegance of her insights. She arrived at hypotheses by sheer intuition and with what eventually one of her mentors described as an almost alarming speed; she was like a dancer, he said, out in the cosmos springing weightlessly from star to star. Drones, merely brilliant, crawled along behind with laborious proofs that supported her assertions.

A tremendous capacity for metaphor, Otto assumed it was; a tremendous sensitivity to the deep structures of the universe. Uncanny. It seemed no more likely that there would be human beings thus equipped than human beings born with satellite dishes growing out of their heads.

He himself was so literal minded he couldn't understand the simplest scientific or mathematical formulation. Plain old electricity, for example, with its amps and volts and charges and conductivity! Metaphors, presumably—metaphors to describe some ectoplasmic tiger in the walls just spoiling to shoot through the wires the instant the cage door was opened and out into the bulb. And molecules! What on earth were people talking about? If the table was actually just a bunch of swarming motes, bound to one another by nothing more than some amicable commonality of form, then why didn't your teacup go crashing through it?

But from the time she was tiny, Sharon seemed to be in kindly, light-hearted communion with the occult substances that lay far within and far beyond the human body. It was all as easy for her as reading was for him. She was a creature of the universe. As were they all, come to think of it, though so few were privileged to feel it. And how hospitable and correct she'd made the universe seem when she spoke of even its most rococo and farfetched attributes!

The only truly pleasurable moments at the family dinner table were those rare occasions when Sharon would talk. He remembered one evening—she would have been in grade school. She was wearing a red sweater; pink barrettes held back her hair. She was speaking of

holes in space—holes in nothing! No, not in nothing, Sharon explained patiently—in space. And the others, older and larger, laid down their speared meat and listened, uncomprehending and entranced, as though to distant, wordless singing.

Perhaps, Otto sometimes consoled himself, they could be forgiven for failing to identify the beginnings. How could the rest of them, with their ordinary intellects, have followed Sharon's rapid and arcane speculations, her penetrating apperceptions, closely enough to identify with any certainty the odd associations and disjunctures that seemed to be showing up in her conversation? In any case, at a certain point as she wandered out among the galaxies, among the whirling particles and ineffable numbers, something leaked in her mind, smudging the text of the cosmos, and she was lost.

Or perhaps, like a lightbulb, she was helplessly receptive to an overwhelming influx. She was so physically delicate, and yet the person to whom she was talking might take a step back. And she, in turn, could be crushed by the slightest shift in someone's expression or tone. It was as if the chemistry of her personality burned off the cushion of air between herself and others. Then one night she called, very late, to alert Otto to a newspaper article about the sorting of lettuces; if he were to give each letter its numerological value . . . The phone cord thrummed with her panic.

When their taxi approached the hospital on that first occasion, Sharon was dank and electric with terror; her skin looked like wet plaster. Otto felt like an assassin as he led her in, and then she was ushered away somewhere. The others joined him in the waiting room, and after several hours had the opportunity to browbeat various doctors into hangdog temporizing. Many people got better, didn't they, had only one episode, didn't they, led fully functioning lives? Why wouldn't Sharon be part of that statistic—she, who was so able, so lively, so sweet—so, in a word, healthy? When would she be all right?

That depended on what they meant by "all right," one of the doctors replied. "We mean by 'all right' what you mean by 'all right,' you squirrelly bastard," Wesley had shouted, empurpling. Martin paced, sizzling and clicking through his teeth, while Otto sat with his head in his hands,

but the fateful, brutal, meaningless diagnosis had already been handed down.

"I got a cake," Sharon said. She glanced at Otto. "Oh. Was that appropriate?"

"Utterly," William said.

Appropriate? What if the cake turned out to be decorated with invisible portents and symbols? What if it revealed itself to be invested with power? To be part of the arsenal of small objects—nail scissors, postage stamps, wrapped candies—that lay about in camouflage to fool the credulous doofus like himself just as they were winking their malevolent signals to Sharon?

Or what if the cake was, after all, only an inert teatime treat? A cake required thought, effort, expenditure—all that on a negligible scale for most people, but in Sharon's stripped and cautious life, nothing was negligible. A cake. Wasn't that enough to bring one to one's knees? "Very appropriate," Otto concurred.

"Do you miss the fish?" Sharon said, lifting the cake from its box.

Fish? Otto's heart flipped up, pounding. Oh, the box, fish, nothing.

"We brought them home from the dime store in little cardboard boxes," she explained to William, passing the cake on its plate and a large knife over to him.

"I had a hamster," William said. The cake bulged resiliently around the knife.

"Did it have to rush around on one of those things?" Sharon asked.

"I think it liked to," William said, surprised.

"Let us hope so," Otto said. "Of course it did."

"I loved the castles and the colored sand," Sharon said. "But it was no life for a fish. We had to flush them down the toilet."

William, normally so fastidious about food, appeared to be happily eating his cake, which tasted, to Otto, like landfill. And William had brought Sharon flowers, which it never would have occurred to Otto to do.

Why had lovely William stayed with disagreeable old him for all this time? What could possibly explain his appeal for William, Otto wondered? Certainly not his appearance, nor his musical sensitivity—middling at

best—nor, clearly, his temperament. Others might have been swayed by the money that he made so easily, but not William. William cared as little about that as did Otto himself. And yet, through all these years, William had cleaved to him. Or at least, usually. Most of the uncleavings, in fact, had been Otto's—brief, preposterous seizures having to do with God knows what. Well, actually he himself would be the one to know what, wouldn't he, Otto thought. Having to do with—who *did* know what? Oh, with fear, with flight, the usual. A bit of glitter, a mirage, a chimera . . . A lot of commotion just for a glimpse into his own life, the real one—a life more vivid, more truly his, than the one that was daily at hand.

"Was there something you wanted to see me about?" Sharon asked.

"Well, I just . . ." Powerful beams of misery intersected in Otto's heart; was it true? Did he always have a reason when he called Sharon? Did he never drop in just to say hello? Not that anyone ought to "drop in" on Sharon. Or on anyone, actually. How barbarous.

"Your brother's here in an ambassadorial capacity," William said. "I'm just here for the cake."

"Ambassadorial?" Sharon looked alarmed.

"Oh, it's only Thanksgiving," Otto said. "Corinne was hoping—I was hoping—"

"Otto, I can't. I just can't. I don't want to sit there being an exhibit of robust good health, or noncontaminatingness, or the triumph of the human spirit, or whatever it is that Corinne needs me to illustrate. Just tell them everything is okay."

He looked at his cake. William was right. This was terribly unfair. "Well, I don't blame you," he said. "I wouldn't go myself, if I could get out of it."

"If you had a good enough excuse."

"I only—" But of course it was exactly what he had meant; he had meant that Sharon had a good enough excuse. "I'm—"

"Tell Corinne I'm all right."

Otto started to speak again, but stopped.

"Otto, please." Sharon looked at her hands, folded in her lap. "It's all right."

"I've sometimes wondered if it might not be possible, in theory, to remember something that you—I mean the aspect of yourself that you're aware of—haven't experienced yet," William said later. "I mean, we really *don't* know whether time is linear, so—"

"Would you stop that?" Otto said. "*You're* not insane."

"I'm merely speaking theoretically."

"Well, don't! And your memory has nothing to do with whether time is 'really,' whatever you mean by that, linear. It's plenty linear for us! Cradle to grave? Over the hill? It's a one-way street, my dear. My hair is not sometimes there and sometimes not there; we're *not* getting any younger."

At moments it occurred to Otto that what explained his appeal for William was the fact that they lived in the same apartment. That William was idiotically accepting, idiotically pliant. Perhaps William was so deficient in subtlety, so insensitive to nuance, that he simply couldn't tell the difference between Otto and anyone else. "And, William—I wish you'd get back to your tennis."

"It's a bore. Besides, you didn't want me playing with Jason, as I remember."

"Well, I was out of my mind. And at this point it's your arteries I worry about."

"You know," William said and put his graceful hand on Otto's arm. "I don't think she's any more unhappy than the rest of us, really, most of the time. That smile! I mean, that smile can't come out of nowhere."

There actually were no children to speak of. Corinne and Wesley's "boys" put in a brief, unnerving appearance. When last seen, they had been surly, furtive, persecuted-looking, snickering, hulking, hairy adolescents, and now here they were, having undergone the miraculous transformation. How gratified Wesley must be! They had shed their egalitarian denim chrysalis and had risen up in the crisp, mean mantle of their class.

The older one even had a wife, whom Corinne treated with a stricken, fluttery deference as if she were a suitcase full of weapons-grade plutonium. The younger one was restlessly on his own. When, early in the

evening the three stood and announced to Corinne with thuggish placidity that they were about to leave ("I'm afraid we've got to shove off now, Ma"), Otto jumped to his feet. As he allowed his hand to be crushed, he felt the relief of a mayor watching an occupying power depart his city.

Martin's first squadron of children (Maureen's) weren't even mentioned. Who knew what army of relatives, step-relatives, half-relatives they were reinforcing by now. But there were—Otto shuddered faintly—Martin's two newest (Laurie's). Yes, just as Corinne had said, they, too, were growing up. Previously indistinguishable wads of self-interest, they had developed perceptible features—maybe even characteristics; it appeared reasonable, after all, that they had been given names.

What on earth was it that William did to get children to converse? Whenever Otto tried to have a civilized encounter with a child, the child just stood there with its finger in its nose. But Martin's two boys were chattering away, showing off to William their whole heap of tiresome electronics.

William was frowning with interest. He poked at a keyboard, which sent up a shower of festive little beeps, and the boys flung themselves at him, cheering, while Laurie smiled meltingly. How times had changed. Not so many years earlier, such a tableau would have had handcuffs rattling in the wings.

The only other representative of "the children" to whom Corinne had referred with such pathos, was Martin's daughter, Portia (Viola's). She'd been hardly more than a toddler at last sight, though she now appeared to be about—what? Well, anyhow, a little girl. "What are the domestic arrangements?" Otto asked. "Is she living with Martin and Laurie these days, or is she with her mother?"

"That crazy Viola has gone back to England, thank God; Martin has *de facto* custody."

"Speaking of Martin, where is he?"

"I don't ask," Corinne said.

Otto waited.

"I don't ask," Corinne said again. "And if Laurie wants to share, she'll tell you herself."

"Is Martin in the pokey already?" Otto asked.

"This is not a joke, Otto. I'm sorry to tell you that Martin has been having an affair with some girl."

"Again?"

Corinne stalled, elaborately adjusting her bracelet. "I'm sorry to tell you she's his trainer."

"His *trainer*? How can Martin have a trainer? If Martin has a trainer, what can explain Martin's body?"

"Otto, it's not funny," Corinne said with ominous primness. "The fact is, Martin has been looking very good, lately. But of course you wouldn't have seen him."

All those wives—and a trainer! How? Why would any woman put up with Martin? Martin, who always used to eat his dessert so slowly that the rest of them had been made to wait, squirming at the table, watching as he took his voluptuous, showy bites of chocolate cake or floating island long after they'd finished their own.

"I'm afraid it's having consequences for Portia. Do you see what she's doing?"

"She's—" Otto squinted over at Portia. "What is she doing?"

"Portia, come here, darling," Corinne called.

Portia looked at them for a moment, then wandered sedately over. "And now we'll have a word with Aunt Corinne," she said to her fist as she approached. "Hello, Aunt Corinne."

"Portia," Corinne said, "do you remember Uncle Otto?"

"And Uncle Otto," Portia added to her fist. She regarded him with a clear, even gaze. In its glade of light and silence they encountered one another serenely. She held out her fist to him. "Would you tell our listeners what you do when you go to work, Uncle Otto?"

"Well," Otto said, to Portia's fist, "first I take the elevator up to the twentieth floor, and then I sit down at my desk, and then I send Bryan out for coffee and a bagel—"

"Otto," Corinne said, "Portia is trying to learn what it is you do. Something I'm sure we'd all like to know."

"Oh," Otto said. "Well, I'm a lawyer, dear. Do you know what that is?"

"Otto," Corinne said wearily, "Portia's father is a lawyer."

"Portia's father is a global-money mouthpiece!" Otto said.

"Aunt Corinne is annoyed," Portia commented to her fist. "Now Uncle Otto and Aunt Corinne are looking at your correspondent. Now they're not."

"Tell me, Portia," Otto said; the question had sprung insistently into his mind, "what are you going to be when you grow up?"

Her gaze was strangely relaxing. "You know, Uncle Otto," she said pensively to her fist, "people used to ask me that a lot."

Huh! Yes, that was probably something people asked only very small children, when speculation would be exclusively a matter of amusing fantasy. "Well, I was only just mulling it over," Otto said.

"Portia, darling," Corinne said, "why don't you run into the kitchen and do a cooking segment with Bea and Cleveland?"

"It's incredible," Otto said when Portia disappeared, "she looks exactly like Sharon did at that age."

"Ridiculous," Corinne said. "She takes after her father."

Martin? Stuffy, venal Martin, with his nervous eyes and scoopy nose, and squashy head balanced on his shirt collar? Portia's large, gray eyes, the flaxen hair, the slightly oversized ears and fragile neck recapitulated absolutely Sharon's appearance in this child who probably wouldn't remember ever having seen Sharon. "Her *father*?"

"Her father," Corinne said. "Martin. Portia's father."

"I know Martin is her father. I just can't divine the resemblance."

"Well, there's certainly no resemblance to— Wesley—" Corinne called over to him. "Must you read the newspaper? This is a social occasion. Otto, will you listen, please? I'm trying to tell you something. The truth is, we're all quite worried about Portia."

Amazing how fast one's body reacted. Fear had vacuumed the blood right through his extremities. One's body, the primeval parts of one's brain—how fast they were! Much faster than that recent part with the words and thoughts and so on, what was it? The cortex, was that it? He'd have to ask William, he thought, his blood settling back down. That sort of wrinkly stuff on top that looked like crumpled wrapping paper.

"Laurie is worried sick. The truth is, that's one reason I was so anxious for you to join us today. I wanted your opinion on the matter."

"On what matter?" Otto said. "I have no idea what this is about. She's fine. She seems fine. She's just playing."

"I know she's just playing, Otto. It's *what* she's playing that concerns me."

"What she's playing? What is she playing? She's playing radio, or something! Is that so sinister? The little boys seem to be playing something called Hammer Her Flat."

"I'm sure not. Oh, gracious. You and Sharon were both so right not to have children."

"Excuse me?" Otto said incredulously.

"It's not the radio aspect per se that I'm talking about, it's what that represents. The child is an observer. She sees herself as an outsider. As alienated."

"There's nothing wrong with being observant. Other members of this family could benefit from a little of that quality."

"She can't relate directly to people."

"Who can?" Otto said.

"Half the time Viola doesn't even remember the child is alive! You watch. She won't send Portia a Christmas present. She probably won't even call. Otto, listen. We've always said that Viola is 'unstable,' but, frankly, Viola is *psychotic*. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? Portia's *mother*, Otto. It's just as you were saying, *there's a geneti—*"

"I was saying *what*? I was saying nothing! I was only saying—"

"Oh, dear!" Laurie exclaimed. She had an arm around Portia, who was crying.

"What in hell is going on now?" Wesley demanded, slamming down his newspaper.

"I'm afraid Bea and Cleveland may have said something to her," Laurie said, apologetically.

"Oh, terrific," Wesley said. "Now I know what I'm paying them for."

"It's all right, sweetie," Laurie said. "It all happened a long time ago."

"But why are we celebrating that we killed them?" Portia asked, and started crying afresh.

"We're not celebrating because we killed the Indians, darling," Laurie said. "We're celebrating because we ate dinner with them."

"Portia still believes in Indians!" one of the little boys exclaimed.

"So do we all, Josh," Wesley said. "They live at the North Pole and make toys for good little—"

"Wesley, please!" Corinne said.

"Listener poll," Portia said to her fist. "Did we eat dinner with the Indians, or did we kill them?" She strode over to Otto and held out her fist.

"We ate dinner with them and *then* we killed them," Otto realized, out loud to his surprise.

"Who are you to slag off Thanksgiving, old boy?" Wesley said. "You're wearing a fucking bow tie."

"So are you, for that matter," Otto said, awkwardly embracing Portia, who was crying again.

"And *I* stand behind my tie," Wesley said, rippling upward from his chair.

"It was Portia's birthday last week!" Laurie interrupted loudly, and Wesley sank back down. "Wasn't it!"

Portia nodded, gulping, and wiped at her tears.

"How old are you now, Portia?" William asked.

"Nine," Portia said.

"That's great," William said. "Get any good stuff?"

Portia nodded again.

"And Portia's mommy sent a terrific present, didn't she," Laurie said.

"Oh, what was it, sweetie?" Corinne said.

Laurie turned pink and her head seemed to flare out slightly in various directions. "You don't have to say, darling, if you don't like."

Portia held on to the arm of Otto's chair and swung her leg aimlessly back and forth. "My mother gave me two tickets to go to Glyndebourne on my eighteenth birthday," she said in a tiny voice.

Wesley snorted. "Got your frock all picked out, Portia?"

"I won't be going to Glyndebourne, Uncle Wesley," Portia said with dignity.

There was a sudden silence in the room.

"Why not, dear?" Otto asked. He was trembling, he noticed.

Portia looked out at all of them. Tears still clung to her face. "Because." She raised her fist to her mouth again. "Factoid: According to the Mayan calendar, the world is going to end in the year 2012, the year before this reporter's eighteenth birthday."

"All right," Corinne whispered to Otto. "Now do you see?"

"You're right, as always," Otto said, in the taxi later, "they're no worse than anyone else's. They're all awful. I really don't see the point in it. Just think! Garden garden garden garden garden, two happy people, and it could have gone on forever! They knew, they'd been told, but they ate it anyway, and from there on out, *family*! Shame, fear, jobs, mortality, envy, murder . . ."

"Well," William said brightly, "and sex."

"There's that," Otto conceded.

"In fact, you could look at both family and mortality simply as by-products of sexual reproduction."

"I don't really see the point of sexual reproduction, either," Otto said. "I wouldn't stoop to it."

"Actually, that's very interesting, you know; they think that the purpose of sexual reproduction is to purge the genome of harmful mutations. Of course, they also seem to think it isn't working."

"Then why not scrap it?" Otto said. "Why not let us divide again, like our dignified and immortal forebear, the amoeba."

William frowned. "I'm not really sure that—"

"Joke," Otto said.

"Oh, yes. Well, but I suppose sexual reproduction is fairly entrenched by now—people aren't going to give it up without a struggle. And besides, family confers certain advantages as a social unit, doesn't it."

"No. What advantages?"

"Oh, rudimentary education. Protection."

"'Education'! Ha! 'Protection'! Ha!"

"Besides," William said. "It's broadening. You meet people in your family you'd never happen to run into otherwise. And anyhow, obviously the desire for children is hardwired."

" 'Hardwired.' You know, that's a term I've really come to loathe! It explains nothing, it justifies anything; you might as well say, 'Humans have children because the Great Moth in the Sky wants them to.' Or, 'Humans have children because humans have children.' 'Hardwired,' please! It's lazy, it's specious, it's perfunctory, and it's utterly without depth."

"Why does it have to have depth?" William said. "It *refers* to depth. It's good, clean science."

"It's not science at all, it's a cliché. It's a redundancy."

"Otto, why do you always scoff at me when I raise a scientific point?"

"I don't! I don't scoff at you. I certainly don't mean to. It's just that this particular phrase, used in this particular way, isn't very interesting. I mean, you're telling me that something is biologically *inherent* in human experience, but you're not telling me anything *about* human experience."

"I wasn't intending to," William said. "I wasn't trying to. If you want to talk about human experience, then let's talk about it."

"All right," Otto said. It was painful, of course, to see William irritated, but almost a relief to know that it could actually happen. "Let's, then. By all means."

"So?"

"Well?"

"Any particular issues?" William said. "Any questions?"

Any! *Billions*. But that was always just the problem: how to disentangle one; how to pluck it up and clothe it in presentable words? Otto stared, concentrating. Questions were roiling in the pit of his mind like serpents, now a head rising up from the seething mass, now a rattling tail . . . He closed his eyes. If only he could get his brain to relax . . . Relax, relax . . . Relax, relax, relax . . . "Oh, you know, William—is there anything at home to eat? Believe it or not, I'm starving again."

There was absolutely no reason to fear that Portia would have anything other than an adequately happy, adequately fruitful life. No reason at all.

Oh, how prudent of Sharon not to have come yesterday. Though in any case, she had been as present to the rest of them as if she had been sitting on the sofa. And the rest of them had probably been as present to her as she had been to them.

When one contemplated Portia, when one contemplated Sharon, when one contemplated one's own apparently pointless, utterly trivial being, the questions hung all around one, as urgent as knives at the throat. But the instant one tried to grasp one of them and turn it to one's own purpose and pierce through the murk, it became as blunt and useless as a piece of cardboard.

All one could dredge up were platitudes: one comes into the world alone, snore snore; one, snore snore, departs the world alone . . .

What would William have to say? Well, it was a wonderful thing to live with an inquiring and mentally active person; no one could quarrel with that. William was immaculate in his intentions, unflagging in his efforts. But what drove one simply insane was the vagueness. Or, really, the banality. Not that it was William's job to explicate the foggy assumptions of one's culture, but one's own ineptitude was galling enough; one hardly needed to consult a vacuity expert!

And how could one think at all, or even just casually ruminate, with William practicing, as he had been doing since they'd awakened. Otto had forgotten what a strain it all was—even without any exasperating social nonsense—those few days preceding the concert; you couldn't think, you couldn't concentrate on the newspaper. You couldn't even really hear the phone, which seemed to be ringing now—

Nor could you make any sense of what the person on the other end of it might be saying. "What?" Otto shouted into it. "You what?"

Could he—the phone cackled into the lush sheaves of William's arpeggios—*bribery, sordid out*—

"William!" Otto yelled. "Excuse me? Could I what?"

The phone cackled some more. "Excuse me," Otto said. "*William!*"

The violin went quiet. "Excuse me?" Otto said again into the phone, which was continuing to emit jibberish. "Sort *what* out? Took her *where* from the library?"

"I'm trying to explain, sir," the phone said. "I'm calling from the hospital."

"She was *taken* from the library *by force*?"

"Unfortunately, sir, as I've tried to explain, she was understood to be homeless."

"And so she was taken away? By force? That could be construed as kidnapping, you know."

"I'm only reporting what the records indicate, sir. The records do not indicate that your sister was kidnapped."

"I don't understand. Is it a crime to be homeless?"

"Apparently your sister did not claim to be homeless. Apparently your sister claimed to rent an apartment. Is this not the case? Is your sister in fact homeless?"

"My sister is not homeless! My sister rents an apartment! Is that a crime? What does this have to do with why my sister was taken away, by force, from the library?"

"Sir, I'm calling from the hospital."

"I'm a taxpayer!" Otto shouted. William was standing in the doorway, violin in one hand, bow in the other, watching gravely. "I'm a lawyer! Why is information being withheld from me?"

"Information is not being withheld from you, sir, please! I understand that you are experiencing concern, and I'm trying to explain this situation in a way that you will understand what has occurred. It is a policy that homeless people tend to congregate in the library, using the restrooms, and some of these people may be removed, if, for example, these people exhibit behaviors that are perceived to present a potential danger."

"Are you *reading* this from something? Is it a crime to use a *public bathroom*?"

"When people who do not appear to have homes to go to, appear to be confused and disoriented—"

"Is it a *crime* to be *confused*?"

"Please calm *down*, sir. The evaluation was not ours. What I'm trying to tell you is that according to the report, your sister became obstrep-

erous when she was brought to the homeless shelter. She appeared to be disoriented. She did not appear to understand why she was being taken to the homeless shelter.”

“Shall I go with you?” William said, when Otto put down the phone.

“No,” Otto said. “Stay, please. Practice.”

So, once again. Waiting in the dingy whiteness, the fearsome whiteness no doubt of heaven, heaven’s sensible shoes, overtaxed heaven’s obtuse smiles and ruthless tranquillity, heaven’s asphyxiating clouds dropped over the screams bleeding faintly from behind closed doors. He waited in a room with others too dazed even to note the television that hissed and bristled in front of them or to turn the pages of the sticky, dog-eared magazines they held, from which they could have learned how to be happy, wealthy, and sexually appealing; they waited, like Otto, to learn instead what it was that destiny had already handed down: bad, not that bad, very, very bad.

The doctor, to whom Otto was eventually conducted through the elderly bowels of the hospital, looked like an epic hero—shining, arrogant, supple. “She’ll be fine, now,” he said. “You’ll be fine now, won’t you?”

Sharon’s smile, the sudden birth of a little sun, and the doctor’s own brilliant smile met, and ignited for an instant. Otto felt as though a missile had exploded in his chest.

“Don’t try biting any of those guys from the city again,” the doctor said, giving Sharon’s childishly rounded, childishly humble, shoulder a companionable pat. “They’re poisonous.”

“Bite them!” Otto exclaimed, admiration leaping up in him like a dog at a chain link fence, on the other side of which a team of uniformed men rushed at his defenseless sister with clubs.

“I did?” Sharon cast a repentant, sidelong glance at the doctor.

The doctor shrugged and flipped back his blue-black hair, dislodging sparkles of handsomeness. “The file certainly painted an unflattering portrait of your behavior. ‘Menaced dentally,’ it says, or something of the sort. Now, listen. Take care of yourself. Follow Dr. Shiga’s instructions. Because I don’t want to be seeing you around here, okay?”

He and Sharon looked at each other for a moment, then traded a little, level, intimate smile. "It's okay with me," she said.

Otto took Sharon to a coffee shop near her apartment and bought her two portions of macaroni and cheese.

"How was it?" she said. "How was everyone?"

"Thanksgiving? Oh. You didn't miss much."

She put down her fork. "Aren't you going to have anything, Otto?"

"I'll have something later with William," he said.

"Oh," she said. She sat very still. "Of course."

He was a monster. Well, no one was perfect. But in any case, her attention returned to her macaroni. Not surprising that she was ravenous. How long had her adventures lasted? Her clothing was rumpled and filthy.

"I didn't know you liked the library," he said.

"Don't think I'm not grateful for the computer," she said. "It was down."

He nodded, and didn't press her.

There was a bottle of wine breathing on the table, and William had managed to maneuver dinner out of the mysterious little containers and the limp bits of organic matter from the fridge, which Otto had inspected earlier in a doleful search for lunch. "Bad?" William asked.

"Fairly," Otto said.

"Want to tell me?" William said.

Otto gestured impatiently. "Oh, what's the point."

"Okay," William said. "Mustard with that? It's good."

"I can't stand it that she has to live like this!" Otto said.

William shook his head. "Everyone is so alone," he said.

Otto yelped.

"What?" William said. "What did I do?"

"Nothing," Otto said. He stood, trying to control his trembling. "I'm going to my study. You go on upstairs when you get tired."

"Otto?"

"Just—please."

He sat downstairs in his study with a book in his hand, listening while

William rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher, and went, finally, upstairs. For some time, footsteps persisted oppressively in the bedroom overhead. When they ceased, Otto exhaled with relief.

A pale tincture spread into the study window; the pinched little winter sun was rising over the earth, above the neighbors' buildings. Otto listened while William came down and made himself breakfast, then returned upstairs to practice once again.

The day loomed heavily in front of Otto, like an opponent judging the moment to strike. How awful everything was. How awful he was. How bestial he had been to William; William, who deserved only kindness, only gratitude.

And yet the very thought of glimpsing that innocent face was intolerable. It had been a vastly unpleasant night in the chair, and it would be hours, he knew, before he'd be able to manage an apology without more denunciations leaping from his treacherous mouth.

Hours seemed to be passing, in fact. Or maybe it was minutes. The clock said seven, said ten, said twelve, said twelve, said twelve, seemed to be delirious. Fortunately there were leftovers in the fridge.

Well, if time was the multiplicity Sharon and William seemed to believe it was, maybe it contained multiple Sharons, perhaps some existing in happier conditions, before the tracks diverged, one set leading up into the stars, the other down to the hospital. Otto's mind wandered here and there amid the dimensions, catching glimpses of her skirt, her hair, her hand, as she slipped through the mirrors. Did things have to proceed for each of the Sharons in just exactly the same way?

Did each one grieve for the Olympian destiny that ought to have been hers? Did each grieve for an ordinary life—a life full of ordinary pleasures and troubles—children, jobs, lovers?

Everyone is so alone. For this, all the precious Sharons had to flounder through their loops and tucks of eternity; for this, the shutters were drawn on their aerial and light-filled minds. Each and every Sharon, thrashing through the razor-edged days only in order to be absorbed by this spongy platitude: *everyone is so alone!* Great God, how could it be endured? All the Sharons, for ever and ever, discarded in a phrase.

And those Ottos, sprinkled through the zones of actuality—What were the others doing now? The goldfish gliding, gliding, within the severe perimeter of water; William pausing to introduce himself . . .

Yes, so of course one felt incomplete; of course one felt obstructed and blind. And perhaps every creature on earth, on all the earths, was straining at the obdurate membranes to reunite as its own original entity, the spark of unique consciousness allocated to each being, only then to be irreconcilably refracted through world after world by the prism of time. No wonder one tended to feel so fragile. It was infuriating enough just trying to have contact with a few other people, let alone with all of one's selves!

To think there could be an infinitude of selves, and not an iota of latitude for any of them! An infinitude of Ottos, lugging around that personality, those circumstances, that appearance. Not only once dreary and pointless, but infinitely so.

Oh, was there no escape? Perhaps if one could only concentrate hard enough they could be collected, all those errant, enslaved selves. And in the triumphant instant of their reunification, purified to an unmarked essence, the suffocating Otto-costumes dissolving, a true freedom at last. Oh, how tired he was! But why not make the monumental effort?

Because Naomi and Margaret were arriving at nine to show off this baby of theirs, that was why not.

But anyhow, what on earth was he thinking?

Still, at least he could apologize to William. He was himself, but at least he could go fling that inadequate self at William's feet!

No. At the *very* least he could let poor, deserving William practice undisturbed. He'd wait—patiently, patiently—and when William was finished, William would come downstairs. Then Otto could apologize abjectly, spread every bit of his worthless being at William's feet, comfort him and be comforted, reassure him and be reassured . . .

At a few minutes before nine, William appeared, whistling.

Whistling! "Good practice session?" Otto said. His voice came out cracked, as if it had been hurled against the high prison walls of himself.

"Terrific," William said, and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

Otto opened his mouth. "You know—" he said.

"Oh, listen—" William said. "There really is a baby!" And faintly interspersed among Naomi and Margaret's familiar creakings and bumpings in the hall Otto heard little chirps and gurgles.

"Hello, hello!" William cried, flinging open the door. "Look, isn't she fabulous?"

"We think so," Naomi said, her smile renewing and renewing itself. "Well, she is."

"I can't see if you do that," Margaret said, disengaging the earpiece of her glasses and a clump of her red, crimped hair from the baby's fist as she attempted to transfer the baby over to William.

"Here." Naomi held out a bottle of champagne. "Take this, too. Well, but you can't keep the baby. Wow, look, she's fascinated by Margaret's hair. I mean, who isn't?"

Otto wasn't, despite his strong feelings about hair in general. "Should we open this up and drink it?" he said, his voice a mechanical voice, his hand a mechanical hand accepting the bottle.

"That was the idea," Naomi said. She blinked up at Otto, smiling hopefully, and rocking slightly from heel to toe.

"Sit. Sit everyone," William said. "Oh, she's sensational!"

Otto turned away to open the champagne and pour it into the lovely glasses somebody or another had given to them sometime or another.

"Well, cheers," William said. "Congratulations. And here's to—"

"Molly," Margaret said. "We decided to keep it simple."

"We figured she's got so much working against her already," Naomi said, "including a couple of geriatric moms with a different ethnicity, and God only knows what infant memories, or whatever you call that stuff you don't remember. We figured we'd name her something nice, that didn't set up all kinds of expectations. Just a nice, friendly, pretty name. And she can take it from there."

"She'll be taking it from there in any case," Otto said, grimly.

The others looked at him.

"I love Maggie," Naomi said. "I always wanted a Maggie, but Margaret said—"

"Well." Margaret shrugged. "I mean—"

"No, I know," Naomi said. "But."

Margaret rolled a little white quilt out on the rug. Plunked down on it, the baby sat, wobbling, with an expression of surprise.

"Look at her!" William said.

"Here's hoping," Margaret said, raising her glass.

So, marvelous. Humans were born, they lived. They glued themselves together in little clumps, and then they died. It was no more, as William had once cheerfully explained, than a way for genes to perpetuate themselves. "The selfish gene," he'd said, quoting, probably detrimentally, someone; you were put on earth to fight for your DNA.

Let the organisms chat. Let them talk. Their voices were as empty as the tinklings of a player-piano. Let the organisms talk about this and that; it was what (as William had so trenchantly pointed out) this particular carbon-based life form did, just as its cousin (according to William) the roundworm romped ecstatically beneath the surface of the planet.

He tried to intercept the baby's glossy, blurry stare. The baby was actually attractive, for a baby, and not bald at all, as it happened. Hello, Otto thought to it, let's you and I communicate in some manner far superior to the verbal one.

The baby ignored him. Whatever she was making of the blanket, the table legs, the shod sets of feet, she wasn't about to let on to Otto. Well, see if he cared.

William was looking at him. So, what was he supposed to do? Oh, all right, he'd contribute. Despite his current clarity of mind.

"And how was China?" he asked. "Was the food as bad as they say?"

Naomi looked at him blankly. "Well, I don't know, actually," she said. "Honey, how was the food?"

"The food," Margaret said. "Not memorable, apparently."

"The things people have to do in order to have children," Otto said.

"We toyed with the idea of giving birth," Margaret said. "That is, Naomi toyed with it."

"At first," Naomi said, "I thought, what a shame to miss an experience that nature intended for us. And, I mean, there was this guy at work, or of course there's always—But then I thought, what, am I an

idiot? I mean, just because you've got arms and legs, it doesn't mean you have to—"

"No," William said. "But still. I can understand how you felt."

"Have to what?" Margaret said.

"I can't," Otto said.

"Have to what?" Margaret said.

"I *can't* understand it," Otto said. "I've just never envied the capacity. Others are awestruck, not I. I've never even remotely wished I were able to give birth, and, in fact, I've never wanted a baby. Of course it's inhuman not to want one, but I'm just not human. I'm not a human being. William is a human being. Maybe William wanted a baby. I never thought to ask. Was that what you were trying to tell me the other day, William? Were you trying to tell me that I've ruined your life? *Did* you want a baby? *Have* I ruined your life? Well, it's too bad. I'm sorry. I was too selfish ever to ask if you wanted one, and I'm too selfish to want one myself. I'm more selfish than my own genes. I'm not fighting *for* my DNA, I'm fighting against it!"

"I'm happy as I am," William said. He sat, his arms wrapped tightly around himself, looking at the floor. The baby coughed. "Who needs more champagne?"

"You see?" Otto said into the tundra of silence William left behind him as he retreated into the kitchen. "I really am a monster."

Miles away, Naomi sat blushing, her hands clasped in her lap. Then she scooped up the baby. "There, there," she said.

But Margaret sat back, eyebrows raised in semicircles, contemplating something that seemed to be hanging a few feet under the ceiling. "Oh, I don't know," she said, and the room shuttled back into proportion. "I suppose you could say it's human to want a child, in the sense that it's biologically mandated. But I mean, you could say that, or you could say it's simply unimaginative. Or you could say it's unselfish or you could say it's selfish, or you could say pretty much anything about it at all. Or you could just say, well, I want one. But when you get right down to it, really, one what? Because, actually—I mean, well, look at Molly. I mean, actually, they're awfully specific."

"I suppose I meant, like, crawl around on all fours, or something," Naomi said. "I mean, just because you've got—But look, there they already are, all these babies, so many of them, just waiting, waiting, waiting on the shelves for someone to take care of them. We could have gone to Romania, we could have gone to Guatemala, we could have gone almost anywhere—just, for various reasons, we decided to go to China."

"And we both really liked the idea," Margaret said, "that you could go as far away as you could possibly get, and there would be your child."

"Uh-huh," Naomi nodded, soberly. "How crazy is that?"

"I abase myself," Otto told William as they washed and dried the champagne glasses. "I don't need to tell you how deeply I'll regret having embarrassed you in front of Naomi and Margaret." He clasped the limp dishtowel to his heart. "How deeply I'll regret having been insufficiently mawkish about the miracle of life. I don't need to tell you how ashamed I'll feel the minute I calm down. How deeply I'll regret having trampled your life, and how deeply I'll regret being what I am. Well, that last part I regret already. I profoundly regret every tiny crumb of myself. I don't need to go into it all once again, I'm sure. Just send back the form, pertinent boxes checked: 'I intend to accept your forthcoming apology for—' "

"Please stop," William said.

"Oh, how awful to have ruined the life of such a marvelous man! Have I ruined your life? You can tell me; we're friends."

"Otto, I'm going upstairs now. I didn't sleep well last night, and I'm tired."

"Yes, go upstairs."

"Good night," William said.

"Yes, go to sleep, why not?" Oh, it was like trying to pick a fight with a dog toy! "Just you go on off to sleep."

"Otto, listen to me. My concert is tomorrow. I want to be able to play adequately. I don't know why you're unhappy. You do interesting work, you're admired, we live in a wonderful place, we have wonderful

friends. We have everything we need and most of the things we want. We have excellent lives by anyone's standard. I'm happy, and I wish you were. I know that you've been upset these last few days, I asked if you wanted to talk, and you said you didn't. Now you do, but this happens to be the one night of the year when I most need my sleep. Can it wait till tomorrow? I'm very tired, and you're obviously very tired, as well. Try and get some sleep, please."

" 'Try *and* get some sleep?' 'Try *and* get some sleep?' This is unbearable! I've spent the best years of my life with a man who doesn't know how to use the word 'and'! 'And' is not part of the infinitive! 'And' means '*in addition to.*' It's not 'Try *and* get some sleep,' it's 'Try *to* get some sleep.' *To! To! To! To! To! To! To! To! Please try to get some sleep!*"

Otto sat down heavily at the kitchen table and began to sob.

How arbitrary it all was, and cruel. This identity, that identity: Otto, William, Portia, Molly, the doctor . . .

She'd be up now, sitting at her own kitchen table, the white enamel table with a cup of tea, thinking about something, about numbers streaming past in stately sequences, about remote astral pageants . . . The doctor had rested his hand kindly on her shoulder. And what she must have felt then! Oh, to convert that weight of the world's compassion into something worthwhile—the taste, if only she could have lifted his hand and kissed it, the living satin feel of his skin . . . Everyone had to put things aside, to put things aside for good.

The way they had smiled at one another, she and that doctor! What can you do, their smiles had said. The handsome doctor in his handsome-doctor suit and Sharon in her disheveled-lunatic suit; what a charade. In this life, Sharon's little spark of consciousness would be costumed inescapably as a waif at the margins of mental organization and the doctor's would be costumed inescapably as a flashing exemplar of supreme competence; in this life (and, frankly, there would be no other) the hospital was where they would meet.

"Otto—"

A hand was resting on Otto's shoulder.

"William," Otto said. It was William. They were in the clean, dim

kitchen. The full moon had risen high over the neighbors' buildings, where the lights were almost all out. Had he been asleep? He blinked up at William, whose face, shadowed against the light of the night sky, was as inflected, as ample in mystery as the face in the moon. "It's late, my darling," Otto said. "I'm tired. What are we doing down here?"

THE HITCHHIKING GAME

MILAN KUNDERA

I

The needle on the gas gauge suddenly dipped toward empty, and the young driver of the sports car declared that it was maddening how much gas the car guzzled. "See that we don't run out of gas again," protested the girl (about twenty-two), and she reminded the driver of several places where this had already happened to them. The young man replied that he wasn't worried, because whatever he went through with her had the charm of adventure for him. The girl objected; whenever they had run out of gas on the highway it had, she said, always been an adventure only for her. The young man had hidden, and she had had to make ill use of her charms by thumbing a ride and letting herself be driven to the nearest gas station, then thumbing a ride back with a can of gas. The young man asked the girl whether the drivers who had given her a ride had been unpleasant, since she spoke as if her task had been a hardship. She replied (with awkward flirtatiousness) that sometimes they had been very pleasant, but that it hadn't done her any good as she had been burdened with the can and had had to leave them before she could get anything going. "Sex fiend," said the young man. The girl protested that it was he who was the sex fiend. God knows how many girls stopped him on the highway when he was driving the car alone! Still driving, the young man put his arm around the girl's shoulders and kissed her gently on the forehead. He knew that she loved him and that she was jealous. Jealousy isn't a pleasant trait, but if it isn't overdone (and if it's combined with modesty), apart from its inconvenience there's even something touching about it. At least that's what the young

man thought. Because he was only twenty-eight, it seemed to him that he was old and knew everything that a man could know about women. In the girl sitting beside him he valued precisely what, until now, he had encountered least in women: purity.

The needle was already on empty when, to the right, the young man caught sight of a sign announcing that a gas station was five hundred meters ahead. The girl hardly had time to say how relieved she was before the young man was signaling left and driving into a space in front of the pumps. However, he had to stop a little way off, because beside the pumps was a huge gasoline truck with a large metal tank and a bulky hose, which was refilling the pumps. "We'll have to wait," said the young man to the girl, and he got out of the car. "How long will it take?" he shouted to the man in overalls. "Only a moment," replied the attendant, and the young man said: "I've heard that one before." He wanted to go back and sit in the car, but he saw that the girl had gotten out the other side. "I'll take a little walk in the meantime," she said. "Where to?" the young man asked on purpose, wanting to see the girl's embarrassment. He had known her for a year now, but she would still blush in front of him. He enjoyed her moments of modesty, partly because they distinguished her from the women he'd met before, partly because he was aware of the law of universal transience, which made even his girl's modesty a precious thing to him.

II

The girl really didn't like it when during a trip (the young man would drive for several hours without stopping) she had to ask him to stop for a moment somewhere near a clump of trees. She always got angry when, with feigned surprise, he asked her why he should stop. She knew that her modesty was ridiculous and old-fashioned. Many times at work she had noticed that they laughed at her on account of it and deliberately provoked her. She always blushed in advance at the idea that she was going to blush. She often longed to feel free and easy about her body, the way most of the women around her did. She had even invented a special

course in self-persuasion: she would repeat to herself that at birth every human being received one out of the millions of available bodies, as one would receive an allotted room out of the millions of rooms in an enormous hotel; that consequently the body was fortuitous and impersonal, only a ready-made, borrowed thing. She would repeat this to herself in different ways, but she could never manage to feel it. This mind-body dualism was alien to her. She was too much at one with her body; that is why she always felt such anxiety about it.

She experienced this same anxiety even in her relations with the young man, whom she had known for a year and with whom she was happy, perhaps because he never separated her body from her soul, and she could live with him wholly. In this unity there was happiness, but it is not far from happiness to suspicion, and the girl was full of suspicions. For instance, it often occurred to her that other women (those who weren't anxious) were more attractive and more seductive, and that the young man, who did not conceal the fact that he knew this kind of woman well, would someday leave her for a woman like that. (True, the young man declared that he'd had enough of them to last his whole life, but she knew that he was still much younger than he thought.) She wanted him to be completely hers and herself to be completely his, but it often seemed to her that the more she tried to give him everything, the more she denied him something: the very thing that a light and superficial love or a flirtation gives a person. It worried her that she was not able to combine seriousness with lightheartedness.

But now she wasn't worrying, and any such thoughts were far from her mind. She felt good. It was the first day of their vacation (of their two-week vacation, which she had been dreaming about for a whole year), the sky was blue (the whole year she had been worrying about whether the sky would really be blue), and he was beside her. At his "Where to?" she blushed, and she left the car without a word. She walked around the gas station, which was situated beside the highway in total isolation, surrounded by fields. About a hundred meters away (in the direction in which they were traveling), a wood began. She set off for it, vanished behind a little bush, and gave herself up to her good mood. (In solitude it was possible for her to get the greatest enjoyment

from the presence of the man she loved. If his presence had been continuous, it would have kept on disappearing. Only when she was alone was she able to hold on to it.)

When she came out of the wood onto the highway, the gas station was visible. The large gasoline truck was already pulling out, and the sports car moved forward toward the red column of the pump. The girl walked on along the highway and only at times looked back to see if the sports car was coming. At last she caught sight of it. She stopped and began to signal at it like a hitchhiker signaling at a stranger's car. The sports car slowed down and stopped close to the girl. The young man leaned toward the window, rolled it down, smiled, and asked: "Where are you headed, miss?" "Are you going to Bystrica?" asked the girl, smiling flirtatiously at him. "Yes, please get in," said the young man, opening the door. The girl got in, and the car took off.

III

The young man was always glad when his girlfriend was in a good mood. This didn't happen too often; she had quite a tiresome job in an unpleasant environment, many hours of overtime without compensatory leisure, and, at home, a sick mother. So she often felt tired. She didn't have either particularly good nerves or self-confidence, and she fell easily into a state of anxiety and fear. For this reason he welcomed every manifestation of her gaiety with the tender solicitude of an older brother. He smiled at her and said: "I'm lucky today. I've been driving for five years, but I've never given a ride to such a pretty hitchhiker."

The girl was grateful to the young man for every bit of flattery; she wanted to linger for a moment in its warmth, and so she said: "You're very good at lying."

"Do I look like a liar?"

"You look like you enjoy lying to women," said the girl, and into her words there crept unawares a touch of the old anxiety, because she really did believe that her young man enjoyed lying to women.

The girl's jealousy often irritated the young man, but this time he could easily overlook it for, after all, her words didn't apply to him but to an unknown driver. And so he merely asked an ordinary question: "Does it bother you?"

"If I were going out with you, then it would bother me," said the girl and her words contained a subtle, instructive message for the young man; but the end of her sentence applied only to the unknown driver: "but I don't know you, so it doesn't bother me."

"Things about her own man always bother a woman more than things about a stranger" (this was now the young man's subtle, instructive message to the girl), "so seeing that we are strangers, we could get along well together."

The girl pretended not to understand the implied meaning of his message, and so she now addressed the unknown driver exclusively: "What does it matter, since we'll part company in a little while?"

"Why?" asked the young man.

"Well, I'm getting out at Bystrica."

"And what if I get out with you?"

At these words the girl looked up at him and found that he looked exactly as she imagined him in her most agonizing hours of jealousy. She was alarmed at how he was flattering her and flirting with her (an unknown hitchhiker), and how seductive he was. Therefore she responded with defiant provocativeness: "What would *you* do with me, I wonder?"

"I wouldn't have to think too hard about what to do with such a beautiful woman," said the young man gallantly, and at this moment he was once again speaking far more to his own girl than to the figure of the hitchhiker.

But this flattering sentence made the girl feel as if she had caught him at something, as if she had wheedled a confession out of him with a fraudulent trick. She felt toward him a brief flash of intense hatred and said: "Aren't you rather too sure of yourself?"

The young man looked at the girl. Her defiant face appeared to him to be completely convulsed. He felt sorry for her and longed for her usual, familiar expression (which he considered childish and simple). He

leaned toward her, put his arm around her shoulders, and softly spoke the nickname he often used and with which he now wanted to stop the game.

But the girl released herself and said: "You're going a bit too fast!"

At this rebuff the young man said: "Excuse me, miss," and looked silently in front of him at the highway.

IV

The girl's pitiful jealousy, however, left her as quickly as it had come over her. After all, she was sensible and knew perfectly well that all this was merely a game; now it even struck her as a little ridiculous that she had repulsed her man out of jealous rage; it wouldn't be pleasant for her if he found out why she had done it. Fortunately she had the miraculous ability to change the meaning of her actions after the event. Using this ability, she decided that she had repulsed him not out of anger but so that she could go on with the game, which, with its whimsicality, so well suited the first day of their vacation.

So again she was the hitchhiker who had just repulsed the overeager driver, but only so as to slow down his conquest and make it more exciting. She half turned toward the young man and said caressingly: "I didn't mean to offend you, mister!"

"Excuse me, I won't touch you again," said the young man.

He was furious with the girl for not listening to him and refusing to be herself when that was what he wanted. And since the girl insisted on continuing in her role, he transferred his anger to the unknown hitchhiker whom she was portraying. And all at once he discovered the character of his own role: he stopped making the gallant remarks with which he had wanted to flatter his girl in a roundabout way, and began to play the tough guy who treats women to the coarser aspects of his masculinity: willfulness, sarcasm, self-assurance.

This role was a complete contradiction of the young man's habitually solicitous approach to the girl. True, before he had met her he had in fact behaved roughly rather than gently toward women. But he had

never resembled a heartless tough guy, because he had never demonstrated either a particularly strong will or ruthlessness. However, if he did not resemble such a man, nonetheless he had longed to at one time. Of course it was a quite naive desire, but there it was. Childish desires withstand all the snares of the adult mind and often survive into ripe old age. And this childish desire quickly took advantage of the opportunity to embody itself in the proffered role.

The young man's sarcastic reserve suited the girl very well—it freed her from herself. For she herself was, above all, the epitome of jealousy. The moment she stopped seeing the gallantly seductive young man beside her and saw only his inaccessible face, her jealousy subsided. The girl could forget herself and give herself up to her role.

Her role? What was her role? It was a role out of trashy literature. The hitchhiker stopped the car not to get a ride, but to seduce the man who was driving the car. She was an artful seductress, cleverly knowing how to use her charms. The girl slipped into this silly, romantic part with an ease that astonished her and held her spellbound.

V

There was nothing the young man missed in his life more than light-heartedness. The main road of his life was drawn with implacable precision: his job didn't use up merely eight hours a day, it also infiltrated the remaining time with the compulsory boredom of meetings and home study, and, by means of the attentiveness of his countless male and female colleagues, it infiltrated the wretchedly little time he had left for his private life as well; this private life never remained secret and sometimes even became the subject of gossip and public discussion. Even a two week vacation didn't give him a feeling of liberation and adventure; the gray shadow of precise planning lay even here. The scarcity of summer accommodations in our country had compelled him to book a room in the Tatras six months in advance, and since for that he needed a recommendation from his office, its omnipresent brain thus did not cease knowing about him for even an instant.

He had become reconciled to all this, yet all the same from time to time the terrible thought of the straight road would overcome him—a road along which he was being pursued, where he was visible to everyone, and from which he could not turn aside. At this moment that thought returned to him. Through an odd and brief conjunction of ideas the figurative road became identified with the real highway along which he was driving—and this led him suddenly to do a crazy thing.

“Where did you say you wanted to go?” he asked the girl.

“To Bystrica,” she replied.

“And what are you going to do there?”

“I have a date there.”

“Who with?”

“With a certain gentleman.”

The car was just coming to a large crossroads. The driver slowed down so as to read the road signs, then turned off to the right.

“What will happen if you don’t turn up for that date?”

“I would be your fault, and you would have to take care of me.”

“You obviously didn’t notice that I turned off in the direction of Nove Zamky.”

“Is that true? You’ve gone crazy!”

“Don’t worry! I’ll take care of you,” said the young man.

The game all at once went into a higher gear. The sports car was moving away not only from the imaginary goal of Bystrica, but also from the real goal, toward which it had been heading in the morning: the Tatras and the room that had been reserved. Fiction was suddenly making an assault on real life. The young man was moving away from himself and from the implacable straight road, from which he had never strayed until now.

“But you said you were going to the Tatras!” The girl was surprised.

“I’m going, miss, wherever I feel like going. I’m a free man, and I do what I want and what it pleases me to do.”

VI

When they drove into Nove Zamky it was already getting dark.

The young man had never been here before, and it took him a while to orient himself. Several times he stopped the car and asked the passersby directions to the hotel. Several streets had been dug up, so that the drive to the hotel, even though it was quite close by (as all those who had been asked asserted), necessitated so many detours and roundabout routes that it was almost a quarter of an hour before they finally stopped in front of it. The hotel looked unprepossessing, but it was the only one in town and the young man didn't feel like driving on. So he said to the girl: "Wait here," and he got out of the car.

Out of the car he was, of course, himself again. And it was upsetting for him to find himself in the evening somewhere completely different from his intended destination—the more so because no one had forced him to do it and as a matter of fact he hadn't even really wanted to. He blamed himself for this piece of folly, but then became reconciled to it. The room in the Tatras could wait until tomorrow, and it wouldn't do any harm if they celebrated the first day of their vacation with something unexpected.

He walked through the restaurant—smoky, noisy, and crowded—and asked for the reception desk. They sent him to the back of the lobby near the staircase, where behind a glass panel a superannuated blonde was sitting beneath a board full of keys. With difficulty, he obtained the key to the only room left.

The girl, when she found herself alone, also threw off her role. She didn't feel ill-humored, though, at finding herself in an unexpected town. She was so devoted to the young man that she never had doubts about anything he did, and confidently entrusted every moment of her life to him. On the other hand the idea once again popped into her mind that perhaps—just as she was now doing—other women had waited for her man in his car, those women he met on business trips. But surprisingly enough this idea didn't upset her at all now; in fact, she smiled at the thought of how nice it was that today she was this other woman, this irresponsible, indecent other woman, one of those

women of whom she was so jealous; it seemed to her that she was cutting them all out, that she had learned how to use their weapons; how to give the young man what until now she had not known how to give him: lightheartedness, shamelessness, and dissoluteness; a curious feeling of satisfaction filled her, because she alone had the ability to be all women and in this way (she alone) could completely captivate her lover and hold his interest.

The young man opened the car door and led the girl into the restaurant. Amid the din, the dirt, and the smoke he found a single unoccupied table in a corner.

VII

"So how are you going to take care of me now?" asked the girl provocatively.

"What would you like for an aperitif?"

The girl wasn't too fond of alcohol, still she drank a little wine and liked vermouth fairly well. Now, however, she purposely said: "Vodka."

"Fine," said the young man. "I hope you won't get drunk on me."

"And if I do?" said the girl.

The young man did not reply but called over a waiter and ordered two vodkas and two steak dinners. In a moment the waiter brought a tray with two small glasses and placed it in front of them.

The man raised his glass, "To you!"

"Can't you think of a wittier toast?"

Something was beginning to irritate him about the girl's game; now sitting face-to-face with her, he realized that it wasn't just the *words* that were turning her into a stranger, but that she had *completely* changed, the movements of her body and her facial expression, and that she unpalatably and faithfully resembled a type of woman he knew all too well and inspired some aversion in him.

And so (holding his glass in his raised hand), he corrected his toast: "Okay, then I won't drink to you, but to your kind, in which are com-

bined so successfully the better qualities of the animal and the worse aspects of the human being.”

“By ‘kind’ do you mean all women?” asked the girl.

“No, I mean only those who are like you.”

“Anyway, it doesn’t seem very witty to me to compare a woman to an animal.”

“Okay,” the young man was still holding his glass aloft, “then I won’t drink to your kind, but to your soul. Agreed? To your soul, which lights up when it descends from your head into your belly, and which goes out when it rises back up to your head.”

The girl raised her glass. “Okay, to my soul, which descends into my belly.”

“I’ll correct myself once more,” said the young man. “To your belly, into which your soul descends.”

“To my belly,” said the girl, and her belly (now that they had named it specifically) seemed to respond to the call; she could feel every bit of its skin.

Then the waiter brought their steaks, and the young man ordered them another vodka and some soda water (this time they drank to the girl’s breasts), and the conversation continued in this peculiar, frivolous tone. It irritated the young man more and more to see how well his girlfriend *knew* how to behave like a loose woman; if she was able to do it so well, he thought, it meant that she really was like that; after all, no alien soul had entered into her from somewhere in space; what she was acting now was she herself; perhaps it was that part of her being that had formerly been locked up and that the pretext of the game had let out of its cage. Perhaps the girl supposed that by means of the game she was *disowning* herself, but wasn’t it the other way around? Wasn’t she becoming herself only through the game? Wasn’t she freeing herself through the game? No, sitting opposite him was not a strange woman in his girl’s body; it was his girl, herself, no one else. He looked at her and felt growing aversion toward her.

However, it was not only aversion. The more the girl withdrew from him psychically, the more he longed for her physically; the alienation of her soul drew attention to her body; yes it turned her body into a body;

as if until now it had been hidden from the young man within clouds of compassion, tenderness, concern, love, and emotion, as if it had been lost in these clouds (yes, as if this body had been *lost!*). It seemed to the young man that today he was *seeing* his girl's body for the first time.

After her third vodka and soda the girl got up and said flirtatiously: "Excuse me."

The young man said, "May I ask you where you are going, miss?"

"To piss, if you'll permit me," said the girl, and she walked off between the tables back toward the plush curtain.

VIII

She was pleased with the way she had astounded the young man with this word, which—in spite of all its innocence—he had never heard from her; nothing seemed to her truer to the character of the woman she was playing than this flirtatious emphasis placed on the word in question; yes, she was pleased, she was in the best of moods; the game captivated her. It allowed her to what she had not felt until now: *a feeling of happy-go-lucky irresponsibility*.

She who was always uneasy in advance about her every next step, suddenly felt completely relaxed. The alien life in which she had become involved was a life without shame, without biographical specifications, without past or future, without obligations; it was a life that was extraordinarily free. The girl, as a hitchhiker, could do anything: *Everything was permitted her*; she could say, do, and feel whatever she liked.

She walked through the room and was aware that people were watching her from all the tables; it was also a new sensation, one she didn't recognize: *indecent joy caused by her body*. Until now she had never been able to get rid of the fourteen-year-old girl within herself who was ashamed of her breasts and had the disagreeable feeling that she was indecent, because they stuck out from her body and were visible. Even though she was proud of being pretty and having a good figure, this feeling of pride was always immediately curtailed by shame; she rightly suspected that feminine beauty functioned above all as sexual provocation, and she

found this distasteful; she longed for her body to relate only to the man she loved; when men stared at her breasts in the street it seemed to her that they were invading a piece of her most secret privacy that should belong only to herself and her lover. But now she was the hitchhiker, the woman without a destiny. In this role she was relieved of the tender bonds of her love and began to be intensely aware of her body; and her body became more aroused the more alien the eyes watching it.

She was walking past the last table when an intoxicated man, wanting to show off his worldliness, addressed her in French: "*Combien, mademoiselle?*"

The girl understood. She thrust out her breasts and fully experienced every movement of her hips, then disappeared behind the curtain.

IX

It was a peculiar game. This peculiarity was evidenced, for example, by the fact that the young man, even though he himself was playing the unknown driver remarkably well, did not for a moment stop seeing his girl in the hitchhiker. And it was precisely this that was tormenting; he saw his girl seducing a strange man, and he had the bitter privilege of being present, of seeing at close quarters how she looked and of hearing what she said when she was cheating on him (when she had cheated on him, when she would cheat on him); he had the paradoxical honor of being himself the pretext for her unfaithfulness.

This was all the worse because he worshiped rather than loved her; it had always seemed that the girl had *reality* only within the bounds of fidelity and purity, and that beyond these bounds it simply didn't exist; beyond these bounds she would cease to be herself, as water ceases to be water beyond the boiling point. When he now saw her crossing this horrifying boundary with nonchalant elegance, he was filled with anger.

The girl came back from the rest room and complained: "A guy over there asked me: '*Combien, mademoiselle?*'"

"Don't be surprised!" said the young man. "You look like a whore."

"Do you know that it doesn't bother me in the least?"

"Then you should go with the gentleman!"

"But I have you."

"You can join him later. Go and work out something with him."

"I don't find him attractive."

"But in principle you have nothing against it, having several men in one night."

"Why not? If they're good-looking."

"Do you prefer them one after the other or at the same time?"

"Either way," said the girl.

The conversation was proceeding to still greater enormities; it shocked the girl slightly, but she couldn't protest. Even in a game there lurks a lack of freedom; even a game is a trap for the players. If this had not been a game and they had really been two strangers, the hitchhiker could long ago have taken offense and left; but there's no escape from a game. A team cannot flee before the end of the match, chess pieces cannot desert the chessboard, the boundaries of the playing field are impassable. The girl knew that she had to accept whatever form the game might take, just because it was a game. She knew that the more extreme the game became, the more it would be a game and the more obediently she would have to play it. And it was futile to evoke good sense and warn her dazed soul that she must keep her distance from the game and not take it seriously. Just because it was only a game her soul was not afraid, did not oppose the game, and sank deeper into it as if drugged.

The young man called the waiter and paid. Then he got up and said to the girl: "We're going."

"Where to?" The girl feigned surprise.

"Don't ask, just come on," said the young man.

"Is that any way to talk to me?"

"It's the way I talk to whores."

X

They went up the badly lit staircase. On the landing below the second floor a group of intoxicated men was standing near the rest room. The

young man caught hold of the girl from behind so that he was holding her breast with his hand. The men by the rest room saw this and began to call out. The girl wanted to break away, but the young man yelled at her: "Keep still!" The men greeted this with general ribaldry and addressed several dirty remarks to the girl. The young man and the girl reached the second floor. He opened the door of their room and switched on the light.

It was a narrow room with two beds, a small table, a chair, and a washbasin. The young man locked the door and turned to the girl. She was standing facing him in a defiant pose with insolent sensuality in her eyes. He looked at her and tried to discover behind her lascivious expression the familiar features that he loved tenderly. It was as if he were looking at two images through the same lens, at two images superimposed one on the other with one showing through the other. These two images showing through each other were telling him that *everything* was in the girl, that her soul was terrifyingly amorphous, that it held faithfulness and unfaithfulness, treachery and innocence, flirtatiousness and chastity. This disorderly jumble seemed disgusting to him, like the variety to be found in a pile of garbage. Both images continued to show through each other, and the young man understood that the girl differed only on the surface from other women, but deep down was the same as they: full of all possible thoughts, feelings, and vices, which justified all his secret misgivings and fits of jealousy. The impression that certain outlines delineated her as an individual was only a delusion to which the other person, the one who was looking, was subject—namely himself. It seemed to him that the girl he loved was a creation of his desire, his thoughts, and his faith and that the *real* girl now standing in front of him was hopelessly *other*, hopelessly *alien*, hopelessly *polymorphous*. He hated her.

"What are you waiting for? Strip!" he said.

The girl flirtatiously bent her head and said: "Is it necessary?"

The tone in which she said this seemed to him very familiar; it seemed to him that once long ago some other woman had said this to him, only he no longer knew which one. He longed to humiliate her. Not the hitch-

hiker, but his own girl. The game merged with life. The game of humiliating the hitchhiker became only a pretext for humiliating his girl. The young man had forgotten that he was playing a game. He simply hated the woman standing in front of him. He stared at her and drew a fifty-crown bill from his wallet. He offered it to the girl. "Is that enough?"

The girl took the fifty crowns and said: "You don't think I'm worth much."

The young man said: "You aren't worth more."

The girl nestled up against the young man. "You can't get around me like that. You have to be nicer. You have to make an effort!"

She put her arms around him and moved her mouth toward his. He put his fingers on her mouth and gently pushed her away. He said: "I only kiss women I love."

"And you don't love me?"

"No."

"Who do you love?"

"What's that got to do with you? Strip!"

XI

She had never undressed like this before. The shyness, the feeling of inner panic, the dizziness, all that she had always felt when undressing in front of the young man (and she couldn't hide in the darkness), all this was gone. She was standing in front of him self-confident, insolent, bathed in light, and astonished at her sudden discovery of the gestures, heretofore unknown to her, of a slow, provocative striptease. She took in his glances, slipping off each piece of clothing with a caressing movement and enjoying each individual stage of this exposure.

But then suddenly she was standing in front of him completely naked, and at this moment it flashed through her head that now the whole game would end, that since she had stripped off her clothes, she had also stripped away her dissimulation, and that being naked meant that she was now herself and the young man ought to come up to her

now and make a gesture with which he would wipe out everything and after which would follow only their most intimate lovemaking. So she stood naked in front of the young man and at that moment stopped playing the game. She felt embarrassed, and on her face appeared the smile that really belonged to her: a shy and confused smile.

But the young man didn't come to her and didn't end the game. He didn't notice the familiar smile; he saw before him only the beautiful, alien body of his own girl, whom he hated. Hatred cleansed his sensuality of any sentimental coating. She wanted to come to him, but he said: "Stay where you are, I want to have a good look at you." Now he longed only to treat her as a whore. But the young man had never had a whore, and the ideas he had about them came from literature and hearsay. So he turned to these ideas and the first thing he recalled was the image of a woman in black underwear (and black stockings) dancing on the shiny top of a piano. In the little hotel room there was no piano, there was only a small table, covered with a linen cloth, leaning against the wall. He ordered the girl to climb up on it. The girl made a pleading gesture, but the young man said: "You've been paid."

When she saw the look of unshakable obsession in the young man's eyes, she tried to go on with the game, even though she no longer could and no longer knew how. With tears in her eyes she climbed onto the table. The top was scarcely a yard square and one leg was a little bit shorter than the others, so that standing on it the girl felt unsteady.

But the young man was pleased with the naked figure now towering above him, and the girl's ashamed uncertainty merely inflamed his imperiousness. He wanted to see her body in all positions and from all sides, as he imagined other men had seen it and would see it. He was vulgar and lascivious. He used words she had never heard from him before. She wanted to refuse, she wanted to be released from the game. She called him by his first name, but he immediately yelled at her that she had no right to address him so intimately. And so eventually in confusion and on the verge of tears, she obeyed, she bent forward and crouched according to the young man's wishes, gave a military salute, and then wiggled her hips as she did the twist for him; during a slightly more violent move-

ment, when the cloth slipped beneath her feet and she nearly fell, the young man caught her and dragged her to the bed.

He had intercourse with her. She was glad that at least now finally the unfortunate game would end and they would again be the two people they had been before and would love each other. She wanted to press her mouth against his. But the young man pushed her head away and repeated that he only kissed women he loved. She burst into loud sobs. But she wasn't even allowed to cry, because the young man's furious passion gradually won over her body, which then silenced the complaint of her soul. On the bed there were soon two bodies in perfect harmony, two sensual bodies alien to each other. This was exactly what the girl had most dreaded all her life and had scrupulously avoided until now: lovemaking without emotion or love. She knew that she had crossed the forbidden boundary, but she proceeded across it without objections and as a full participant; only somewhere, far off in a corner of her consciousness, did she feel horror at the thought that she had never known such pleasure, never so much pleasure as at this moment—beyond that boundary.

XII

Then it was all over. The young man got up off the girl and, reaching out for the long cord hanging over the bed, switched off the light. He didn't want to see the girl's face. He knew that the game was over, but he didn't feel like returning to their customary relationship; he feared this return. He lay beside the girl in the dark in such a way that their bodies would not touch.

After a moment he heard her sobbing quietly; the girl's hand diffidently, childishly touched his; it touched, withdrew, then touched again, and then a pleading, sobbing voice broke the silence, calling him by his name and saying "I'm me, I'm me. . . ."

The young man was silent, he didn't move, and he was aware of the sad emptiness of the girl's assertion, in which the unknown was defined by the same unknown.

And the girl soon passed from sobbing to loud crying and went on endlessly repeating this pitiful tautology: "I'm me, I'm me, I'm me. . . ."

The young man began to call compassion to his aid (he had to call it from afar, because it was nowhere near at hand), so as to be able to calm the girl. There were still thirteen days of vacation before them.

LOVERS OF THEIR TIME

WILLIAM TREVOR

Looking back on it, it seemed to have to do with that particular decade in London. Could it have happened, he wondered, at any other time except the 1960s? That feeling was intensified, perhaps, because the whole thing had begun on New Year's Day, 1963, long before that day became a bank holiday in England. 'That'll be two and nine,' she'd said, smiling at him across her counter, handing him toothpaste and emery boards in a bag. 'Colgate's, remember,' his wife had called out as he was leaving the flat. 'The last stuff we had tasted awful.'

His name was Norman Britt. It said so on a small plastic name-plate in front of his position in the travel agency where he worked, Travel-Wide as it was called. *Marie* a badge on her light-blue shop-coat announced. His wife, who worked at home, assembling jewellery for a firm that paid her on a production basis, was called Hilda.

Green's the Chemist's and Travel-Wide were in Vincent Street, a street that was equidistant from Paddington Station and Edgware Road. The flat where Hilda worked all day was in Putney. Marie lived in Reading with her mother and her mother's friend Mrs Druk, both of them widows. She caught the 8.05 every morning to Paddington and usually the 6.30 back.

He was forty in 1963, as Hilda was; Marie was twenty-eight. He was tall and thin, with a David Niven moustache. Hilda was thin also, her dark hair beginning to grey, her sharply featured face pale. Marie was well-covered, carefully made up, her hair dyed blonde. She smiled a lot, a slack, half-crooked smile that made her eyes screw up and twinkle; she exuded laziness and generosity. She and her friend Mavis went dancing a lot in Reading and had a sizeable collection of men friends. 'Fellas' they called them.

Buying things from her now and again in Green's the Chemist's Norman had come to the conclusion that she was of a tartish disposition, and imagined that if ever he sat with her over a drink in the nearby Drummer Boy the occasion could easily lead to a hug on the street afterwards. He imagined her coral-coloured lips, like two tiny sausages, only softer, pressed upon his moustache and his abbreviated mouth. He imagined the warmth of her hand in his. For all that, she was a little outside reality: she was there to desire, to glow erotically in the heady atmosphere of the Drummer Boy, to light cigarettes for in a fantasy.

'Isn't it cold?' he said as she handed him the emery boards and the toothpaste.

'Shocking,' she agreed, and hesitated, clearly wanting to say something else. 'You're in that Travel-Wide,' she added in the end. 'Me and my friend want to go to Spain this year.'

'It's very popular. The Costa Brava?'

'That's right.' She handed him threepence change. 'In May.'

'Not too hot on the Costa in May. If you need any help—'

'Just the bookings.'

'I'd be happy to make them for you. Look in any time. Britt the name is. I'm on the counter.'

'If I may, Mr Britt. I could slip out maybe at four, or roundabout.'

'Today, you mean?'

'We want to fix it up.'

'Naturally. I'll keep an eye out for you.'

It was hard not to call her madam or miss, the way he'd normally do. He had heard himself saying that he'd be happy to make the bookings for her, knowing that that was business jargon, knowing that the unfussy voice he'd used was a business one also. Her friend was a man, he supposed, some snazzy tough in a car. 'See you later then,' he said, but already she was serving another customer, advising about lipstick refills.

She didn't appear in Travel-Wide at four o'clock; she hadn't come when the doors closed at five-thirty. He was aware of a sense of disappointment, combined with one of anticipation: for if she'd come at four, he reflected as he left the travel agency, their bit of business would be in

the past rather than the future. She'd look in some other time and he'd just have to trust to luck that if he happened to be busy with another customer she'd be able to wait. There'd be a further occasion, when she called to collect the tickets themselves.

'Ever so sorry,' she said on the street, her voice coming from behind him. 'Couldn't get away, Mr Britt.'

He turned and smiled at her, feeling the movement of his moustache as he parted his lips. He knew only too well, he said. 'Some other time then?'

'Maybe tomorrow. Maybe lunchtime.'

'I'm off myself from twelve to one. Look, you wouldn't fancy a drink? I could advise you just as easily over a drink.'

'Oh, you wouldn't have the time. No, I mustn't take advantage—'

'You're not at all. If you've got ten minutes?'

'Well, it's awfully good of you, Mr Britt. But I really feel I'm taking advantage, I really do.'

'A New Year's drink.'

He pushed open the doors of the saloon bar of the Drummer Boy, a place he didn't often enter except for office drinks at Christmas or when someone leaving the agency was being given a send-off. Ron Stocks and Mr Blackstaffe were usually there in the evenings: he hoped they'd be there now to see him in the company of the girl from Green's the Chemist's. 'What would you like?' he asked her.

'Gin and peppermint's my poison, only honestly I should pay. No, let me ask you—'

'I wouldn't dream of it. We can sit over there, look.'

The Drummer Boy, so early in the evening, wasn't full. By six o'clock the advertising executives from the firm of Dalton, Dure and Higgins, just round the corner, would have arrived, and the architects from Frine and Knight. Now there was only Mrs Gegan, old and alcoholic, known to everyone, and a man called Bert, with his poodle, Jimmy. It was disappointing that Ron Stocks and Mr Blackstaffe weren't there.

'You were here lunchtime Christmas Eve,' she said.

'Yes, I was.' He paused, placing her gin and peppermint on a cardboard mat that advertised Guinness. 'I saw you too.'

He drank some of his Double Diamond and carefully wiped the traces of foam from his moustache. He realized now that it would, of course, be quite impossible to give her a hug on the street outside. That had been just imagination, wishful thinking as his mother would have said. And yet he knew that when he arrived home twenty-five or so minutes late he would not tell Hilda that he'd been advising an assistant from Green's the Chemist's about a holiday on the Costa Brava. He wouldn't even say he'd been in the Drummer Boy. He'd say Blackstaffe had kept everyone late, going through the new package that Eurotours were offering in Germany and Luxembourg this summer. Hilda wouldn't in a million years suspect that he'd been sitting in a public house with a younger woman who was quite an eyeful. As a kind of joke, she quite regularly suggested that his sexual drive left something to be desired.

'We were thinking about the last two weeks in May,' Marie said. 'It's when Mavis can get off too.'

'Mavis?'

'My friend, Mr Britt.'

Hilda was watching *Z-Cars* in the sitting-room, drinking V.P. wine. His stuff was in the oven, she told him. 'Thanks,' he said.

Sometimes she was out when he returned in the evenings. She went round to friends, a Mr and Mrs Fowler, with whom she drank V.P. and played bridge. On other occasions she went to the Club, which was a place with a licence, for card-players and billiard-players. She quite liked her social life, but always said beforehand when she'd be out and always made arrangements about leaving food in the oven. Often in the daytime she'd go and make jewellery with Violet Parkes, who also went in for this occupation; and often Violet Parkes spent the day with Hilda. The jewellery-making consisted for the most part of threading plastic beads on to a string or arranging plastic pieces in the settings provided. Hilda was quick at it and earned more than she would have if she went out every day, saving the fares for a start. She was better at it than Violet Parkes.

'All right then?' she said when he carried his tray of food into the sitting-room and sat down in front of the television set. 'Want some V.P., eh?'

Her eyes continued to watch the figures on the screen as she spoke. He knew she'd prefer to be in the Fowlers' house or at the Club, although now that they'd acquired a TV set the evenings passed easier when they were alone together.

'No, thanks,' he said in reply to her offer of wine and he began to eat something that appeared to be a rissole. There were two of them, round and brown in a tin-foil container that also contained gravy. He hoped she wasn't going to be demanding in their bedroom. He eyed her, for sometimes he could tell.

'Hi,' she said, noticing the glance. 'Feeling fruity, dear?' She laughed and winked, her suggestive voice seeming odd as it issued from her thin, rather dried-up face. She was always saying things like that, for no reason that Norman could see, always talking about feeling fruity or saying she could see he was keen when he wasn't in the least. Norman considered that she was unduly demanding and often wondered what it would be like to be married to someone who was not. Now and again, fatigued after the intensity of her love-making, he lay staring at the darkness, wondering if her bedroom appetites were related in some way to the fact that she was unable to bear children, if her abandon reflected a maternal frustration. Earlier in their married life she'd gone out every day to an office where she'd been a filing clerk; in the evenings they'd often gone to the cinema.

He lay that night, after she'd gone to sleep, listening to her heavy breathing, thinking of the girl in Green's the Chemist's. He went through the whole day in his mind, seeing himself leaving the flat in Putney, hearing Hilda calling out about the emery boards and the toothpaste, seeing himself reading the *Daily Telegraph* in the Tube. Slowly he went through the morning, deliciously anticipating the moment when she handed him his change. With her smile mistily hovering, he recalled the questions and demands of a number of the morning's customers. 'Fix us up Newcastle and back?' a couple inquired. 'Mid-week's cheaper, is it?' A man with a squashed-up face wanted a week in Holland for himself and his sister and his sister's husband. A woman asked about Greece, another about cruises on the Nile, a third about the Scilly Isles. Then he placed the Closed sign in front of his position

at the counter and went out to have lunch in Bette's Sandwiches off the Edgware Road. 'Packet of emery boards,' he said again in Green's the Chemist's, 'and a small Colgate's.' After that there was the conversation they'd had, and then the afternoon with her smile still mistily hovering, as in fact it had, and then her presence beside him in the Drummer Boy. Endlessly she lifted the glass of gin and peppermint to her lips, endlessly she smiled. When he slept he dreamed of her. They were walking in Hyde Park and her shoe fell off. 'I could tell you were a deep one,' she said, and the next thing was Hilda was having one of her early-morning appetites.

'I don't know what it is about that chap,' Marie confided to Mavis. 'Something, though.'

'Married, is he?'

'Oh, he would be, chap like that.'

'Now, you be careful, girl.'

'He has Sinatra's eyes. That blue, you know.'

'Now, Marie—'

'I like an older fella. He's got a nice moustache.'

'So's that fella in the International.'

'Wet behind the ears. And my God, his dandruff!'

They left the train together and parted on the platform, Marie making for the Underground, Mavis hurrying for a bus. It was quite convenient, really, living in Reading and travelling to Paddington every day. It was only half an hour and chatting on the journey passed the time. They didn't travel back together in the evenings because Mavis nearly always did an hour's overtime. She was a computer programmer.

'I talked to Mavis. It's OK about the insurance,' Marie said in Travel-Wide at half past eleven that morning, having slipped out when the shop seemed slack. There'd been some details about insurance which he'd raised the evening before. He always advised insurance, but he'd quite understood when she'd made the point that she'd better discuss the matter with her friend before committing herself to the extra expenditure.

'So I'll go ahead and book you,' he said. 'There'll just be the deposit.'

Mavis wrote the cheque. She pushed the pink slip across the counter to him. 'Payable to Travel-Wide.'

'That's quite correct.' He glanced at it and wrote her a receipt. He said:

'I looked out another brochure or two. I'd quite like to go through them with you. So you can explain what's what to your friend.'

'Oh, that's very nice, Mr Britt. But I got to get back. I mean, I shouldn't be out in the middle of the morning.'

'Any chance of lunchtime?'

His suavity astounded him. He thought of Hilda, deftly working at her jewellery, stringing orange and yellow beads, listening to the Jimmy Young programme.

'Lunchtime, Mr Britt?'

'We'd maybe talk about the brochures.'

He fancied her, she said to herself. He was making a pass, talking about brochures and lunchtime. Well, she wasn't disagreeable. She'd meant what she'd said to Mavis: she liked an older fella and she liked his moustache, so smooth it looked as if he put something on it. She liked the name Norman.

'All right then,' she said.

He couldn't suggest Bette's Sandwiches because you stood up at a shelf on the wall and ate the sandwiches off a cardboard plate.

'We could go to the Drummer Boy,' he suggested instead. 'I'm off at twelve-fifteen.'

'Say half past, Mr Britt.'

'I'll be there with the brochures.'

Again he thought of Hilda. He thought of her wiry, pasty limbs and the way she had of snorting. Sometimes when they were watching the television she'd suddenly want to sit on his knee. She'd get worse as she grew older; she'd get scrawnier; her hair, already coarse, would get dry and grey. He enjoyed the evenings when she went out to the Club or to her friends the Fowlers. And yet he wasn't being fair because in very many ways she did her best. It was just that you didn't always feel like having someone on your knee after a day's work.

'Same?' he said in the Drummer Boy.

'Yes please, Mr Britt.' She'd meant to say that the drinks were definitely on her, after what he'd spent last night. But in her flurry she forgot. She picked up the brochures he'd left on the seat beside her. She pretended to read one, but all the time she was watching him as he stood by the bar. He smiled as he turned and came back with their drinks. He said something about it being a nice way to do business. He was drinking gin and peppermint himself.

'I meant to pay for the drinks. I meant to say I would. I'm sorry, Mr Britt.'

'Norman my name is.' He surprised himself again by the ease with which he was managing the situation. They'd have their drinks and then he'd suggest some of the shepherd's pie, or a ham-and-salad roll if she'd prefer it. He'd buy her another gin and peppermint to get her going. Eighteen years ago he used to buy Hilda further glasses of V.P. wine with the same thought in mind.

They finished with the brochures. She told him she lived in Reading; she talked about the town. She mentioned her mother and her mother's friend Mrs Druk, who lived with them, and Mavis. She told him a lot about Mavis. No man was mentioned, no boyfriend or fiancé.

'Honestly,' she said, 'I'm not hungry.' She couldn't have touched a thing. She just wanted to go on drinking gin with him. She wanted to get slightly squiffy, a thing she'd never done before in the middle of the day. She wanted to put her arm through his.

'It's been nice meeting you,' he said.

'A bit of luck.'

'I think so too, Marie.' He ran his forefinger between the bones on the back of her hand, so gently that it made her want to shiver. She didn't take her hand away, and when she continued not to he took her hand in his.

After that they had lunch together every day, always in the Drummer Boy. People saw them, Ron Stocks and Mr Blackstaffe from Travel-Wide, Mr Fineman, the pharmacist from Green's the Chemist's. Other people from the travel agency and from the chemist's saw them walking about the streets, usually hand in hand. They would look together into

the shop windows of Edgware Road, drawn particularly to an antique shop full of brass. In the evenings he would walk with her to Paddington Station and have a drink in one of the bars. They'd embrace on the platform, as other people did.

Mavis continued to disapprove; Marie's mother and Mrs Druk remained ignorant of the affair. The holiday on the Costa Brava that May was not a success because all the time Marie kept wishing Norman Britt was with her. Occasionally, while Mavis read magazines on the beach, Marie wept and Mavis pretended not to notice. She was furious because Marie's low spirits meant that it was impossible for them to get to know fellas. For months they'd been looking forward to the holiday and now, just because of a clerk in a travel agency, it was a flop. 'I'm sorry, dear,' Marie kept saying, trying to smile; but when they returned to London the friendship declined. 'You're making a fool of yourself,' Mavis pronounced harshly, 'and it's dead boring having to hear about it.' After that they ceased to travel together in the mornings.

The affair remained unconsummated. In the hour and a quarter allotted to each of them for lunch there was nowhere they might have gone to let their passion for one another run its course. Everywhere was public: Travel-Wide and the chemist's shop, the Drummer Boy, the streets they walked. Neither could easily spend a night away from home. Her mother and Mrs Druk would guess that something untoward was in the air; Hilda, deprived of her bedroom mating, would no longer be nonchalant in front of the TV. It would all come out if they were rash, and they sensed some danger in that.

'Oh, darling,' she whispered one October evening at Paddington, huddling herself against him. It was foggy and cold. The fog was in her pale hair, tiny droplets that only he, being close to her, could see. People hurried through the lit-up station, weary faces anxious to be home.

'I know,' he said, feeling as inadequate as he always did at the station.

'I lie awake and think of you,' she whispered.

'You've made me live,' he whispered back.

'And you me. Oh, God, and you me.' She was gone before she finished speaking, swinging into the train as it moved away, her bulky red

handbag the last thing he saw. It would be eighteen hours before they'd meet again.

He turned his back on her train and slowly made his way through the crowds, his reluctance to start the journey back to the flat in Putney seeming physical, like a pain, inside him. 'Oh, for God's sake!' a woman cried angrily at him, for he had been in her way and had moved in the same direction as she had in seeking to avoid her, causing a second collision. She dropped magazines on to the platform and he helped her to pick them up, vainly apologizing.

It was then, walking away from this woman, that he saw the sign. *Hotel Entrance* it said in red neon letters, beyond the station's main bookstall. It was the back of the Great Western Royal, a short-cut to its comforts for train travellers at the end of their journey. If only, he thought, they could share a room there. If only for one single night they were granted the privilege of being man and wife. People passed through the swing-doors beneath the glowing red sign, people hurrying, with newspapers or suitcases. Without quite knowing why, he passed through the swing-doors himself.

He walked up two brief flights of steps, through another set of doors, and paused in the enormous hall of the Great Western Royal Hotel. Ahead of him, to the left, was the long, curved reception counter and, to the right, the porter's desk. Small tables and armchairs were everywhere; it was carpeted underfoot. There were signs to lifts and to the bar and the restaurant. The stairway, gently rising to his left, was gracious, carpeted also.

They would sit for a moment in this hall, he imagined, as other people were sitting now, a few with drinks, others with pots of tea and plates half empty of assorted biscuits. He stood for a moment, watching these people, and then, as though he possessed a room in the hotel, he mounted the stairs, saying to himself that it must somehow be possible, that surely they could share a single night in the splendour of this place. There was a landing, made into a lounge, with armchairs and tables, as in the hall below. People conversed quietly; a foreign waiter, elderly and limping, collected silver-plated teapots; a Pekinese dog slept on a woman's lap.

The floor above was different. It was a long, wide corridor with bedroom doors on either side of it. Other corridors, exactly similar, led off it. Chambermaids passed him with lowered eyes; someone gently laughed in a room marked *Staff Only*; a waiter wheeled a trolley containing covered dishes, and a bottle of wine wrapped in a napkin. *Bathroom* a sign said, and he looked in, just to see what a bathroom in the Great Western Royal Hotel would be like. 'My God!' he whispered, possessed immediately with the idea that was, for him, to make the decade of the 1960s different. Looking back on it, he was for ever after unable to recall the first moment he beheld the bathroom on the second floor without experiencing the shiver of pleasure he'd experienced at the time. Slowly he entered. He locked the door and slowly sat down on the edge of the bath. The place was huge, as the bath itself was, like somewhere in a palace. The walls were marble, white veined delicately with grey. Two monstrous brass taps, the biggest bath taps he'd ever in his life seen, seemed to know already that he and Marie would come to the bathroom. They seemed almost to wink an invitation to him, to tell him that the bathroom was a comfortable place and not often in use since private bathrooms were now attached to most of the bedrooms. Sitting in his mackintosh coat on the edge of the bath, he wondered what Hilda would say if she could see him now.

He suggested it to Marie in the Drummer Boy. He led up to it slowly, describing the interior of the Great Western Royal Hotel and how he had wandered about it because he hadn't wanted to go home. 'Actually,' he said, 'I ended up in a bathroom.'

'You mean the toilet, dear? Taken short—'

'No, not the toilet. A bathroom on the second floor. Done out in marble, as a matter of fact.'

She replied that honestly he was a one, to go into a bathroom like that when he wasn't even staying in the place! He said:

'What I mean, Marie, it's somewhere we could go.'

'Go, dear?'

'It's empty half the time. Nearly all the time it must be. I mean, we could be there now. This minute if we wanted to.'

'But we're having our lunch, Norman.'

'That's what I mean. We could even be having it there.'

From the saloon bar's juke-box a lugubrious voice pleaded for a hand to be held. *Take my hand*, sang Elvis Presley, *take my whole life too*. The advertising executives from Dalton, Dure and Higgins were loudly talking about their hopes of gaining the Canadian Pacific account. Less noisily the architects from Frine and Knight complained about local planning regulations.

'In a bathroom, Norman? But we couldn't just go into a bathroom.'

'Why not?'

'Well, we couldn't. I mean, we *couldn't*.'

'What I'm saying is we could.'

'I want to marry you, Norman. I want us to be together. I don't want just going to a bathroom in some hotel.'

'I know; I want to marry you too. But we've got to work it out. You know we've got to work it out, Marie—getting married.'

'Yes, I know.'

It was a familiar topic of conversation between them. They took it for granted that one day, somehow, they would be married. They had talked about Hilda. He'd described Hilda to her, he'd drawn a picture in Marie's mind of Hilda bent over her jewellery-making in a Putney flat, or going out to drink V.P. with the Fowlers or at the Club. He hadn't presented a flattering picture of his wife, and when Marie had quite timidly said that she didn't much care for the sound of her he had agreed that naturally she wouldn't. The only aspect of Hilda he didn't touch upon was her bedroom appetite, night starvation as he privately dubbed it. He didn't mention it because he guessed it might be upsetting.

What they had to work out where Hilda was concerned were the economics of the matter. He would never, at Travel-Wide or anywhere else, earn a great deal of money. Familiar with Hilda's nature, he knew that as soon as a divorce was mooted she'd set out to claim as much alimony as she possibly could, which by law he would have to pay. She would state that she only made jewellery for pin-money and increasingly found it difficult to do so due to a developing tendency towards chilblains or arthritis, anything she could think of. She would hate him for rejecting

her, for depriving her of a tame companion. Her own resentment at not being able to have children would somehow latch on to his unfaithfulness: she would see a pattern which wasn't really there, bitterness would come into her eyes.

Marie had said that she wanted to give him the children he had never had. She wanted to have children at once and she knew she could. He knew it too: having children was part of her, you'd only to look at her. Yet that would mean she'd have to give up her job, which she wanted to do when she married anyway, which in turn would mean that all three of them would have to subsist on his meagre salary. And not just all three, the children also.

It was a riddle that mocked him: he could find no answer, and yet he believed that the more he and Marie were together, the more they talked to one another and continued to be in love, the more chance there was of suddenly hitting upon a solution. Not that Marie always listened when he went on about it. She agreed they had to solve their problem, but now and again just pretended it wasn't there. She liked to forget about the existence of Hilda. For an hour or so when she was with him she liked to assume that quite soon, in July or even June, they'd be married. He always brought her back to earth.

'Look, let's just have a drink in the hotel,' he urged. 'Tonight, before the train. Instead of having one in the buffet.'

'But it's a hotel, Norman. I mean, it's for people to stay in—'

'Anyone can go into a hotel for a drink.'

That evening, after their drink in the hotel bar, he led her to the first-floor landing that was also a lounge. It was warm in the hotel. She said she'd like to sink down into one of the armchairs and fall asleep. He laughed at that; he didn't suggest an excursion to the bathroom, sensing that he shouldn't rush things. He saw her on to her train, abandoning her to her mother and Mrs Druk and Mavis. He knew that all during the journey she would be mulling over the splendours of the Great Western Royal.

December came. It was no longer foggy, but the weather was colder, with an icy wind. Every evening, before her train, they had their drink in the hotel. 'I'd love to show you that bathroom,' he said once. 'Just for

fun.' He hadn't been pressing it in the least; it was the first time he'd mentioned the bathroom since he'd mentioned it originally. She giggled and said he was terrible. She said she'd miss her train if she went looking at bathrooms, but he said there'd easily be time. 'Gosh!' she whispered, standing in the doorway, looking in. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her inside, fearful in case a chambermaid should see them loitering there. He locked the door and kissed her. In almost twelve months it was their first embrace in private.

They went to the bathroom during the lunch hour on New Year's Day, and he felt it was right that they should celebrate in this way the anniversary of their first real meeting. His early impression of her, that she was of a tartish disposition, had long since been dispelled. Voluptuous she might seem to the eye, but beneath that misleading surface she was prim and proper. It was odd that Hilda, who looked dried-up and wholly uninterested in the sensual life, should also belie her appearance. 'I've never done it before,' Marie confessed in the bathroom, and he loved her the more for that. He loved her simplicity in this matter, her desire to remain a virgin until her wedding. But since she repeatedly swore that she could marry no one else, their anticipating of their wedding-night did not matter. 'Oh, God, I love you,' she whispered, naked for the first time in the bathroom. 'Oh, Norman, you're so good to me.'

After that it became a regular thing. He would saunter from the hotel bar, across the huge entrance lounge, and take a lift to the second floor. Five minutes later she would follow, with a towel brought specially from Reading in her handbag. In the bathroom they always whispered, and would sit together in a warm bath after their love-making, still murmuring about the future, holding hands beneath the surface of the water. No one ever rapped on the door to ask what was going on in there. No one ever questioned them as they returned, separately, to the bar, with the towel they'd shared damping her compact and her handkerchief.

Years instead of months began to go by. On the juke-box in the Drummer Boy the voice of Elvis Presley was no longer heard. '*Why she had to go I don't know,*' sang the Beatles, '*she didn't say . . . I believe in yesterday.*' And Eleanor Rigby entered people's lives, and Sergeant Pepper

with her. The fantasies of secret agents, more fantastic than ever before, filled the screens of London's cinemas. Carnaby Street, like a jolly trash-can, overflowed with noise and colour. And in the bathroom of the Great Western Royal Hotel the love affair of Norman Britt and Marie was touched with the same preposterousness. They ate sandwiches in the bathroom; they drank wine. He whispered to her of the faraway places he knew about but had never been to: the Bahamas, Brazil, Peru, Seville at Easter, the Greek islands, the Nile, Shiraz, Persepolis, the Rocky Mountains. They should have been saving their money, not spending it on gin and peppermint in the bar of the hotel and in the Drummer Boy. They should have been racking their brains to find a solution to the problem of Hilda, but it was nicer to pretend that one day they would walk together in Venice or Tuscany. It was all so different from the activities that began with Hilda's bedroom appetites, and it was different from the coarseness that invariably surfaced when Mr Blackstaffe got going in the Drummer Boy on an evening when a Travel-Wide employee was being given a send-off. Mr Blackstaffe's great joke on such occasions was that he liked to have sexual intercourse with his wife at night and that she preferred the conjunction in the mornings. He was always going on about how difficult it was in the mornings, what with the children liable to interrupt you, and he usually went into details about certain other, more intimate preferences of his wife's. He had a powerful, waxy guffaw, which he brought regularly into play when he was engaged in this kind of conversation, allying it with a nudging motion of the elbow. Once his wife actually turned up in the Drummer Boy and Norman found it embarrassing even to look at her, knowing as he did so much about her private life. She was a stout middle-aged woman with decorated spectacles: her appearance, too, apparently belied much.

In the bathroom all such considerations, disliked equally by Norman Britt and Marie, were left behind. Romance ruled their brief sojourns, and love sanctified—or so they believed—the passion of their physical intimacy. Love excused their eccentricity, for only love could have found in them a willingness to engage in the deception of a hotel and the courage that went with it: that they believed most of all.

But afterwards, selling tickets to other people or putting Marie on her

evening train, Norman sometimes felt depressed. And then gradually, as more time passed, the depression increased and intensified. 'I'm so sad,' he whispered in the bathroom once, 'when I'm not with you. I don't think I can stand it.' She dried herself on the towel brought specially from Reading in her large red handbag. 'You'll have to tell her,' she said, with an edge in her voice that hadn't ever been there before. 'I don't want to leave having babies too late.' She wasn't twenty-eight any more; she was thirty-one. 'I mean, it isn't fair on me,' she said.

He knew it wasn't fair on her, but going over the whole thing yet again in Travel-Wide that afternoon he also knew that poverty would destroy them. He'd never earn much more than he earned now. The babies Marie wanted, and which he wanted too, would soak up what there was like blotting-paper; they'd probably have to look for council accommodation. It made him weary to think about it, it gave him a headache. But he knew she was right: they couldn't go on for ever, living off a passing idyll, in the bathroom of a hotel. He even thought, quite seriously for a moment, of causing Hilda's death.

Instead he told her the truth, one Thursday evening after she'd been watching *The Avengers* on television. He just told her he'd met someone, a girl called Marie, he said, whom he had fallen in love with and wished to marry. 'I was hoping we could have a divorce,' he said.

Hilda turned the sound on the television set down without in any way dimming the picture, which she continued to watch. Her face did not register the hatred he had imagined in it when he rejected her; nor did bitterness suddenly enter her eyes. Instead she shook her head at him, and poured herself some more V.P. She said:

'You've gone barmy, Norman.'

'You can think that if you like.'

'Wherever'd you meet a girl, for God's sake?'

'At work. She's there in Vincent Street. In a shop.'

'And what's she think of you, may I ask?'

'She's in love with me, Hilda.'

She laughed. She told him to pull the other one, adding that it had bells on it.

'Hilda, I'm not making this up. I'm telling you the truth.'

She smiled into her V.P. She watched the screen for a moment, then she said:

‘And how long’s this charming stuff been going on, may I inquire?’

He didn’t want to say for years. Vaguely, he said it had been going on for just a while.

‘You’re out of your tiny, Norman. Just because you fancy some piece in a shop doesn’t mean you go getting hot under the collar. You’re no tomcat, you know, old boy.’

‘I didn’t say I was.’

‘You’re no sexual mechanic.’

‘Hilda—’

‘All chaps fancy things in shops: didn’t your mother tell you that? D’you think I haven’t fancied stuff myself, the chap who came to do the blinds, that randy little postman with his rugby songs?’

‘I’m telling you I want a divorce, Hilda.’

She laughed. She drank more V.P. wine. ‘You’re up a gum tree,’ she said, and laughed again.

‘Hilda—’

‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ All of a sudden she was angry, but more, he felt, because he was going on, not because of what he was actually demanding. She thought him ridiculous and said so. And then she added all the things he’d thought himself: that people like them didn’t get divorces, that unless his girlfriend was well-heeled the whole thing would be a sheer bloody nonsense, with bloody solicitors the only ones to benefit. ‘They’ll send you to the cleaners, your bloody solicitors will,’ she loudly pointed out, anger still trembling in her voice. ‘You’d be paying them back for years.’

‘I don’t care,’ he began, although he did. ‘I don’t care about anything except—’

‘Of course you do, you damn fool.’

‘Hilda—’

‘Look, get over her. Take her into a park after dark or something. It’ll make no odds to you and me.’

She turned the sound on the television up and quite quickly finished the V.P. wine. Afterwards, in their bedroom, she turned to him

with an excitement that was greater than usual. 'God, that switched me on,' she whispered in the darkness, gripping him with her limbs. 'The stuff we were talking about, that girl.' When she'd finished her love-making she said, 'I had it with that postman, you know. Swear to God. In the kitchen. And since we're on the subject, Fowler looks in here the odd time.'

He lay beside her in silence, not knowing whether or not to believe what she was saying. It seemed at first that she was keeping her end up because he'd mentioned Marie, but then he wasn't so sure. 'We had a foursome once,' she said, 'the Fowlers and me and a chap that used to be in the Club.'

She began to stroke his face with her fingers, the way he hated. She always seemed to think that if she stroked his face it would excite him. She said, 'Tell me more about this piece you fancy.'

He told her to keep her quiet and to make her stop stroking his face. It didn't seem to matter now if he told her how long it had been going on, not since she'd made her revelations about Fowler and the postman. He even enjoyed telling her, about the New Year's Day when he'd bought the emery boards and the Colgate's, and how he'd got to know Marie because she and Mavis were booking a holiday on the Costa Brava.

'But you've never actually?'

'Yes, we have.'

'For God's sake where? Doorways or something? In the park?'

'We go to a hotel.'

'You old devil!'

'Listen, Hilda—'

'For God's sake go on, love. Tell me about it.'

He told her about the bathroom and she kept asking him questions, making him tell her details, asking him to describe Marie to her. Dawn was breaking when they finished talking.

'Forget about the divorce stuff,' she said quite casually at breakfast. 'I wouldn't want to hear no more of that. I wouldn't want you ruined for my sake, dear.'

He didn't want to see Marie that day, although he had to because it was arranged. In any case she knew he'd been going to tell his wife the night before; she'd want to hear the outcome.

'Well?' she said in the Drummer Boy.

He shrugged. He shook his head. He said:

'I told her.'

'And what'd she say, Norman? What'd Hilda say?'

'She said I was barmy to be talking about divorce. She said what I said to you: that we wouldn't manage with the alimony.'

They sat in silence. Eventually Marie said:

'Then can't you leave her? Can't you just not go back? We could get a flat somewhere. We could put off kiddies, darling. Just walk out, couldn't you?'

'They'd find us. They'd make me pay.'

'We could try it. If I keep on working you could pay what they want.'

'It'll never pan out, Marie.'

'Oh, darling, just walk away from her.'

Which is what, to Hilda's astonishment, he did. One evening when she was at the Club he packed his clothes and went to two rooms in Kilburn that he and Marie had found. He didn't tell Hilda where he was going. He just left a note to say he wouldn't be back.

They lived as man and wife in Kilburn, sharing a lavatory and a bathroom with fifteen other people. In time he received a court summons, and in court was informed that he had behaved meanly and despicably to the woman he'd married. He agreed to pay regular maintenance.

The two rooms in Kilburn were dirty and uncomfortable, and life in them was rather different from the life they had known together in the Drummer Boy and the Great Western Royal Hotel. They planned to find somewhere better, but at a reasonable price that wasn't easy to find. A certain melancholy descended on them, for although they were together they seemed as far away as ever from their own small house, their children and their ordinary contentment.

'We could go to Reading,' Marie suggested.

'Reading?'

'To my mum's.'

'But your mum's nearly disowned you. Your mum's livid, you said yourself she was.'

'People come round.'

She was right. One Sunday afternoon they made the journey to Reading to have tea with Marie's mother and her friend Mrs Druk. Neither of these women addressed Norman, and once when he and Marie were in the kitchen he heard Mrs Druk saying it disgusted her, that he was old enough to be Marie's father. 'Don't think much of him,' Marie's mother replied. 'Pipsqueak really.'

Nevertheless, Marie's mother had missed her daughter's contribution to the household finances and before they returned to London that evening it was arranged that Norman and Marie should move in within a month, on the firm understanding that the very second it was feasible their marriage would take place. 'He's a boarder, mind,' Marie's mother warned. 'Nothing but a boarder in this house.' There were neighbours, Mrs Druk added, to be thought of.

Reading was worse than the two rooms in Kilburn. Marie's mother continued to make disparaging remarks about Norman, about the way he left the lavatory, or the thump of his feet on the stair-carpet, or his fingermarks around the light-switches. Marie would deny these accusations and then there'd be a row, with Mrs Druk joining in because she loved a row, and Marie's mother weeping and then Marie weeping. Norman had been to see a solicitor about divorcing Hilda, quoting her unfaithfulness with a postman and with Fowler. 'You have your evidence, Mr Britt?' the solicitor inquired, and pursed his lips when Norman said he hadn't.

He knew it was all going to be too difficult. He knew his instinct had been right: he shouldn't have told Hilda, he shouldn't have just walked out. The whole thing had always been unfair on Marie; it had to be when a girl got mixed up with a married man. 'Should think of things like that,' her mother had a way of saying loudly when he was passing an open door. 'Selfish type he is,' Mrs Druk would loudly add.

Marie argued when he said none of it was going to work. But she wasn't as broken-hearted as she might have been a year or so ago, for the strain had told on Marie too, especially the strain in Reading. She natu-

rally wept when Norman said they'd been defeated, and so for a moment did he. He asked for a transfer to another branch of Travel-Wide and was sent to Ealing, far away from the Great Western Royal Hotel.

Eighteen months later Marie married a man in a brewery. Hilda, hearing on some grapevine that Norman was on his own, wrote to him and suggested that bygones should be allowed to be bygones. Lonely in a bed-sitting-room in Ealing, he agreed to talk the situation over with her and after that he agreed to return to their flat. 'No hard feelings,' Hilda said, 'and no deception: there's been a chap from the Club in here, the Woolworth's manager.' No hard feelings, he agreed.

For Norman Britt, as the decade of the 1960s passed, it trailed behind it the marvels of his love affair with Marie. Hilda's scorn when he had confessed had not devalued them, nor had the two dirty rooms in Kilburn, nor the equally unpleasant experience in Reading. Their walk to the Great Western Royal, the drinks they could not afford in the hotel bar, their studied nonchalance as they made their way separately upstairs, seemed to Norman to be a fantasy that had miraculously become real. The second-floor bathroom belonged in it perfectly, the bathroom full of whispers and caressing, where the faraway places of his daily work acquired a hint of magic when he spoke of them to a girl as voluptuous as any of James Bond's. Sometimes on the Tube he would close his eyes and with the greatest pleasure that remained to him he would recall the delicately veined marble and the great brass taps, and the bath that was big enough for two. And now and again he heard what appeared to be the strum of distant music, and the voices of the Beatles celebrating a bathroom love, as they had celebrated Eleanor Rigby and other people of that time.

MOUCHE

Reminiscences of a Rowing Man

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

This is what he told us:

‘I saw some funny things and some funny girls in those days, when I used to go boating on the river. Many’s the time I’ve felt like writing a little book called *On the Seine*, describing that carefree athletic life, a life of poverty and gaiety, of noisy, rollicking fun, that I led in my twenties.

‘I was a penniless clerk at the time; now I’m a successful man who can throw away huge sums to gratify a passing whim. I had a thousand modest, unattainable desires in my heart which gilded my existence with fantastic hopes. Today, I really can’t think of anything that would induce me to get out of the armchair where I sit dozing. Though life could be hard, how simple and enjoyable it was to live like that, between the office in Paris and the river at Argenteuil. For ten years my great, my only, my absorbing passion was the Seine, that lovely, calm, varied, stinking river, full of mirages and filth. I think I loved it so much because it gave me the feeling of being alive. Oh, those strolls along the flower-covered banks, with my friends the frogs dreamily cooling their bellies on water-lily leaves, and the frail, dainty lilies among the tall grasses, which parted suddenly to reveal a scene from a Japanese album as a kingfisher darted past me like a blue flame! How I loved all that, with an instinctive passion of the eyes which spread through my whole body in a feeling of deep and natural joy!

‘Just as others remember nights of passion, I cherish memories of sunrises on misty mornings, with floating, drifting vapours, white as ghosts before the dawn, and then, as the first ray of sunshine touched

the meadows, lit with a lovely rosy glow; and I cherish memories too of the moon silvering the rippling surface of the water with a radiance which brought all my dreams to life.

‘And all that, that symbol of everlasting illusion, was born for me on the foul water which swept all the refuse of Paris down to the sea.

‘Besides, what a gay life we led! There were five of us, a small group of friends who are pillars of the community today. As none of us had any money we had set up an indescribable sort of club in a frightful pot-house at Argenteuil, renting a single dormitory bedroom where I spent what were the maddest nights of my life. We thought about nothing but having fun and rowing, for all of us, with one exception, regarded rowing as a religion. I remember adventures those five rascals had, and pranks they thought up, which were so fantastic that nobody could possibly believe them today. Nobody behaves like that any more, even on the Seine, because the crazy fun which was the breath of life to us means nothing to people nowadays.

‘The five of us owned a single boat between us, which had cost us enormous trouble to buy and which gave us more fun than we shall ever have again. It was a yawl, broad in the beam and rather heavy, but solid, roomy and comfortable. I won’t try to describe my friends to you. One of them was a mischievous little chap nicknamed *Petit Bleu*, and another a tall, wild-looking fellow with grey eyes and black hair whom we called *Tomahawk*. Then there was a lazy, witty character we nicknamed *La Tôque*, the only one who never touched an oar, on the pretext that he would be sure to capsize the boat; a slim, elegant, very well-groomed fellow we called *N’a-qu’un-Oeil* after a recently published novel by *Cladel*, and also because he wore a monocle; and lastly myself, whom the others had baptized *Joseph Prunier*. We lived in perfect harmony, our only regret being that we hadn’t a girl to take the tiller. A woman is an indispensable adjunct to a boat like ours—indispensable because she keeps minds and hearts awake, because she provides excitement, amusement and distraction, and because she gives a spice to life and, with a red parasol gliding past green banks, decoration too. But an ordinary cox-woman was no use to us five, who could scarcely be described as ordinary people. We needed somebody unusual, odd, ready for anything,

in short almost impossible to find. We had tried a good many without success—girls who just played at being helmswomen, stupid creatures who were more interested in the light wine that went to their heads than in the water that kept them afloat. We kept them for a single Sunday and then sent them packing in disgust.

‘But then one Saturday evening N’a-qu’un-Oeil brought along a lively, skinny little thing who was always hopping and skipping around, a young tease who was full of that skittishness which passes for wit among the street arabs of both sexes who have grown up on the pavements of Paris. She was a sweet girl but not really pretty, a rough sketch of a woman with a little of everything in her, one of those silhouettes which artists draw in three strokes on the tablecloth in a café after dinner, between a glass of brandy and a cigarette. Nature sometimes turns out creatures like that.

‘On that first evening she astonished and amused us, and was so unpredictable that none of us could make up our minds about her. Landing in the midst of a bunch of men who were ready to get up to any kind of prank, she was soon in command of the situation, and by the next day she had conquered us completely.

‘She was absolutely crazy into the bargain. She told us that she had been born with a glass of absinthe in her belly, which her mother had drunk just before giving birth to her, and she had never sobered up since, because, she said, her nurse used to keep her strength up with tots of rum. She herself always called the bottles lined up on bar-room shelves “my Holy Family.”

‘I don’t know which of us christened her “Mouche,” nor why that name was given her. But it suited her perfectly, and it stuck to her. So every week our yawl, which was called *Feuille-à-l’Envers*, would travel along the Seine between Asnières and Maisons-Laffitte with a load of five light-hearted strapping young fellows, steered by a lively, scatter-brained creature under a parasol of painted paper, who treated us as if we were slaves charged with the duty of taking her for a row, and whom we all adored.

‘We adored her, first of all for a variety of reasons, and then for one in particular. She was a sort of little word-mill in the stern of our boat,

chatting away in the wind blowing over the water. She babbled incessantly with the continuous sound of those winged toys that spin in the breeze, trotting out the most unexpected, amusing and astonishing things. In that mind of hers, which seemed like a patchwork of rags of all kinds and colours, not sewn together but only tacked, there was fairy-tale fantasy, bawdy, immodesty, impudence, jokes and surprises, and a sense of fresh air and scenery such as you would get travelling in a balloon.

‘We used to ask her questions just to hear the far-fetched answers she would produce. The one we fired at her most often was: “Why are you called Mouche?”

‘She thought up such fantastic reasons that we would stop rowing to laugh at them.

‘She appealed to us as a woman too and La Tôque, who never did any rowing but spent the whole day sitting beside her in the helmsman’s seat, once said in reply to the traditional question “Why are you called Mouche?”: “Because she’s a little Spanish fly.”

‘And that is exactly what she was: a little buzzing, exciting Spanish fly, not the classic poisonous cantharides, shiny and hooded, but a little red-winged Spanish fly who was beginning to have an oddly disturbing effect on the whole crew of the *Feuille-à-l’Envers*.

‘What stupid jokes we made about that Leaf on which our Fly had alighted!

‘Ever since Mouche had joined our crew N’a-qu’un-Oeil had taken up a superior, preponderant role among us, the role of a gentleman who has a woman, compared with four others who have none. He sometimes abused this privilege to the point of exasperating us by kissing Mouche in front of us, perching her on his knees after meals, and assuming all kinds of humiliating and irritating prerogatives.

‘We had fitted up a curtain in the dormitory to isolate them from the rest of us.

‘But I soon noticed that my companions were thinking along the same lines as myself, and asking themselves: “Why, under what exceptional law, by virtue of what inadmissible principle, should Mouche, who seems uninhibited by any principles, be faithful to her lover when women of higher social standing are not faithful to their husbands?”

'Our assessment of the situation was accurate, as we soon discovered. Our only regret was that we hadn't made it earlier and so wasted precious time. Mouche was unfaithful to N'a-qu'un-Oeil with all the other sailors of the *Feuille-à-l'Envers*.

'She did this without any difficulty, without any resistance, the first time each of us asked.

'Heavens, how shocking prudish folk are going to find this! But why? Is there a single fashionable courtesan without a dozen lovers, and is there a single one of those lovers stupid enough not to know it? Isn't it the done thing to have a regular evening with some famous, much-sought-after woman, just as one has a regular evening at the Opera, the Théâtre-Français, or the Odéon, now that they are putting on the minor classics? A dozen men club together to keep a cocotte who finds it difficult to make a fair distribution of her time, just as a dozen men will club together to buy a racehorse ridden by a single jockey—the perfect symbol of the real lover.

'For reasons of delicacy we left Mouche to N'a-qu'un-Oeil from Saturday evening to Monday morning. The days on the river were his. We deceived him only during the week, in Paris, far from the Seine, which for boating men like us was almost tantamount to not deceiving him at all.

'The odd thing about the situation was that the four men filching Mouche's favours knew all about the sharing of those favours, talked about it among themselves, and even made veiled allusions to it in her presence which made her roar with laughter. Only N'a-qu'un-Oeil seemed to know nothing about it, and his ignorance of the situation produced a sort of awkwardness between him and us; it seemed to set him apart, isolate him, and destroy our former trust and intimacy. It gave him in our eyes a difficult and rather ridiculous part to play, the part of a deceived lover, almost that of a husband.

'However, as he was extremely intelligent, and had a dry sense of humour, we sometimes wondered, rather uneasily, whether he might not have his suspicions.

'He took care to enlighten us in a way which was painful for us. We were on our way to Bougival for lunch and we were rowing hard

when La Tôque, who had the triumphant look of a contented man that morning, and, seated beside the helmswoman, seemed to be pressing up against her rather too freely for our liking, suddenly called out: "Stop!"

'The eight oars rose out of the water.

'Then, turning to his neighbour, he asked: "Why are you called Mouche?"

'Before she could answer, N'a-qu'un-Oeil, who was sitting in the bows, said drily: "Because she settles on all sorts of carrion."

'At first there was an embarrassed silence, followed by a general inclination to laugh. Even Mouche was dumbfounded.

'Then La Tôque gave the order: "All together."

'The boat moved forward again.

'The matter was closed, the mystery cleared up.

'This little incident changed nothing in our habits. Its only result was to restore cordial relations between N'a-qu'un-Oeil and ourselves. He became once more the privileged possessor of Mouche from Saturday evening until Monday morning, his superiority over the rest of us having been firmly established by this definition, which incidentally put a stop to all questions about the name Mouche. From then on we contented ourselves with the secondary role of grateful and attentive friends who took discreet advantage of weekdays without there being any sense of rivalry between us.

'Everything went very well for about three months. Then, all of a sudden, Mouche began to behave strangely with us all. She was less high-spirited and became edgy, ill-at-ease, almost irritable.

'We kept asking her: "What's the matter with you?"

'She would answer: "Nothing, leave me alone."

'We learned the truth from N'a-qu'un-Oeil one Saturday evening. We had just sat down at table in the little dining-room which Barbichon, the proprietor of our pothouse, reserved for us in his establishment, and after finishing our soup we were waiting for the fried fish when our friend, who also looked a little worried, took Mouche's hand and then began speaking.

' "My dear friends," he said, "I have something very serious to tell you which may lead to some lengthy discussion. But we'll have time for

that between courses. Poor Mouche has given me a disastrous piece of news which she has asked me to pass on to you.

‘ “She is pregnant.

‘ “I have only two things to add. This is no time to leave her in the lurch, and any attempt to find out who’s the father is forbidden.”

‘The first effect of this news was utter amazement, a sense of disaster. We looked at one another as if we wanted to accuse somebody. But whom? Yes, whom? I have never felt as keenly as I did at that moment the unfairness of that cruel jest of Nature’s which never allows a man to know for certain whether he is the father of his child.

‘Then, little by little, we came to experience a comforting sense of consolation, born, oddly enough, of a vague feeling of solidarity.

‘Tomahawk, who hardly ever spoke, expressed this growing serenity in the following words: “Well, it can’t be helped, and union is strength.”

‘A boy came in from the kitchen with the gudgeon. We didn’t pitch into it as we usually did, because when all was said and done we were rather upset.

‘N’a-qu-un-Oeil went on: “In these circumstances she has been good enough to make a full confession to me. We are all equally guilty. Let’s shake hands on it and adopt the child.”

‘This proposal was unanimously accepted. We raised our arms above the dish of fried fish and swore a solemn oath: “We’ll adopt it.”

‘Then, suddenly realizing that she was saved, and relieved of the horrible weight of anxiety which had been burdening her for a month, that sweet, crazy victim of love exclaimed: “Oh, my dear friends! You’re so kind, so very, very kind. . . . Thank you all!”

‘And for the first time in our presence she burst into tears.

‘From then on we would talk about the child in the boat as if it had already been born, and each of us showed an exaggerated degree of interest in the slow but regular swelling of our helmswoman’s waist.

‘We would stop rowing and ask: “Mouche?”

‘She would reply: “Present!”

‘ “Boy or girl?”

‘ “Boy.”

‘ “What will he be?”

‘Then she would give free rein to her imagination in the most fantastic way, telling us endless stories, astonishing accounts of the child’s life from the day of his birth to his final triumph. He was everything, that child, in the innocent, passionate, touching dreams of that extraordinary little creature who now lived chastely among the five men she called her “five papas.” She saw and described him as a sailor discovering a new world bigger than America; as a general winning back Alsace and Lorraine for France; as an emperor founding a dynasty of wise and generous sovereigns who would give our country lasting happiness; as a scientist finding first the secret of making gold and then that of eternal life; and as an aeronaut devising a method of travelling to the stars and turning the infinite reaches of space into a vast promenade for mankind—thus making all men’s most improbable and magnificent dreams come true.

‘Heavens, how sweet and amusing the poor thing was until the end of that summer!

‘It was on the twentieth of September that her dream was destroyed. We were rowing back after lunch at Maisons-Laffitte, and we were passing Saint-Germain when she said that she was thirsty and asked us to stop at Le Pecq.

‘For some time past she had been growing heavy and this annoyed her dreadfully. She could no longer skip around as before, or leap from the boat to the bank as she was used to doing. But she still tried to, in spite of all we said or did to stop her, and she would have fallen a score of times if our arms had not been waiting to catch her.

‘That day she was rash enough to try to leave the boat while it was still moving, in one of those displays of bravado which sometimes prove fatal to sick or tired athletes.

‘Just as we were coming alongside, before we could guess what she was going to do or stop her, she stood up, took a spring, and tried to jump on to the quay.

‘But she was not strong enough to reach it and just touched the stone

edging with one foot. She slipped, struck her belly against the sharp corner, and with a loud cry disappeared into the water.

'All five of us dived in together, and brought out a poor fainting creature, deathly pale and already suffering terrible pain.

'We carried her as quickly as we could to the nearest inn and then sent for a doctor.

'During the ten hours her miscarriage lasted she bore the appalling agony with heroic courage. We stood around miserably, sick with worry and fear.

'Finally she was delivered of a dead child, and for a few more days we had serious fears for her life.

'At last the doctor told us one morning: "I think she's over the worst. That girl must be made of iron!" And we all went into her room together, our hearts bursting with relief.

'Speaking for us all, N'a-qu'un-Oeil said to her: "You're out of danger, Mouche dear, and we're all delighted!"

'Then for the second time we saw her cry. With her eyes swimming with tears, she stammered: "Oh, if you only knew, if you only knew. . . . I'm so unhappy, so unhappy. . . . I'll never get over it."

' "Over what, Mouche dear?"

' "Killing him, of course, for I did kill him! Oh, I know I didn't mean to, but I'm so unhappy all the same. . . ."

'She burst out sobbing. We stood around her, deeply moved, not knowing what to say.

'She went on: "Did you see him?"

'With one voice we answered: "Yes."

' "It was a boy, wasn't it?"

' "Yes."

' "And beautiful?"

'We hesitated. Petit-Bleu, who had fewer scruples than the rest of us, made up his mind what to say.

' "Very beautiful."

'This was unwise of him, for she started moaning, almost howling with despair.

‘Then N’a-qu’un-Oeil, who perhaps loved her more than any of us, hit on a wonderful idea to calm her down. Kissing her tear-dimmed eyes, he said: “Cheer up, Mouche dear, cheer up. We’ll make you another one.”

‘The sense of humour which was in her very bones suddenly came alive, and half convinced, half laughing, with tears still in her eyes and her heart full of pain, she looked around at us all and asked: “Honest?”

‘And we answered as one man: “Honest.” ’

THE MOON IN ITS FLIGHT

GILBERT SORRENTINO

This was in 1948. A group of young people sitting on the darkened porch of a New Jersey summer cottage in a lake resort community. The host some Bernie wearing an Upsala College sweatshirt. The late June night so soft one can, in retrospect, forgive America for everything. There were perhaps eight or nine people there, two of them the people that this story sketches.

Bernie was talking about Sonny Stitt's alto on "That's Earl, Brother." As good as Bird, he said. Arnie said, bullshit: he was a very hip young man from Washington Heights, wore mirrored sunglasses. A bop drummer in his senior year at the High School of Performing Arts. Our young man, nineteen at this time, listened only to Rebecca, a girl of fifteen, remarkable in her New Look clothes. A long full skirt, black, snug tailored shirt of blue and white stripes with a high white collar and black velvet string tie, black kid Capezios. It is no wonder that lesbians like women.

At some point during the evening he walked Rebecca home. She lived on Lake Shore Drive, a wide road that skirted the beach and ran parallel to the small river that flowed into Lake Minnehaha. Lake Ramapo? Lake Tomahawk. Lake O-shi-wa-noh? Lake Sunburst. Leaning against her father's powder-blue Buick convertible, lost, in the indigo night, the creamy stars, sound of crickets, they kissed. They fell in love.

One of the songs that summer was "For Heaven's Sake." Another, "It's Magic." Who remembers the clarity of Claude Thornhill and Sarah Vaughan, their exquisite irrelevance? They are gone where the useless chrome doughnuts on the Buick's hood have gone. That Valhalla of Amos 'n' Andy and guinea fruit peddlers with golden earrings. "Pleasa No Squeeza Da Banana." In 1948, the whole world seemed beautiful to

young people of a certain milieu, or let me say, possible. Yes, it seemed a possible world. This idea persisted until 1950, at which time it died, along with many of the young people who had held it. In Korea, the Chinese played “Scrapple from the Apple” over loudspeakers pointed at the American lines. That savage and virile alto blue-clear on the sub-zero night. This is, of course, old news.

Rebecca was fair. She was fair. Lovely Jewish girl from the remote and exotic Bronx. To him that vast borough seemed a Cythera—that it could house such fantastic creatures as she! He wanted to be Jewish. He was, instead, a Roman Catholic, awash in sin and redemption. What loathing he had for the Irish girls who went to eleven o’clock Mass, legions of blushing pink and lavender spring coats, flat white straw hats, the crinkly veils over their open faces. Church clothes, under which their inviolate crotches sweetly nestled in soft hair.

She had white and perfect teeth. Wide mouth. Creamy stars, pale nights. Dusty black roads out past the beach. The sunlight on the raft, moonlight on the lake. Sprinkle of freckles on her shoulders. Aromatic breeze.

Of course this was a summer romance, but bear with me and see with what banal literary irony it all turns out—or does not turn out at all. The country bowled and spoke of Truman’s grit and spunk. How softly we had slid off the edge of civilization.

The liquid moonlight filling the small parking area outside the gates to the beach. Bass flopping softly in dark waters. What was the scent of the perfume she wore? The sound of a car radio in the cool nights, collective American memory. Her browned body, delicate hair bleached golden on her thighs. In the beach pavilion they danced and drank Cokes. Mel Tormé and the Mel-Tones. Dizzy Gillespie. “Too Soon to Know.” In the mornings, the sun so crystal and lucent it seemed the very exhalation of the sky, he would swim alone to the raft and lie there, the beach empty, music from the pavilion attendant’s radio coming to him in splinters. At such times he would thrill himself by pretending that he had not yet met Rebecca and that he would see her that afternoon for the first time.

The first time he touched her breasts he cried in his shame and delight. Can all this really have taken place in America? The trees rustled for him, as the rain did rain. One day, in New York, he bought her a silver friendship ring, tiny perfect hearts in bas-relief running around it so that the point of one heart nestled in the cleft of another. Innocent symbol that tortured his blood. She stood before him in the pale light in white bra and panties, her shorts and blouse hung on the hurricane fence of the abandoned and weed-grown tennis court and he held her, stroking her flanks and buttocks and kissing her shoulders. The smell of her flesh, vague sweat and perfume. Of course he was insane. She caressed him so far as she understood how through his faded denim shorts. Thus did they flay themselves, burning. What were they to do? Where were they to go? The very thought of the condom in his pocket made his heart careen in despair. Nothing was like anything said it was after all. He adored her.

She was entering her second year at Evander Childs that coming fall. He hated this school he had never seen, and hated all her fellow students. He longed to be Jewish, dark and mysterious and devoid of sin. He stroked her hair and fingered her nipples, masturbated fiercely on the dark roads after he had seen her home. Why didn't he at least *live* in the Bronx?

Any fool can see that with the slightest twist one way or another all of this is fit material for a sophisticated comic's routine. David Steinberg, say. One can hear his precise voice recording these picayune disasters as jokes. Yet all that moonlight was real. He kissed her luminous fingernails and died over and over again. The maimings of love are endlessly funny, as are the tiny figures of talking animals being blown to pieces in cartoons.

It was this same youth who, three years later, ravished the whores of Mexican border towns in a kind of drunken hilarity, falling down in the dusty streets of Nuevo Laredo, Villa Acuña, and Piedras Negras, the pungency of the overpowering perfume wedded to his rumpled khakis, his flowered shirt, his scuffed and beer-spattered low quarters scraping across the thresholds of the Blue Room, Ofelia's, the 1-2-3 Club, Felicia's, the Cadillac, Tres Hermanas. It would be a great pleasure for me to

allow him to meet her there, in a yellow chiffon cocktail dress and spike heels, lost in prostitution.

One night, a huge smiling Indian whore bathed his member in gin as a testament to the strict hygiene she claimed to practice and he absurdly thought of Rebecca, that he had never seen her naked, nor she him, as he was now in the Hollywood pink light of the whore's room, Jesus hanging in his perpetual torture from the wall above the little bed. The woman was gentle, the light glinting off her gold incisor and the tiny cross at her throat. You good fuck, Jack, she smiled in her lying whore way. He felt her flesh again warm in that long-dead New Jersey sunlight. Turn that into a joke.

They were at the amusement park at Lake Hopatcong with two other couples. A hot and breathless night toward the end of August, the patriotic smell of hot dogs and French fries and cranky music from the carousel easing through the sparsely planted trees down toward the shore. She was pale and sweating, sick, and he took her back to the car and they smoked. They walked to the edge of the black lake stretching out before them, the red and blue neon on the far shore clear in the hot dark.

He wiped her forehead and stroked her shoulders, worshipping her pain. He went to get a Coke and brought it back to her, but she only sipped at it, then said O God! and bent over to throw up. He held her hips while she vomited, loving the waste and odor of her. She lay down on the ground and he lay next to her, stroking her breasts until the nipples were erect under her cotton blouse. My period, she said. God, it just ruins me at the beginning. You bleeding, vomiting, incredible thing, he thought. You should have stayed in, he said. The moonlight of her teeth. I didn't want to miss a night with you, she said. It's August. Stars, my friend, great flashing stars fell on Alabama.

They stood in the dark in the driving rain underneath her umbrella. Where could it have been? Nokomis Road? Bliss Lane? Kissing with that trapped yet wholly innocent frenzy peculiar to American youth of that era. Her family was going back to the city early the next morning and his family would be leaving toward the end of the week. They

kissed, they kissed. The angels sang. Where could they go, out of this driving rain?

Isn't there anyone, any magazine writer or avant-garde filmmaker, any lover of life or dedicated optimist out there who will move them toward a cottage, already closed for the season, in whose split log exterior they will find an unlocked door? Inside there will be a bed, whiskey, an electric heater. Or better, a fireplace. White lamps, soft lights. Sweet music. A radio on which they will get Cooky's Caravan or Symphony Sid. Billy Eckstine will sing "My Deep Blue Dream." Who can bring them to each other and allow him to enter her? Tears of gratitude and release, the sublime and elegantly shadowed configuration their tanned legs will make lying together. This was in America, in 1948. Not even fake art or the wearisome tricks of movies can assist them.

She tottered, holding the umbrella crookedly while he went to his knees and clasped her, the rain soaking him through, put his head under her skirt and kissed her belly, licked at her crazily through her underclothes.

All you modern lovers, freed by Mick Jagger and the orgasm, give them, for Christ's sake, for an hour, the use of your really terrific little apartment. They won't smoke your marijuana nor disturb your Indiana graphics. They won't borrow your Fanon or Cleaver or Barthelme or Vonnegut. They'll make the bed before they leave. They whisper good night and dance in the dark.

She was crying and stroking his hair. Ah God, the leaves of brown came tumbling down, remember? He watched her go into the house and saw the door close. Some of his life washed away in the rain dripping from his chin.

A girl named Sheila whose father owned a fleet of taxis gave a reunion party in her parents' apartment in Forest Hills. Where else would it be? I will insist on purchased elegance or nothing. None of your warm and cluttered apartments in this story, cats on the stacks of books, and so on. It was the first time he had ever seen a sunken living room and it fixed his idea of the good life forever after. Rebecca was talking to Marv and Robin, who were to be married in a month. They were Jewish, incred-

ibly and wondrously Jewish, their parents smiled upon them and loaned them money and cars. He skulked in his loud Brooklyn clothes.

I'll put her virgin flesh into a black linen suit, a single strand of pearls around her throat. Did I say that she had honey-colored hair? Believe me when I say he wanted to kiss her shoes.

Everybody was drinking Cutty Sark. This gives you an idea, not of who they were, but of what they thought they were. They worked desperately at it being August, but under the sharkskin and nylons those sunny limbs were hidden. Sheila put on "In the Still of the Night" and all six couples got up to dance. When he held her he thought he would weep.

He didn't want to hear about Evander Childs or Gun Hill Road or the 92nd Street Y. He didn't want to know what the pre-med student she was dating said. Whose hand had touched her secret thighs. It was most unbearable since this phantom knew them in a specifically erotic way that he did not. He had touched them decorated with garters and stockings. Different thighs. She had been to the Copa, to the Royal Roost, to Lewisohn Stadium to hear the Gershwin concert. She talked about *The New Yorker* and *Vogue*, e.e. cummings. She flew before him, floating in her black patent I. Miller heels.

Sitting together on the bed in Sheila's parents' room, she told him that she still loved him, she would always love him, but it was so hard not to go out with a lot of other boys, she had to keep her parents happy. They were concerned about him. They didn't really know him. He wasn't Jewish. All right. All right. But did she have to let Shelley? Did she have to go to the Museum of Modern Art? The Met? Where were these places? What is the University of Miami? Who is Brooklyn Law? What sort of god borrows a Chrysler and goes to the Latin Quarter? What is a supper club? What does Benedictine cost? Her epic acts, his Flagg Brothers shoes.

There was one boy who had almost made her. She had allowed him to take off her blouse and skirt, nothing else! at a CCNY sophomore party. She was a little high and he—messed—all over her slip. It was wicked and she was ashamed. Battering his heart in her candor. Well, I almost slipped too, he lied, and was terrified that she seemed relieved.

He got up and closed the door, then lay down on the bed with her and took off her jacket and brassiere. She zipped open his trousers. Long enough! Sheila said, knocking on the door, then opening it to see him with his head on her breasts. Oh, oh, she said, and closed the door. Of course, it was all ruined. We got rid of a lot of these repressed people in the next decade, and now we are all happy and free.

At three o'clock, he kissed her good night on Yellowstone Boulevard in a thin drizzle. Call me, he said, and I'll call you. She went into her glossy Jewish life, toward mambos and the Blue Angel.

Let me come and sleep with you. Let me lie in your bed and look at you in your beautiful pajamas. I'll do anything you say. I'll honor thy beautiful father and mother. I'll hide in the closet and be no trouble. I'll work as a stock boy in your father's beautiful sweater factory. It's not my fault I'm not Marvin or Shelley. I don't even know where CCNY is! Who is Conrad Aiken? What is Bronx Science? Who is Berlioz? What is a Stravinsky? How do you play Mah-Jongg? What is schmooz, schlepp, Purim, Moo Goo Gai Pan? Help me.

When he got off the train in Brooklyn an hour later, he saw his friends through the window of the all-night diner, pouring coffee into the great pit of their beer drunks. He despised them as he despised himself and the neighborhood. He fought against the thought of her so that he would not have to place her subtle finesse in these streets of vulgar hells, benedictions, and incense.

On Christmas Eve, he left the office party at two, even though one of the file girls, her Catholicism temporarily displaced by Four Roses and ginger, stuck her tongue into his mouth in the stock room.

Rebecca was outside, waiting on the corner of 46th and Broadway, and they clasped hands, oh briefly, briefly. They walked aimlessly around in the gray bitter cold, standing for a while at the Rockefeller Center rink, watching the people who owned Manhattan. When it got too cold, they walked some more, ending up at the Automat across the street from Bryant Park. When she slipped her coat off her breasts moved under the crocheted sweater she wore. They had coffee and doughnuts, surrounded by office party drunks sobering up for the trip home.

Then it went this way: We can go to Maryland and get married, she said. You know I was sixteen a month ago. I want to marry you, I can't stand it. He was excited and frightened, and got an erection. How could he bear this image? Her breasts, her familiar perfume, enormous figures of movie queens resplendent in silk and lace in the snug bedrooms of Vermont inns—shutters banging, the rain pouring down, all entangled, married! How do we get to *Maryland*? he said.

Against the tabletop her hand, its long and delicate fingers, the perfect moons, Carolina moons of her nails. I'll give her every marvel: push gently the scent of magnolia and jasmine between her legs and permit her to piss champagne.

Against the tabletop her hand, glowing crescent moons over lakes of Prussian blue in evergreen twilights. Her eyes gray, flecked with bronze. In her fingers a golden chain and on the chain a car key. My father's car, she said. We can take it and be there tonight. We can be married Christmas then, he said, but you're Jewish. He saw a drunk going out onto Sixth Avenue carrying their lives along in a paper bag. I mean it, she said. I can't stand it, I love you. I love *you*, he said, but I can't drive. He smiled. I *mean* it, she said. She put the key in his hand. The car is in midtown here, over by Ninth Avenue. I really *can't* drive, he said. He could shoot pool and drink boilermakers, keep score at baseball games and handicap horses, but he couldn't drive.

The key in his hand, fascinating wrinkle of sweater at her waist. Of course, life is a conspiracy of defeat, a sophisticated joke, endless. I'll get some money and we'll go the holiday week, he said, we'll take a train, O.K.? O.K., she said. She smiled and asked for another coffee, taking the key and dropping it into her bag. It was a joke after all. They walked to the subway and he said I'll give you a call right after Christmas. Gray bitter sky. What he remembered was her gray cashmere coat swirling around her calves as she turned at the foot of the stairs to smile at him, making the gesture of dialing a phone and pointing at him and then at herself.

Give these children a Silver Phantom and a chauffeur. A black chauffeur, to complete the America that owned them.

Now I come to the literary part of this story, and the reader may prefer to let it go and watch her profile against the slick tiles of the IRT stairwell, since she has gone out of the reality of narrative, however splintered. This postscript offers something different, something finely artificial and discrete, one of the designer sweaters her father makes now, white and stylish as a sailor's summer bells. I grant you it will be unbelievable.

I put the young man in 1958. He has served in the Army, and once told the Automat story to a group of friends as proof of his sexual prowess. They believed him: what else was there for them to believe? This shabby use of a fragile occurrence was occasioned by the smell of honeysuckle and magnolia in the tobacco country outside Winston-Salem. It brought her to him so that he was possessed. He felt the magic key in his hand again. To master this overpowering wave of nostalgia he cheapened it. Certainly the reader will recall such shoddy incidents in his own life.

After his discharge he married some girl and had three children by her. He allowed her her divers interests and she tolerated his few stupid infidelities. He had a good job in advertising and they lived in Kew Gardens in a brick semi-detached house. Let me give them a sunken living room to give this the appearance of realism. His mother died in 1958 and left the lake house to him. Since he had not been there for ten years he decided to sell it, against his wife's wishes. The community was growing and the property was worth twice the original price.

This is a ruse to get him up there one soft spring day in May. He drives up in a year-old Pontiac. The realtor's office, the papers, etc. Certainly, a shimmer of nostalgia about it all, although he felt a total stranger. He left the car on the main road, deciding to walk down to the lake, partly visible through the new-leaved trees. All right, now here we go. A Cadillac station wagon passed and then stopped about fifteen yards ahead of him and she got out. She was wearing white shorts and sneakers and a blue sweatshirt. Her hair was the same, shorter perhaps, tied with a ribbon of navy velour.

It's too impossible to invent conversation for them. He got in her car. Her perfume was not the same. They drove to her parents' house for a

cup of coffee—for old times' sake. How else would they get themselves together and alone? She had come up to open the house for the season. Her husband was a college traveler for a publishing house and was on the road, her son and daughter were staying at their grandparents' for the day. Popular songs, the lyrics half-remembered. You will do well if you think of the ambience of the whole scene as akin to the one in detective novels where the private investigator goes to the murdered man's summer house. This is always in off-season because it is magical then, one sees oneself as a being somehow existing outside time, the year-round residents are drawings in flat space.

When they walked into the chilly house she reached past him to latch the door and he touched her hand on the lock, then her forearm, her shoulder. Take your clothes off, he said, gently. Oh gently. Please. Take your clothes off? He opened the button of her shorts. You see that they now have the retreat I begged for them a decade ago. If one has faith all things will come. Her flesh was cool.

In the bedroom, she turned down the spread and fluffed the pillows, then sat and undressed. As she unlaced her sneakers, he put the last of his clothes on a chair. She got up, her breasts quivering slightly, and he saw faint stretch marks running into the shadowy symmetry of her pubic hair. She plugged in a small electric heater, bending before him, and he put his hands under her buttocks and held her there. She sighed and trembled and straightened up, turning toward him. Let me have a mist of tears in her eyes, of acrid joy and shame, of despair. She lay on the bed and opened her thighs and they made love without elaboration.

In the evening, he followed her car back into the city. They had promised to meet again the following week. Of course it wouldn't be sordid. What, then, would it be? He had perhaps wept bitterly that afternoon as she kissed his knees. She would call him, he would call her. They could find a place to go. Was she happy? Really happy? God knows, he wasn't *happy*! In the city they stopped for a drink in a Village bar and sat facing each other in the booth, their knees touching, holding hands. They carefully avoided speaking of the past, they made no jokes. He felt his heart rattling around in his chest in large jagged pieces. It was rotten

for everybody, it was rotten but they would see each other, they were somehow owed it. They would find a place with clean sheets, a radio, whiskey, they would just—continue. Why not?

These destructive and bittersweet accidents do not happen every day. He put her number in his address book, but he wouldn't call her. Perhaps she would call him, and if she did, well, they'd see, they'd see. But he would *not* call her. He wasn't that crazy. On the way out to Queens he felt himself in her again and the car swerved erratically. When he got home he was exhausted.

You are perfectly justified in scoffing at the outrageous transparency of it if I tell you that his wife said that he was so pale that he looked as if he had seen a ghost, but that is, indeed, what she said. Art cannot rescue anybody from anything.

SPRING IN FIALTA

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Spring in Fialta is cloudy and dull. Everything is damp: the piebald trunks of the plane trees, the juniper shrubs, the railings, the gravel. Far away, in a watery vista between the jagged edges of pale bluish houses, which have tottered up from their knees to climb the slope (a cypress indicating the way), the blurred Mount St. George is more than ever remote from its likeness on the picture postcards which since 1910, say (those straw hats, those youthful cabmen), have been courting the tourist from the sorry-go-round of their prop, among amethyst-toothed lumps of rock and the mantelpiece dreams of seashells. The air is windless and warm, with a faint tang of burning. The sea, its salt drowned in a solution of rain, is less glaucous than gray with waves too sluggish to break into foam.

It was on such a day in the early thirties that I found myself, all my senses wide open, on one of Fialta's steep little streets, taking in everything at once, that marine rococo on the stand, and the coral crucifixes in a shop window, and the dejected poster of a visiting circus, one corner of its drenched paper detached from the wall, and a yellow bit of unripe orange peel on the old, slate-blue sidewalk, which retained here and there a fading memory of ancient mosaic design. I am fond of Fialta; I am fond of it because I feel in the hollow of those violaceous syllables the sweet dark dampness of the most rumpled of small flowers, and because the altolike name of a lovely Crimean town is echoed by its viola; and also because there is something in the very somnolence of its humid Lent that especially anoints one's soul. So I was happy to be there again, to trudge uphill in inverse direction to the rivulet of the gutter, hatless, my head wet, my skin already suf-

fused with warmth although I wore only a light mackintosh over my shirt.

I had come on the Capparabella express, which, with that reckless gusto peculiar to trains in mountainous country, had done its thundering best to collect throughout the night as many tunnels as possible. A day or two, just as long as a breathing spell in the midst of a business trip would allow me, was all I expected to stay. I had left my wife and children at home, and that was an island of happiness always present in the clear north of my being, always floating beside me, and even through me, I dare say, but yet keeping on the outside of me most of the time.

A pantless infant of the male sex, with a taut mud-gray little belly, jerkily stepped down from a doorstep and waddled off, bowlegged, trying to carry three oranges at once, but continuously dropping the variable third, until he fell himself, and then a girl of twelve or so, with a string of heavy beads around her dusky neck and wearing a skirt as long as that of a Gypsy, promptly took away the whole lot with her more nimble and more numerous hands. Nearby, on the wet terrace of a café, a waiter was wiping the slabs of tables; a melancholy brigand hawking local lollipops, elaborate-looking things with a lunar gloss, had placed a hopelessly full basket on the cracked balustrade, over which the two were conversing. Either the drizzle had stopped or Fialta had got so used to it that she herself did not know whether she was breathing moist air or warm rain. Thumb-filling his pipe from a rubber pouch as he walked, a plus-foured Englishman of the solid exportable sort came from under an arch and entered a pharmacy, where large pale sponges in a blue vase were dying a thirsty death behind their glass. What luscious elation I felt rippling through my veins, how gratefully my whole being responded to the flutters and effluvia of that gray day saturated with a vernal essence which itself it seemed slow in perceiving! My nerves were unusually receptive after a sleepless night; I assimilated everything: the whistling of a thrush in the almond trees beyond the chapel, the peace of the crumbling houses, the pulse of the distant sea, panting in the mist, all this together with the jealous green of bottle glass bristling along the top of a wall and the fast colors of a circus advertisement featuring a feathered Indian on a rearing horse in the act of lassoing a boldly endemic

zebra, while some thoroughly fooled elephants sat brooding upon their star-spangled thrones.

Presently the same Englishman overtook me. As I absorbed him along with the rest, I happened to notice the sudden side-roll of his big blue eye straining at its crimson canthus, and the way he rapidly moistened his lips—because of the dryness of those sponges, I thought; but then I followed the direction of his glance, and saw Nina.

Every time I had met her during the fifteen years of our—well, I fail to find the precise term for our kind of relationship—she had not seemed to recognize me at once; and this time too she remained quite still for a moment, on the opposite sidewalk, half turning toward me in sympathetic incertitude mixed with curiosity, only her yellow scarf already on the move like those dogs that recognize you before their owners do—and then she uttered a cry, her hands up, all her ten fingers dancing, and in the middle of the street, with merely the frank impulsiveness of an old friendship (just as she would rapidly make the sign of the cross over me every time we parted), she kissed me thrice with more mouth than meaning, and then walked beside me, hanging on to me, adjusting her stride to mine, hampered by her narrow brown skirt perfunctorily slit down the side.

“Oh, yes, Ferdie is here too,” she replied and immediately in her turn inquired nicely after Elena.

“Must be loafing somewhere around with Segur,” she went on in reference to her husband. “And I have some shopping to do; we leave after lunch. Wait a moment, where are you leading me, Victor dear?”

Back into the past, back into the past, as I did every time I met her, repeating the whole accumulation of the plot from the very beginning up to the last increment—thus in Russian fairy tales the already told is bunched up again at every new turn of the story. This time we had met in warm and misty Fialta, and I could not have celebrated the occasion with greater art, could not have adorned with brighter vignettes the list of fate’s former services, even if I had known that this was to be the last one; the last one, I maintain, for I cannot imagine any heavenly firm of brokers that might consent to arrange me a meeting with her beyond the grave.

My introductory scene with Nina had been laid in Russia quite a long time ago, around 1917 I should say, judging by certain left-wing theater rumblings backstage. It was at some birthday party at my aunt's on her country estate, near Luga, in the deepest folds of winter (how well I remember the first sign of nearing the place: a red barn in a white wilderness). I had just graduated from the Imperial Lyceum; Nina was already engaged: although she was of my age and of that of the century, she looked twenty at least, and this in spite or perhaps because of her neat slender build, whereas at thirty-two that very slightness of hers made her look younger. Her fiancé was a guardsman on leave from the front, a handsome heavy fellow, incredibly well bred and stolid, who weighed every word on the scales of the most exact common sense and spoke in a velvety baritone, which grew even smoother when he addressed her; his decency and devotion probably got on her nerves; and he is now a successful if somewhat lonesome engineer in a most distant tropical country.

Windows light up and stretch their luminous lengths upon the dark billowy snow, making room for the reflection of the fan-shaped light above the front door between them. Each of the two side pillars is fluffily fringed with white, which rather spoils the lines of what might have been a perfect *ex libris* for the book of our two lives. I cannot recall why we had all wandered out of the sonorous hall into the still darkness, peopled only with firs, snow-swollen to twice their size; did the watchmen invite us to look at a sullen red glow in the sky, portent of nearing arson? Possibly. Did we go to admire an equestrian statue of ice sculptured near the pond by the Swiss tutor of my cousins? Quite as likely. My memory revives only on the way back to the brightly symmetrical mansion toward which we tramped in single file along a narrow furrow between snowbanks, with that crunch-crunch-crunch which is the only comment that a taciturn winter night makes upon humans. I walked last; three singing steps ahead of me walked a small bent shape; the firs gravely showed their burdened paws. I slipped and dropped the dead flashlight someone had forced upon me; it was devilishly hard to retrieve; and instantly attracted by my curses, with an eager, low laugh in anticipation of fun, Nina dimly veered toward me. I call her Nina, but

I could hardly have known her name yet, hardly could we have had time, she and I, for any preliminary; “Who’s that?” she asked with interest—and I was already kissing her neck, smooth and quite fiery hot from the long fox fur of her coat collar, which kept getting into my way until she clasped my shoulder, and with the candor so peculiar to her gently fitted her generous, dutiful lips to mine.

But suddenly parting us by its explosion of gaiety, the theme of a snowball fight started in the dark, and someone, fleeing, falling, crunching, laughing, and panting, climbed a drift, tried to run, and uttered a horrible groan: deep snow had performed the amputation of an arctic. And soon after, we all dispersed to our respective homes, without my having talked with Nina, nor made any plans about the future, about those fifteen itinerant years that had already set out toward the dim horizon, loaded with the parts of our unassembled meetings; and as I watched her in the maze of gestures and shadows of gestures of which the rest of that evening consisted (probably parlor games—with Nina persistently in the other camp), I was astonished, I remember, not so much by her inattention to me after that warmth in the snow as by the innocent naturalness of that inattention, for I did not yet know that had I said a word it would have changed at once into a wonderful sunburst of kindness, a cheerful, compassionate attitude with all possible cooperation, as if woman’s love were springwater containing salubrious salts which at the least notice she ever so willingly gave anyone to drink.

“Let me see, where did we last meet,” I began (addressing the Fialta version of Nina) in order to bring to her small face with prominent cheekbones and dark-red lips a certain expression I knew; and sure enough, the shake of her head and the puckered brow seemed less to imply forgetfulness than to deplore the flatness of an old joke; or to be more exact, it was as if all those cities where fate had fixed our various rendezvous without ever attending them personally, all those platforms and stairs and three-walled rooms and dark back alleys, were trite settings remaining after some other lives all brought to a close long before and were so little related to the acting out of our own aimless destiny that it was almost bad taste to mention them.

I accompanied her into a shop under the arcades; there, in the twilight

beyond a beaded curtain, she fingered some red leather purses stuffed with tissue paper, peering at the price tags, as if wishing to learn their museum names. She wanted, she said, exactly that shape but in fawn, and when after ten minutes of frantic rustling the old Dalmatian found such a freak by a miracle that has puzzled me ever since, Nina, who was about to pick some money out of my hand, changed her mind and went through the streaming beads without having bought anything.

Outside it was just as milky dull as before; the same smell of burning, stirring my Tartar memories, drifted from the bare windows of the pale houses; a small swarm of gnats was busy darning the air above a mimosa, which bloomed listlessly, her sleeves trailing to the very ground; two workmen in broad-brimmed hats were lunching on cheese and garlic, their backs against a circus billboard, which depicted a red hussar and an orange tiger of sorts; curious—in his effort to make the beast as ferocious as possible, the artist had gone so far that he had come back from the other side, for the tiger's face looked positively human.

"Au fond, I wanted a comb," said Nina with belated regret.

How familiar to me were her hesitations, second thoughts, third thoughts mirroring first ones, ephemeral worries between trains. She had always either just arrived or was about to leave, and of this I find it hard to think without feeling humiliated by the variety of intricate routes one feverishly follows in order to keep that final appointment which the most confirmed dawdler knows to be unavoidable. Had I to submit before judges of our earthly existence a specimen of her average pose, I would have perhaps placed her leaning upon a counter at Cook's, left calf crossing right shin, left toe tapping floor, sharp elbows and coin-spilling bag on the counter, while the employee, pencil in hand, pondered with her over the plan of an eternal sleeping car.

After the exodus from Russia, I saw her—and that was the second time—in Berlin at the house of some friends. I was about to get married; she had just broken with her fiancé. As I entered that room I caught sight of her at once and, having glanced at the other guests, I instinctively determined which of the men knew more about her than I. She was sitting in the corner of a couch, her feet pulled up, her small comfortable body folded in the form of a Z; an ashtray stood aslant on the

couch near one of her heels; and, having squinted at me and listened to my name, she removed her stalklike cigarette holder from her lips and proceeded to utter slowly and joyfully, "Well, of all people—" and at once it became clear to everyone, beginning with her, that we had long been on intimate terms: unquestionably, she had forgotten all about the actual kiss, but somehow because of that trivial occurrence she found herself recollecting a vague sketch of warm, pleasant friendship, which in reality had never existed between us. Thus the whole cast of our relationship was fraudulently based upon an imaginary amity—which had nothing to do with her random good will. Our meeting proved quite insignificant in regard to the words we said, but already no barriers divided us; and when that night I happened to be seated beside her at supper, I shamelessly tested the extent of her secret patience.

Then she vanished again; and a year later my wife and I were seeing my brother off to Posen, and when the train had gone, and we were moving toward the exit along the other side of the platform, suddenly near a car of the Paris express I saw Nina, her face buried in the bouquet she held, in the midst of a group of people whom she had befriended without my knowledge and who stood in a circle gaping at her as idlers gape at a street row, a lost child, or the victim of an accident. Brightly she signaled to me with her flowers; I introduced her to Elena, and in that life-quickenning atmosphere of a big railway station where everything is something trembling on the brink of something else, thus to be clutched and cherished, the exchange of a few words was enough to enable two totally dissimilar women to start calling each other by their pet names the very next time they met. That day, in the blue shade of the Paris car, Ferdinand was first mentioned; I learned with a ridiculous pang that she was about to marry him. Doors were beginning to slam; she quickly but piously kissed her friends, climbed into the vestibule, disappeared; and then I saw her through the glass settling herself in her compartment, having suddenly forgotten about us or passed into another world, and we all, our hands in our pockets, seemed to be spying upon an utterly unsuspecting life moving in that aquarium dimness, until she grew aware of us and drummed on the windowpane, then raised her eyes, fumbling at the frame as if hanging a picture, but nothing hap-

pened; some fellow passenger helped her, and she leaned out, audible and real, beaming with pleasure; one of us, keeping up with the stealthily gliding car, handed her a magazine and a Tauchnitz (she read English only when traveling); all was slipping away with beautiful smoothness, and I held a platform ticket crumpled beyond recognition, while a song of the last century (connected, it has been rumored, with some Parisian drama of love) kept ringing and ringing in my head, having emerged, God knows why, from the music box of memory, a sobbing ballad which often used to be sung by an old maiden aunt of mine, with a face as yellow as Russian church wax, but whom nature had given such a powerful, ecstatically full voice that it seemed to swallow her up in the glory of a fiery cloud as soon as she would begin:

*On dit que tu te maries,
tu sais que j'en vais mourir*

and that melody, the pain, the offense, the link between hymen and death evoked by the rhythm, and the voice itself of the dead singer, which accompanied the recollection as the sole owner of the song, gave me no rest for several hours after Nina's departure and even later arose at increasing intervals like the last flat little waves sent to the beach by a passing ship, lapping ever more infrequently and dreamily, or like the bronze agony of a vibrating belfry after the bell ringer has already reseated himself in the cheerful circle of his family. And another year or two later, I was in Paris on business; and one morning on the landing of a hotel, where I had been looking up a film actor fellow, there she was again, clad in a gray tailored suit, waiting for the elevator to take her down, a key dangling from her fingers. "Ferdinand has gone fencing," she said conversationally; her eyes rested on the lower part of my face as if she were lip reading, and after a moment of reflection (her amatory comprehension was matchless), she turned and rapidly swaying on slender ankles led me along the sea-blue carpeted passage. A chair at the door of her room supported a tray with the remains of breakfast—a honey-stained knife, crumbs on the gray porcelain; but the room had already been done, and because of our sudden draft a wave of mus-

lin embroidered with white dahlias got sucked in, with a shudder and knock, between the responsive halves of the French window, and only when the door had been locked did they let go that curtain with something like a blissful sigh; and a little later I stepped out on the diminutive cast-iron balcony beyond to inhale a combined smell of dry maple leaves and gasoline—the dregs of the hazy blue morning street; and as I did not yet realize the presence of that growing morbid pathos which was to embitter so my subsequent meetings with Nina, I was probably quite as collected and carefree as she was, when from the hotel I accompanied her to some office or other to trace a suitcase she had lost, and thence to the café where her husband was holding session with his court of the moment.

I will not mention the name (and what bits of it I happen to give here appear in decorous disguise) of that man, that Franco-Hungarian writer. . . . I would rather not dwell upon him at all, but I cannot help it—he is surging up from under my pen. Today one does not hear much about him; and this is good, for it proves that I was right in resisting his evil spell, right in experiencing a creepy chill down my spine whenever this or that new book of his touched my hand. The fame of his likes circulates briskly but soon grows heavy and stale; and as for history it will limit his life story to the dash between two dates. Lean and arrogant, with some poisonous pun ever ready to fork out and quiver at you, and with a strange look of expectancy in his dull brown veiled eyes, this false wag had, I daresay, an irresistible effect on small rodents. Having mastered the art of verbal invention to perfection, he particularly prided himself on being a weaver of words, a title he valued higher than that of a writer; personally, I never could understand what was the good of thinking up books, of penning things that had not really happened in some way or other; and I remember once saying to him as I braved the mockery of his encouraging nods that, were I a writer, I should allow only my heart to have imagination, and for the rest rely upon memory, that long-drawn sunset shadow of one's personal truth.

I had known his books before I knew him; a faint disgust was already replacing the aesthetic pleasure which I had suffered his first novel to give me. At the beginning of his career, it had been possible perhaps

to distinguish some human landscape, some old garden, some dream-familiar disposition of trees through the stained glass of his prodigious prose . . . but with every new book the tints grew still more dense, the gules and purple still more ominous; and today one can no longer see anything at all through that blazoned, ghastly rich glass, and it seems that were one to break it, nothing but a perfectly black void would face one's shivering soul. But how dangerous he was in his prime, what venom he squirted, with what whips he lashed when provoked! The tornado of his passing satire left a barren waste where felled oaks lay in a row, and the dust still twisted, and the unfortunate author of some adverse review, howling with pain, spun like a top in the dust.

At the time we met, his *Passage à niveau* was being acclaimed in Paris; he was, as they say, "surrounded," and Nina (whose adaptability was an amazing substitute for the culture she lacked) had already assumed if not the part of a muse at least that of a soul mate and subtle adviser, following Ferdinand's creative convolutions and loyally sharing his artistic tastes; for although it is wildly improbable that she had ever waded through a single volume of his, she had a magic knack of glean- ing all the best passages from the shop talk of literary friends.

An orchestra of women was playing when we entered the café; first I noted the ostrich thigh of a harp reflected in one of the mirror-faced pillars, and then I saw the composite table (small ones drawn together to form a long one) at which, with his back to the plush wall, Ferdinand was presiding; and for a moment his whole attitude, the position of his parted hands, and the faces of his table companions all turned toward him reminded me in a grotesque, nightmarish way of something I did not quite grasp, but when I did so in retrospect, the suggested comparison struck me as hardly less sacrilegious than the nature of his art itself. He wore a white turtleneck sweater under a tweed coat; his glossy hair was combed back from the temples, and above it cigarette smoke hung like a halo; his bony, pharaohlike face was motionless: the eyes alone roved this way and that, full of dim satisfaction. Having forsaken the two or three obvious haunts where naive amateurs of Montparnasian life would have expected to find him, he had started patronizing this perfectly bourgeois establishment because of his peculiar sense of

humor, which made him derive ghoulish fun from the pitiful *spécialité de la maison*—this orchestra composed of half a dozen weary-looking, self-conscious ladies interlacing mild harmonies on a crammed platform and not knowing, as he put it, what to do with their motherly bosoms, quite superfluous in the world of music. After each number he would be convulsed by a fit of epileptic applause, which the ladies had stopped acknowledging and which was already arousing, I thought, certain doubts in the minds of the proprietor of the café and its fundamental customers, but which seemed highly diverting to Ferdinand's friends. Among these I recall: an artist with an impeccably bald though slightly chipped head, which under various pretexts he constantly painted into his eye-and-guitar canvases; a poet, whose special gag was the ability to represent, if you asked him, Adam's Fall by means of five matches; a humble businessman who financed surrealist ventures (and paid for the aperitifs) if permitted to print in a corner eulogistic allusions to the actress he kept; a pianist, presentable insofar as the face was concerned, but with a dreadful expression of the fingers; a jaunty but linguistically impotent Soviet writer fresh from Moscow, with an old pipe and a new wristwatch, who was completely and ridiculously unaware of the sort of company he was in; there were several other gentlemen present who have become confused in my memory, and doubtless two or three of the lot had been intimate with Nina. She was the only woman at the table; there she stooped, eagerly sucking at a straw, the level of her lemonade sinking with a kind of childish celerity, and only when the last drop had gurgled and squeaked, and she had pushed away the straw with her tongue, only then did I finally catch her eye, which I had been obstinately seeking, still not being able to cope with the fact that she had had time to forget what had occurred earlier in the morning—to forget it so thoroughly that upon meeting my glance, she replied with a blank questioning smile, and only after peering more closely did she remember suddenly what kind of answering smile I was expecting. Meanwhile, Ferdinand (the ladies having temporarily left the platform after pushing away their instruments like so many pieces of furniture) was juicily drawing his cronies' attention to the figure of an elderly luncher in a far corner of the café, who had, as some Frenchmen for some reason or

other have, a little red ribbon or something on his coat lapel and whose gray beard combined with his mustaches to form a cozy yellowish nest for his sloppily munching mouth. Somehow the trappings of old age always amused Ferdie.

I did not stay long in Paris, but that week proved sufficient to engender between him and me that fake chumminess the imposing of which he had such a talent for. Subsequently I even turned out to be of some use to him: my firm acquired the film rights of one of his more intelligible stories, and then he had a good time pestering me with telegrams. As the years passed, we found ourselves every now and then beaming at each other in some place, but I never felt at ease in his presence, and that day in Fialta too I experienced a familiar depression upon learning that he was on the prowl nearby; one thing, however, considerably cheered me up: the flop of his recent play.

And here he was coming toward us, garbed in an absolutely waterproof coat with belt and pocket flaps, a camera across his shoulder, double rubber soles to his shoes, sucking with an imperturbability that was meant to be funny a long stick of moonstone candy, that specialty of Fialta's. Beside him walked the dapper, doll-like, rosy Segur, a lover of art and a perfect fool; I never could discover for what purpose Ferdinand needed him; and I still hear Nina exclaiming with a moaning tenderness that did not commit her to anything: "Oh, he is such a darling, Segur!" They approached; Ferdinand and I greeted each other lustily, trying to crowd into handshake and backslap as much fervor as possible, knowing by experience that actually that was all but pretending it was only a preface; and it always happened like that: after every separation we met to the accompaniment of strings being excitedly tuned, in a bustle of geniality, in the hubbub of sentiments taking their seats; but the ushers would close the doors, and after that no one was admitted.

Segur complained to me about the weather, and at first I did not understand what he was talking about; even if the moist, gray, greenhouse essence of Fialta might be called "weather," it was just as much outside of anything that could serve us as a topic of conversation as was, for instance, Nina's slender elbow, which I was holding between

finger and thumb, or a bit of tinfoil someone had dropped, shining in the middle of the cobbled street in the distance.

We four moved on, vague purchases still looming ahead. "God, what an Indian!" Ferdinand suddenly exclaimed with fierce relish, violently nudging me and pointing at a poster. Farther on, near a fountain, he gave his stick of candy to a native child, a swarthy girl with beads round her pretty neck; we stopped to wait for him: he crouched saying something to her, addressing her sooty-black lowered eyelashes, and then he caught up with us, grinning and making one of those remarks with which he loved to spice his speech. Then his attention was drawn by an unfortunate object exhibited in a souvenir shop: a dreadful marble imitation of Mount St. George showing a black tunnel at its base, which turned out to be the mouth of an inkwell, and with a compartment for pens in the semblance of railroad tracks. Open-mouthed, quivering, all agog with sardonic triumph, he turned that dusty, cumbersome, and perfectly irresponsible thing in his hands, paid without bargaining, and with his mouth still open came out carrying the monster. Like some autocrat who surrounds himself with hunchbacks and dwarfs, he would become attached to this or that hideous object; this infatuation might last from five minutes to several days or even longer if the thing happened to be animate.

Nina wistfully alluded to lunch, and seizing the opportunity when Ferdinand and Segur stopped at a post office, I hastened to lead her away. I still wonder what exactly she meant to me, that small dark woman of the narrow shoulders and "lyrical limbs" (to quote the expression of a mincing émigré poet, one of the few men who had sighed platonically after her), and still less do I understand what was the purpose of fate in bringing us constantly together. I did not see her for quite a long while after my sojourn in Paris, and then one day when I came home from my office I found her having tea with my wife and examining on her silk-hosed hand, with her wedding ring gleaming through, the texture of some stockings bought cheap in Tauentzienstrasse. Once I was shown her photograph in a fashion magazine full of autumn leaves and gloves and windswept golf links. On a certain Christmas she sent me a picture postcard with snow and stars. On a Riviera beach she almost escaped my

notice behind her dark glasses and terra-cotta tan. Another day, having dropped in on an ill-timed errand at the house of some strangers where a party was in progress, I saw her scarf and fur coat among alien scarecrows on a coatrack. In a bookshop she nodded to me from a page of one of her husband's stories, a page referring to an episodic servant girl, but smuggling in Nina in spite of the author's intention: "Her face," he wrote, "was rather nature's snapshot than a meticulous portrait, so that when . . . tried to imagine it, all he could visualize were fleeting glimpses of disconnected features: the downy outline of her pommettes in the sun, the amber-tinted brown darkness of quick eyes, lips shaped into a friendly smile which was always ready to change into an ardent kiss."

Again and again she hurriedly appeared in the margins of my life, without influencing in the least its basic text. One summer morning (Friday—because housemaids were thumping out carpets in the sun-dusted yard), my family was away in the country and I was lolling and smoking in bed when I heard the bell ring with tremendous violence—and there she was in the hall having burst in to leave (incidentally) a hairpin and (mainly) a trunk illuminated with hotel labels, which a fortnight later was retrieved for her by a nice Austrian boy, who (according to intangible but sure symptoms) belonged to the same very cosmopolitan association of which I was a member. Occasionally, in the middle of a conversation her name would be mentioned, and she would run down the steps of a chance sentence, without turning her head. While traveling in the Pyrenees, I spent a week at the château belonging to people with whom she and Ferdinand happened to be staying, and I shall never forget my first night there: how I waited, how certain I was that without my having to tell her she would steal to my room, how she did not come, and the din thousands of crickets made in the delirious depth of the rocky garden dripping with moonlight, the mad bubbling brooks, and my struggle between blissful southern fatigue after a long day of hunting on the screes and the wild thirst for her stealthy coming, low laugh, pink ankles above the swan's-down trimming of high-heeled slippers; but the night raved on, and she did not come, and when next day, in the course of a general ramble in the mountains, I told her of my waiting, she clasped her hands in dismay—and at once with a rapid glance estimated whether the

backs of the gesticulating Ferd and his friend had sufficiently receded. I remember talking to her on the telephone across half of Europe (on her husband's business) and not recognizing at first her eager barking voice; and I remember once dreaming of her: I dreamt that my eldest girl had run in to tell me the doorman was sorely in trouble—and when I had gone down to him, I saw lying on a trunk, a roll of burlap under her head, pale-lipped and wrapped in a woolen kerchief, Nina fast asleep, as miserable refugees sleep in godforsaken railway stations. And regardless of what happened to me or to her, in between, we never discussed anything, as we never thought of each other during the intervals in our destiny, so that when we met the pace of life altered at once, all its atoms were recombined, and we lived in another, lighter time-medium, which was measured not by the lengthy separations but by those few meetings of which a short, supposedly frivolous life was thus artificially formed. And with each new meeting I grew more and more apprehensive; no—I did not experience any inner emotional collapse, the shadow of tragedy did not haunt our revels, my married life remained unimpaired, while on the other hand her eclectic husband ignored her casual affairs although deriving some profit from them in the way of pleasant and useful connections. I grew apprehensive because something lovely, delicate, and unrepeatable was being wasted: something which I abused by snapping off poor bright bits in gross haste while neglecting the modest but true core which perhaps it kept offering me in a pitiful whisper. I was apprehensive because, in the long run, I was somehow accepting Nina's life, the lies, the futility, the gibberish of that life. Even in the absence of any sentimental discord, I felt myself bound to seek for a rational, if not moral, interpretation of my existence, and this meant choosing between the world in which I sat for my portrait, with my wife, my young daughters, the Doberman pinscher (idyllic garlands, a signet ring, a slender cane), between that happy, wise, and good world . . . and what? Was there any practical chance of life together with Nina, life I could barely imagine, for it would be penetrated, I knew, with a passionate, intolerable bitterness and every moment of it would be aware of a past, teeming with prolean partners. No, the thing was absurd. And moreover was she not chained to her husband by something stronger than love—the

staunch friendship between two convicts? Absurd! But then what should I have done with you, Nina, how should I have disposed of the store of sadness that had gradually accumulated as a result of our seemingly carefree, but really hopeless meetings?

Fialta consists of the old town and of the new one; here and there, past and present are interlaced, struggling either to disentangle themselves or to thrust each other out; each one has its own methods: the newcomer fights honestly—importing palm trees, setting up smart tourist agencies, painting with creamy lines the red smoothness of tennis courts; whereas the sneaky old-timer creeps out from behind a corner in the shape of some little street on crutches or the steps of stairs leading nowhere. On our way to the hotel, we passed a half-built white villa, full of litter within, on a wall of which again the same elephants, their monstrous baby knees wide apart, sat on huge, gaudy drums; in ethereal bundles the equestrienne (already with a penciled mustache) was resting on a broad-backed steed; and a tomato-nosed clown was walking a tight-rope, balancing an umbrella ornamented with those recurrent stars—a vague symbolic recollection of the heavenly fatherland of circus performers. Here, in the Riviera part of Fialta, the wet gravel crunched in a more luxurious manner, and the lazy sighing of the sea was more audible. In the backyard of the hotel, a kitchen boy armed with a knife was pursuing a hen which was clucking madly as it raced for its life. A bootblack offered me his ancient throne with a toothless smile. Under the plane trees stood a motorcycle of German make, a mud-bespattered limousine, and a yellow long-bodied Icarus that looked like a giant scarab (“That’s ours—Segur’s, I mean,” said Nina, adding, “Why don’t you come with us, Victor?” although she knew very well that I could not come); in the lacquer of its elytra a gouache of sky and branches was engulfed; in the metal of one of the bomb-shaped lamps we ourselves were momentarily reflected, lean film-land pedestrians passing along the convex surface; and then, after a few steps, I glanced back and foresaw, in an almost optical sense, as it were, what really happened an hour or so later: the three of them wearing motoring helmets, getting in, smiling and waving to me, transparent to me like ghosts, with the color of the world shining through them, and then they were moving, receding,

diminishing (Nina's last ten-fingered farewell); but actually the automobile was still standing quite motionless, smooth and whole like an egg, and Nina under my outstretched arm was entering a laurel-flanked doorway, and as we sat down we could see through the window Ferdinand and Segur, who had come by another way, slowly approaching.

There was no one on the veranda where we lunched except the Englishman I had recently observed; in front of him, a long glass containing a bright crimson drink threw an oval reflection on the tablecloth. In his eyes, I noticed the same bloodshot desire, but now it was in no sense related to Nina; that avid look was not directed at her at all, but was fixed on the upper right-hand corner of the broad window near which he was sitting.

Having pulled the gloves off her small thin hands, Nina, for the last time in her life, was eating the shellfish of which she was so fond. Ferdinand also busied himself with food, and I took advantage of his hunger to begin a conversation which gave me the semblance of power over him: to be specific, I mentioned his recent failure. After a brief period of fashionable religious conversion, during which grace descended upon him and he undertook some rather ambiguous pilgrimages, which ended in a decidedly scandalous adventure, he had turned his dull eyes toward barbarous Moscow. Now, frankly speaking, I have always been irritated by the complacent conviction that a ripple of stream consciousness, a few healthy obscenities, and a dash of communism in any old slop pail will alchemically and automatically produce ultramodern literature; and I will contend until I am shot that art as soon as it is brought into contact with politics inevitably sinks to the level of any ideological trash. In Ferdinand's case, it is true, all this was rather irrelevant: the muscles of his muse were exceptionally strong, to say nothing of the fact that he didn't care a damn for the plight of the underdog; but because of certain obscurely mischievous undercurrents of that sort, his art had become still more repulsive. Except for a few snobs none had understood the play; I had not seen it myself, but could well imagine that elaborate Kremlesque night along the impossible spirals of which he spun various wheels of dismembered symbols; and now, not without pleasure, I asked him whether he had read a recent bit of criticism about himself.

"Criticism!" he exclaimed. "Fine criticism! Every slick jackanapes sees fit to read me a lecture. Ignorance of my work is their bliss. My books are touched gingerly, as one touches something that may go bang. Criticism! They are examined from every point of view except the essential one. It is as if a naturalist, in describing the equine genus, started to jaw about saddles or Mme. de V." (he named a well-known literary hostess who indeed strongly resembled a grinning horse). "I would like some of that pigeon's blood too," he continued in the same loud, ripping voice, addressing the waiter, who understood his desire only after he had looked in the direction of the long-nailed finger which unceremoniously pointed at the Englishman's glass. For some reason or other, Segur mentioned Ruby Rose, the lady who painted flowers on her breast, and the conversation took on a less insulting character. Meanwhile the big Englishman suddenly made up his mind, got up on a chair, stepped from there onto the windowsill, and stretched up till he reached that coveted corner of the frame where rested a compact furry moth, which he deftly slipped into a pillbox.

". . . rather like Wouwerman's white horse," said Ferdinand, in regard to something he was discussing with Segur.

"*Tu es très hippique ce matin*," remarked the latter.

Soon they both left to telephone. Ferdinand was particularly fond of long-distance calls, and particularly good at endowing them, no matter what the distance, with a friendly warmth when it was necessary, as for instance now, to make sure of free lodgings.

From afar came the sounds of music—a trumpet, a zither. Nina and I set out to wander again. The circus on its way to Fialta had apparently sent out runners: an advertising pageant was tramping by; but we did not catch its head, as it had turned uphill into a side alley: the gilded back of some carriage was receding, a man in a burnoose led a camel, a file of four mediocre Indians carried placards on poles, and behind them, by special permission, a tourist's small son in a sailor suit sat reverently on a tiny pony.

We wandered by a café where the tables were now almost dry but still empty; the waiter was examining (I hope he adopted it later) a horrible foundling, the absurd inkstand affair, stowed by Ferdinand on the

banisters in passing. At the next corner we were attracted by an old stone stairway, and we climbed up, and I kept looking at the sharp angle of Nina's step as she ascended, raising her skirt, its narrowness requiring the same gesture as formerly length had done; she diffused a familiar warmth, and going up beside her, I recalled the last time we had come together. It had been in a Paris house, with many people around, and my dear friend Jules Darboux, wishing to do me a refined aesthetic favor, had touched my sleeve and said, "I want you to meet—" and led me to Nina, who sat in the corner of a couch, her body folded Z-wise, with an ashtray at her heel, and she took a long turquoise cigarette holder from her lips and joyfully, slowly exclaimed, "Well, of all people—" and then all evening my heart felt like breaking, as I passed from group to group with a sticky glass in my fist, now and then looking at her from a distance (she did not look . . .), and listened to scraps of conversation, and overheard one man saying to another, "Funny, how they all smell alike, burnt leaf through whatever perfume they use, those angular dark-haired girls," and as it often happens, a trivial remark related to some unknown topic coiled and clung to one's own intimate recollection, a parasite of its sadness.

At the top of the steps, we found ourselves on a rough kind of terrace. From here one could see the delicate outline of the dove-colored Mount St. George with a cluster of bone-white flecks (some hamlet) on one of its slopes; the smoke of an indiscernible train undulated along its rounded base—and suddenly disappeared; still lower, above the jumble of roofs, one could perceive a solitary cypress, resembling the moist-twirled black tip of a watercolor brush; to the right, one caught a glimpse of the sea, which was gray, with silver wrinkles. At our feet lay a rusty old key, and on the wall of the half-ruined house adjoining the terrace, the ends of some wire still remained hanging. . . . I reflected that formerly there had been life here, a family had enjoyed the coolness at nightfall, clumsy children had colored pictures by the light of a lamp. . . . We lingered there as if listening to something; Nina, who stood on higher ground, put a hand on my shoulder and smiled, and carefully, so as not to crumple her smile, kissed me. With an unbearable force, I relived (or so it now seems to me) all that had ever been

between us beginning with a similar kiss; and I said (substituting for our cheap, formal “thou” that strangely full and expressive “you” to which the circumnavigator, enriched all around, returns), “Look here—what if I love you?” Nina glanced at me, I repeated those words, I wanted to add . . . but something like a bat passed swiftly across her face, a quick, queer, almost ugly expression, and she, who would utter coarse words with perfect simplicity, became embarrassed; I also felt awkward. . . . “Never mind, I was only joking,” I hastened to say, lightly encircling her waist. From somewhere a firm bouquet of small, dark, unselfishly smelling violets appeared in her hands, and before she returned to her husband and car, we stood for a little while longer by the stone parapet, and our romance was even more hopeless than it had ever been. But the stone was as warm as flesh, and suddenly I understood something I had been seeing without understanding—why a piece of tinfoil had sparkled so on the pavement, why the gleam of a glass had trembled on a tablecloth, why the sea was ashimmer: somehow, by imperceptible degrees, the white sky above Fialta had got saturated with sunshine, and now it was sun-pervaded throughout, and this brimming white radiance grew broader and broader, all dissolved in it, all vanished, all passed, and I stood on the station platform of Mlech with a freshly bought newspaper, which told me that the yellow car I had seen under the plane trees had suffered a crash beyond Fialta, having run at full speed into the truck of a traveling circus entering the town, a crash from which Ferdinand and his friend, those invulnerable rogues, those salamanders of fate, those basilisks of good fortune, had escaped with local and temporary injury to their scales, while Nina, in spite of her long-standing, faithful imitation of them, had turned out after all to be mortal.

HOW TO BE AN OTHER WOMAN

LORRIE MOORE

Meet in expensive beige raincoats, on a pea-soupy night. Like a detective movie. First, stand in front of Florsheim's Fifty-seventh Street window, press your face close to the glass, watch the fake velvet Hummels inside revolving around the wing tips; some white shoes, like your father wears, are propped up with garlands on a small mound of chemical snow. All the stores have closed. You can see your breath on the glass. Draw a peace sign. You are waiting for a bus.

He emerges from nowhere, looks like Robert Culp, the fog rolling, then parting, then sort of closing up again behind him. He asks you for a light and you jump a bit, startled, but you give him your "Lucky's Lounge—Where Leisure Is a Suit" matches. He has a nice chuckle, nice fingernails. He lights the cigarette, cupping his hands around the end, and drags deeply, like a starving man. He smiles as he exhales, returns you the matches, looks at your face, says: "Thanks."

He then stands not far from you, waiting. Perhaps for the same bus. The two of you glance furtively at each other, shifting feet. Pretend to contemplate the chemical snow. You are two spies glancing quickly at watches, necks disappearing in the hunch of your shoulders, collars upturned and slowly razoring the cab and store-lit fog like sharkfins. You begin to circle, gauging each other in primordial sniffs, eyeing, sidling, keen as Basil Rathbone.

A bus arrives. It is crowded, everyone looking laughlessly into one another's underarms. A blonde woman in barrettes steps off, holding her shoes in one hand.

You climb on together, grab adjacent chrome posts, and when the bus hisses and rumbles forward, you take out a book. A minute goes

by and he asks what you're reading. It is *Madame Bovary* in a Doris Day biography jacket. Try to explain about binding warpage. He smiles, interested.

Return to your book. Emma is opening her window, thinking of Rouen.

"What weather," you hear him sigh, faintly British or uppercrust Delaware.

Glance up. Say: "It is fit for neither beast nor vegetable."

It sounds dumb. It makes no sense.

But it is how you meet.

At the movies he is tender, caressing your hand beneath the seat.

At concerts he is sweet and attentive, buying cocktails, locating the ladies' lounge when you can't find it.

At museums he is wise and loving, leading you slowly through the Etruscan cinerary urns with affectionate gestures and an art history minor from Columbia. He is kind; he laughs at your jokes.

After four movies, three concerts, and two-and-a-half museums, you sleep with him. It seems the right number of cultural events. On the stereo you play your favorite harp and oboe music. He tells you his wife's name. It is Patricia. She is an intellectual property lawyer. He tells you he likes you a lot. You lie on your stomach, naked and still too warm. When he says, "How do you feel about that?" don't say "Ridiculous" or "Get the hell out of my apartment." Prop your head up with one hand and say: "It depends. What is intellectual property law?"

He grins. "Oh, you know. Where leisure is a suit."

Give him a tight, wiry little smile.

"I just don't want you to feel uncomfortable about this," he says.

Say: "Hey. I am a very cool person. I am tough." Show him your bicep.

When you were six you thought *mistress* meant to put your shoes on the wrong feet. Now you are older and know it can mean many things, but essentially it means to put your shoes on the wrong feet.

You walk differently. In store windows you don't recognize your-

self; you are another woman, some crazy interior display lady in glasses stumbling frantic and preoccupied through the mannequins. In public restrooms you sit dangerously flat against the toilet seat, a strange flesh sundae of despair and exhilaration, murmuring into your bluing thighs: "Hello, I'm Charlene. I'm a mistress."

It is like having a book out from the library.

It is like constantly having a book out from the library.

You meet frequently for dinner, after work, split whole liters of the house red, then wamble the two blocks east, twenty blocks south to your apartment and lie sprawled on the living room floor with your expensive beige raincoats still on.

He is a systems analyst—you have already exhausted this joke—but what he really wants to be, he reveals to you, is an actor.

"Well, how did you become a systems analyst?" you ask, funny you.

"The same way anyone becomes anything," he muses. "I took courses and sent out resumes." Pause. "Patricia helped me work up a great resume. Too great."

"Oh." Wonder about mistress courses, certification, resumes. Perhaps you are not really qualified.

"But I'm not good at systems work," he says, staring through and beyond, way beyond, the cracked ceiling. "Figuring out the cost-effectiveness of two hundred people shuffling five hundred pages back and forth across a new four-and-a-half-by-three-foot desk. I'm not an organized person, like Patricia, for instance. She's just incredibly organized. She makes lists for everything. It's pretty impressive."

Say flatly, dully: "What?"

"That she makes lists."

"That she makes lists? You like that?"

"Well, yes. You know, what she's going to do, what she has to buy, names of clients she has to see, et cetera."

"Lists?" you murmur hopelessly, listlessly, your expensive beige raincoat still on. There is a long, tired silence. Lists? You stand up, brush off your coat, ask him what he would like to drink, then stump off to the kitchen without waiting for the answer.

* * *

At one-thirty, he gets up noiselessly except for the soft rustle of his dressing. He leaves before you have even quite fallen asleep, but before he does, he bends over you in his expensive beige raincoat and kisses the ends of your hair. Ah, he kisses your hair.

CLIENTS TO SEE

Birthday snapshots

Scotch tape

Letters to TD and Mom

Technically, you are still a secretary for Karma-Kola, but you wear your Phi Beta Kappa key around your neck on a cheap gold chain, hoping someone will spot you for a promotion. Unfortunately, you have lost the respect of all but one of your co-workers and many of your superiors as well, who are working in order to send their daughters to universities so they won't have to be secretaries, and who, therefore, hold you in contempt for having a degree and being a failure anyway. It is like having a degree in failure. Hilda, however, likes you. You are young and remind her of her sister, the professional skater.

"But I hate to skate," you say.

And Hilda smiles, nodding. "Yup, that's exactly what my sister says sometimes and in that same way."

"What way?"

"Oh, I don't know," says Hilda. "Your bangs parted on the side or something."

Ask Hilda if she will go to lunch with you. Over Reuben sandwiches ask her if she's ever had an affair with a married man. As she attempts, mid-bite, to complete the choreography of her chomp, Russian dressing spurts out onto her hands.

"Once," she says. "That was the last lover I had. That was over two years ago."

Say: "Oh my god," as if it were horrible and tragic, then try to mitigate that rudeness by clearing your throat and saying, "Well, actually, I guess that's not so bad."

"No," she sighs good-naturedly. "His wife had Hodgkin's disease, or so everyone thought. When they came up with the correct diagnosis, something that wasn't nearly so awful, he went back to her. Does that make sense to you?"

"I suppose," say doubtfully.

"Yeah, maybe you're right." Hilda is still cleaning Reuben off the backs of her hands with a napkin. "At any rate, who are you involved with?"

"Someone who has a wife that makes lists. She has Listmaker's disease."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah," says Hilda. "That's typical."

CLIENTS TO SEE

Tomatoes, canned

Health food toothpaste

Health food deodorant

Vit. C on sale, Rexall

Check re: other shoemaker, 32nd St.

"Patricia's really had quite an interesting life," he says, smoking a cigarette.

"Oh, really?" you say, stabbing one out in the ashtray.

Make a list of all the lovers you've ever had.

Warren Lasher

Ed "Rubberhead" Catapano

Charles Deats or Keats

Alfonse

Tuck it in your pocket. Leave it lying around, conspicuously. Somehow you lose it. Make "misaid" jokes to yourself. Make another list.

Whisper, "Don't go yet," as he glides out of your bed before sunrise and you lie there on your back cooling, naked between the sheets and smelling of musky, oniony sweat. Feel gray, like an abandoned locker room towel. Watch him as he again pulls on his pants, his sweater, his socks and shoes. Reach out and hold his thigh as he leans over and kisses you quickly, telling you not to get up, that he'll lock the door when he leaves. In the smoky darkness, you see him smile weakly, guiltily, and attempt a false, jaunty wave from the doorway. Turn on your side, toward the wall, so you don't have to watch the door close. You hear it thud nonetheless, the jangle of keys and snap of the bolt lock, the footsteps loud, then fading down the staircase, the clunk of the street door, then nothing, all his sounds blending with the city, his face passing namelessly uptown in a bus or a badly heated cab, the room, the whole building you live in, shuddering at the windows as a truck roars by toward the Queensboro Bridge.

Wonder who you are.

"Hi, this is Attila," he says in a false deep voice when you pick up your office phone.

Giggle. Like an idiot. Say: "Oh. Hi, Hun."

Hilda turns to look at you with a what's-with-you look on her face. Shrug your shoulders.

"Can you meet me for lunch?"

Say: "Meet? I'm sorry, I don't eat meat."

"Cute, you're cute," he says, not laughing, and at lunch he gives you his tomatoes.

Drink two huge glasses of wine and smile at all his office and mother-in-law stories. It makes his eyes sparkle and crinkle at the corners, his face pleased and shining. When the waitress clears the plates away, there is a silence where the two of you look down then back up again.

"You get more beautiful every day," he says to you, as you hold your wine glass over your nose, burgundy rushing down your throat. Put your glass down. Redden. Smile. Fiddle with your Phi Beta Kappa key.

When you get up to leave, take deep breaths. In front of the restaurant, where you will stride off in different directions, don't give him a kiss in the noontime throng. Patricia's office is nearby and she likes to go to the bank right around now; his back will stiffen and his eyes dart around like a crazy person's. Instead, do a quick shuffle-ball-chain like you saw Barbra Streisand do in a movie once. Wave gigantically and say: "Till we eat again."

In your office building the elevator is slow and packed and you forget to get off at the tenth floor and have to ride all the way back down again from the nineteenth. Five minutes after you arrive dizzily back at your desk, the phone rings.

"Meet me tomorrow at seven," he says, "in front of Florsheim's and I'll carry you off to my castle. Patricia is going to a copyright convention."

Wait freezing in front of Florsheim's until seven-twenty. He finally dashes up, gasping apologies (he just now got back from the airport), his coat flying open, and he takes you in tow quickly uptown toward the art museums. He lives near art museums. Ask him what a copyright convention is.

"Where leisure is a suit *and* a suite," he drawls, long and smiling, quickening his pace and yours. He kisses your temple, brushes hair off your face.

You arrive at his building in twenty minutes.

"So, this is it?" The castle doorman's fly is undone. Smile politely. In the elevator, say: "The unexamined fly is not worth zipping."

The elevator has a peculiar rattle, for all eight floors, like someone obsessively clearing her throat.

When he finally gets the apartment door unlocked, he shows you into an L-shaped living room bursting with plants and gold-framed posters announcing exhibitions you are too late for by six years. The kitchen is off to one side—tiny, digital, spare, with a small army of chrome utensils hanging belligerent and clean as blades on the wall. Walk nervously around like a dog sniffing out the place. Peek into the bedroom:

in the center, like a giant bloom, is a queen-sized bed with a Pennsylvania Dutch spread. A small photo of a woman in ski garb is propped on a nightstand. It frightens you.

Back in the living room, he mixes drinks with Scotch in them. "So, this is it," you say again with a forced grin and an odd heaving in your rib cage. Light up one of his cigarettes.

"Can I take your coat?"

Be strange and awkward. Say: "I like beige. I think it is practical."

"What's wrong with you?" he says, handing you your drink.

Try to decide what you should do:

1. rip open the front of your coat, sending the buttons torpedoing across the room in a series of pops into the asparagus fern;
2. go into the bathroom and gargle with hot tap water;
3. go downstairs and wave down a cab for home.

He puts his mouth on your neck. Put your arms timidly around him. Whisper into his ear: "There's a woman, uh, another woman in your room."

When he is fast asleep upon you, in the middle of the night, send your left arm out slowly toward the nightstand like a mechanical limb programmed for a secret intelligence mission, and bring the ski garb picture back close to your face in the dark and try to study the features over his shoulder. She seems to have a pretty smile, short hair, no eyebrows, tough flaring nostrils, body indecipherably ensconced in nylon and down and wool.

Slip carefully out, like a shoe horn, from beneath his sleeping body—he grunts groggily—and go to the closet. Open it with a minimum of squeaking and stare at her clothes. A few suits. Looks like beige blouses and a lot of brown things. Turn on the closet light. Look at the shoes. They are all lined up in neat, married pairs on the closet floor. Black pumps, blue sneakers, brown moccasins, brown T-straps. They have been to an expensive college, say, in Massachusetts. Gaze into her shoes. Her feet are much larger than yours. They are like small cruise missiles.

Inside the caves of those shoes, eyes form and open their lids, stare up at you, regard you, wink at you from the insoles. They are half-friendly, conspiratorial, amused at this reconnaissance of yours, like little smiling men from the open hatches of a fleet of military submarines. Turn off the light and shut the door quickly, before they start talking or dancing or something. Scurry back to the bed and hide your face in his armpit.

In the morning he makes you breakfast. Something with eggs and mushrooms and hot sauce.

Use his toothbrush. The red one. Gaze into the mirror at a face that looks too puffy to be yours. Imagine using her toothbrush by mistake. Imagine a wife and a mistress sharing the same toothbrush forever and ever, never knowing. Look into the medicine cabinet:

Midol
dental floss
Tylenol
Merthiolate
package of eight emory boards
razors and cartridges
two squeezed in the middle toothpaste tubes: Crest and Sensodyne
Band-Aids
hand lotion
rubbing alcohol
three small bars of Cashmere Bouquet stolen from a hotel

On the street, all over, you think you see her, the boring hotel-soap stealer. Every woman is her. You smell Cashmere Bouquet all over the place. That's her. Someone waiting near you for the downtown express: yup, that's her. A woman waiting behind you in a deli near Marine Midland who has smooth, hand-lotioned hands and looks like she skis: good god, what if that is her. Break out in cold sweats. Stare into every pair of flared nostrils with clinical curiosity and unbridled terror. Scrutinize feet. Glance sidelong at pumps. Then look quickly away, like a woman, some other woman, who is losing her mind.

Alone on lunch hours or after work, continue to look every female

over the age of twelve straight in the nose and straight in the shoes. Feel your face quiver and twice bolt out of Bergdorf's irrationally when you are sure it is her at the skirt sale rack choosing brown again, a Tylenol bottle peeking out from the corner of her purse. Sit on a granite wall in the GM plaza and catch your breath. Listen to an old man singing "Frosty the Snowman." Lose track of time.

"You're late," Hilda turns and whispers at you. "Carlyle's been back here twice already asking where you were and if the market survey report has been typed up yet."

Mutter: "Shit." You are only on the T's: Tennessee Karma-Kola consumption per square dollar-mile of investment market. Figures for July 1980–October 1981.

Texas—Fiscal Year 1980

Texas—Fiscal Year 1981

Utah.

It is like typing a telephone directory. Get tears in your eyes.

CLIENTS TO SEE

1. Fallen in love(?) Out of control. Who is this? Who am I? And who is this wife with the skis and the nostrils and the Tylenol and does she have orgasms?
2. Reclaim yourself. Pieces have fluttered away.
3. Everything you do is a masochistic act. Why?
4. Don't you like yourself? Don't you deserve better than all of this?
5. Need: something to lift you from your boots out into the sky, something to make you like little things again, to whirl around the curves of your ears and muss up your hair and call you every single day.
6. A drug.
7. A man.
8. A religion.
9. A good job. Revise and send out resumes.

10. Remember what Mrs. Kloosterman told the class in second grade: Just be glad you have legs.

“What are you going to do for Christmas?” he says, lying supine on your couch.

“Oh. I don’t know. See my parents in New Jersey, I guess.” Pause. “Wanna come? Meet my folks?”

A kind, fatherly, indulgent smile. “Charlene,” he purrs, sitting up to pat your hand, your silly ridiculous little hand.

He gives you a pair of leather slippers. They were what you wanted.

You give him a book about cars.

“Ma, open the red one first. The other package goes with it.”

“A coffee grinder, why thank you, dear.” She kisses you wetly on the cheek, a Christmas mist in her eyes. She thinks you’re wonderful. She’s truly your greatest fan. She is aging and menopausal. She stubbornly thinks you’re an assistant department head at Karma-Kola. She wants so badly, so earnestly, to be you.

“And this bag is some exotic Colombian bean, and this is a chocolate-flavored decaf.”

Your father fidgets in the corner, looking at his watch, worrying that your mom should be checking the crown roast.

“Decaf bean,” he says. “That’s for me?”

Say: “Yeah, Dad. That’s for you.”

“Who is he?” says your mom, later, in the kitchen after you’ve washed the dishes.

“He’s a systems analyst.”

“What do they do?”

“Oh . . . they get married a lot. They’re usually always married.”

“Charlene, are you having an affair with a married man?”

“Ma, do you have to put it that way?”

“You are asking for big trouble,” she says, slowly, and resumes polishing silver with a vehement energy.

Wonder why she always polishes the silver *after* meals.

Lean against the refrigerator and play with the magnets.

Say, softly, carefully: "I know, Mother, it's not something you would do."

She looks up at you, her mouth trembling, pieces of her brown-gray hair dangling in her salty eyes, pink silverware cream caking onto her hands, onto her wedding ring. She stops, puts a spoon down, looks away and then hopelessly back at you, like a very young girl, and, shaking her head, bursts into tears.

"I missed you," he practically shouts, ebullient and adolescent, pacing about the living room with a sort of bounce, like a child who is up way past his bedtime and wants to ask a question. "What did you do at home?" He rubs your neck.

"Oh, the usual holiday stuff with my parents. On New Year's Eve I went to a disco in Morristown with my cousin Denise, but I dressed wrong. I wore the turtleneck and plaid skirt my mother gave me, because I wanted her to feel good, and my slip kept showing."

He grins and kisses your cheek, thinking this sweet.

Continue: "There were three guys, all in purple shirts and paper hats, who kept coming over and asking me to dance. I don't think they were together or brothers or anything. But I danced, and on 'New York City Girl,' that song about how jaded and competent urban women are, I went crazy dancing and my slip dropped to the floor. I tried to pick it up, but finally just had to step out of it and jam it in my purse. At the stroke of midnight, I cried."

"I'll bet you suffered terribly," he says, clasping you around the small of your back.

Say: "Yes, I did."

"I'm thinking of telling Patricia about us."

Be skeptical. Ask: "What will you say?"

He proceeds confidently: "I'll go, 'Dear, there's something I have to tell you.'"

“And she’ll look over at you from her briefcase full of memoranda and say: ‘HMMMMMM?’ ”

“And I’ll say, ‘Dear, I think I’m falling in love with another woman, and I *know* I’m having sex with her.’ ”

“And she’ll say, ‘Oh my god, what did you say?’ ”

“And I’ll say: ‘Sex.’ ”

“And she’ll start weeping inconsolably and *then* what will you do?”

There is a silence, still as the moon. He shifts his legs, seems confused. “I’ll . . . tell her I was just kidding.” He squeezes your hand.

Shave your legs in the bathroom sink. Philosophize: you are a mistress, part of a great hysterical you mean historical tradition. Wives are like cockroaches. Also part of a great historical tradition. They will survive you after a nuclear attack—they are tough and hardy and travel in packs—but right now they’re not having any fun. And when you look in the bathroom mirror, you spot them scurrying, up out of reach behind you.

An hour of gimlets after work, a quick browse through Barnes and Noble, and he looks at his watch, gives you a peck, and says: “Good night. I’ll call you soon.”

Walk out with him. Stand there, shivering, but do not pout. Say: “Call you ‘later’ would sound better than ‘soon.’ ‘Soon’ always means just the opposite.”

He smiles feebly. “I’ll phone you in a few days.”

And when he is off, hurrying up Third Avenue, look down at your feet, kick at a dirty cigarette butt, and in your best juvenile mumble, say: “Fuck you, jack.”

Some nights he says he’ll try to make it over, but there’s no guarantee. Those nights, just in case, spend two hours showering, dressing, applying makeup unrecognizably, like someone in drag, and then, as it is late, and you have to work the next day, climb onto your bed like that, wearing perfume and an embarrassing, long, flowing, lacy bathrobe that is

really not a bathrobe at all, but a “hostess loungecoat.” With the glassed candle by your bed lit and burning away, doze off and on, arranged with excruciating care on top of the covers, the window lamp on in the living room, the door unlocked for him in case he arrives in a passionate flurry, forgetting his key. Six blocks from Fourteenth Street: you are risking your life for him, spread out like a ridiculous cake on the bed, waiting with the door unlocked, thinking you hear him on the stairs, but no. You should have a corsage, you think to yourself. You should have a god-damned orchid pinned to the chest of your long flowing hostess coat, then you would be appropriately absurd. Think: What has happened to me? Why am I lying like this on top of my covers with too much Jontue and mascara and jewelry, pretending casually that this is how I always go to bed, while a pervert with six new steak knives is about to sneak through my unlocked door. Remember: at Blakely Falls High, Willis Holmes would have done anything to be with you. You don’t have to put up with this: you were second runner-up at the Junior Prom.

A truck roars by.

Some deaf and dumb kids, probably let out from a dance at the school nearby, are gathered downstairs below your window, hooting and howling, making unearthly sounds. You guess they are laughing and having fun, but they can’t hear themselves, and at night the noises are scary, animal-like.

Your clock-radio reads 1:45.

Wonder if you are getting old, desperate. Believe that you have really turned into another woman:

your maiden aunt Phyllis;

some vaporish cocktail waitress;

a glittery transvestite who has wandered, lost, up from the Village.

When seven consecutive days go by that you do not hear from him, send witty little postcards to all your friends from college. On the eighth day, when finally he calls you at the office, murmuring lascivious things in German, remain laconic. Say: “*Ja . . . nein . . . ja.*”

At lunch regard your cream of cauliflower soup with a pinched mouth and ask what on earth he and his wife *do* together. Sound irri-

tated. He shrugs and says, "Dust, eat, bicker about the shower curtain. Why do you ask?"

Say: "Gee, I don't know. What an outrageous question, huh?"

He gives you a look of sympathy that could bring a dead cat back to life. "You're upset because I didn't call you." He reaches across the table to touch your fingers. Pull your hand away. Say: "Don't flatter yourself." Look slightly off to one side. Put your hand over your eyes like you have a headache. Say: "God, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he says.

And you think: Something is backward here. Reversed. Wrong. Like the something that is wrong in "What is wrong with this picture?" in kids' magazines in dentists' offices. Toothaches. Stomachaches. God, the soup. Excuse yourself and hurry toward the women's room. Slam the stall door shut. Lean back against it. Stare into the throat of the toilet.

Hilda is worried about you and wants to fix you up with a cousin of hers from Brooklyn.

Ask wearily: "What's his name?"

She looks at you, frowning. "Mark. He's a banker. And what the hell kind of attitude is that?"

Mark orders you a beer in a Greek coffee shop near the movie theater.

"So, you're a secretary."

Squirm and quip: "More like a sedentary," and look at him in surprise and horror when he guffaws and snorts way too loudly.

Say: "Actually, what I really should have been is a dancer. Everybody has always said that."

Mark smiles. He likes the idea of you being a dancer.

Look at him coldly. Say: "No, nobody has ever said that. I just made it up."

All through the movie you forget to read the subtitles, thinking instead about whether you should sleep with Mark the banker. Glance at him out of the corner of your eye. In the dark, his profile seems important and mysterious. Sort of. He catches you looking at him and turns and winks at you. Good god. He seems to be investing something in all

of this. Bankers. Sigh. Stare straight ahead. Decide you just don't have the energy, the interest.

"I saw somebody else."

"Oh?"

"A banker. We went to a Godard movie."

"Well . . . good."

"Good?"

"I mean for you, Charlene. You should be doing things like that once in a while."

"Yeah. He's real rich."

"Did you have fun?"

"No."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"No."

He kisses you, almost gratefully, on the ear. Fidget. Twitch. Lie. Say: "I mean, yes."

He nods. Looks away. Says nothing.

Cut up an old calendar into week-long strips. Place them around your kitchen floor, a sort of bar graph on the linoleum, representing the number of weeks you have been a mistress: thirteen. Put X's through all the national holidays.

Go out for a walk in the cold. Three little girls hanging out on the stoop are laughing and calling to strange men on the street. "Hi! Hi, Mister!" Step around them. Think: They have never had orgasms.

A blonde woman in barrettes passes you in stocking feet, holding her shoes.

There are things you have to tell him.

CLIENTS TO SEE

1. This affair is demeaning.
2. Violates decency. Am I just some scampish tart, some tartish scamp?

3. No emotional support here.
4. Why do you never say "I love you" or "Stay in my arms forever my little tadpole" or "Your eyes set me on fire my sweet nubkin?"

The next time he phones, he says: "I was having a dream about you and suddenly I woke up with a jerk and felt very uneasy."

Say: "Yeah, I hate to wake up with jerks."

He laughs, smooth, beautiful, and tenor, making you feel warm inside of your bones. And it hits you; maybe it all boils down to this: people will do anything, anything, for a really nice laugh.

Don't lose your resolve. Fumble for your list. Sputter things out as convincingly as possible.

Say: "I suffer indignities at your hands. And agonies of duh feet. I don't know why I joke. I hurt."

"That is why."

"What?"

"That is why."

"But you don't really care." Wince. It sounds pitiful.

"But I do."

For some reason this leaves you dumbfounded.

He continues: "You know my situation . . . or maybe you don't." Pause. "What can I do, Charlene? Stand on my goddamned head?"

Whisper: "Please. Stand on your goddamned head."

"It is ten o'clock," he says. "I'm coming over. We need to talk."

What he has to tell you is that Patricia is not his wife. He is separated from his wife; her name is Carrie. You think of a joke you heard once: What do you call a woman who marries a man with no arms and no legs? Carrie. Patricia is the woman he lives with.

"You mean, I'm just another one of the fucking gang?"

He looks at you, puzzled. "Charlene, what I've always admired about you, right from when I first met you, is your strength, your independence."

Say: "That line is old as boots."

Tell him not to smoke in your apartment. Tell him to get out.

At first he protests. But slowly, slowly, he leaves, pulling up the collar on his expensive beige raincoat, like an old and haggard Robert Culp.

Slam the door like Bette Davis.

Love drains from you, takes with it much of your blood sugar and water weight. You are like a house slowly losing its electricity, the fans slowing, the lights dimming and flickering; the clocks stop and go and stop.

At Karma-Kola the days are peg-legged and aimless, collapsing into one another with the comic tedium of old clowns, nowhere fast.

In April you get a raise. Celebrate by taking Hilda to lunch at the Plaza.

Write for applications to graduate schools.

Send Mark the banker a birthday card.

Take long walks at night in the cold. The blonde in barrettes scuttles timelessly by you, still carrying her shoes. She has cut her hair.

He calls you occasionally at the office to ask how you are. You doodle numbers and curlicues on the corners of the Rolodex cards. Fiddle with your Phi Beta Kappa key. Stare out the window. You always, always, say: "Fine."

YOURS

MARY ROBISON

Allison struggled away from her white Renault, limping with the weight of the last of the pumpkins. She found Clark in the twilight on the twig- and leaf-littered porch, behind the house. He wore a tan wool shawl. He was moving up and back in a cushioned glider, pushed by the ball of his slippered foot.

Allison lowered a big pumpkin and let it rest on the porch floor.

Clark was much older than she—seventy-eight to Allison’s thirty-five. They had been married for four months. They were both quite tall, with long hands, and their faces looked something alike. Allison wore a natural-hair wig. It was a thick blonde hood around her face. She was dressed in bright-dyed denims today. She wore durable clothes, usually, for she volunteered afternoons at a children’s day-care center.

She put one of the smaller pumpkins on Clark’s long lap. “Now, nothing surreal,” she told him. “Carve just a *regular* face. These are for kids.”

In the foyer, on the Hepplewhite desk, Allison found the maid’s chore list, with its cross-offs, which included Clark’s supper. Allison went quickly through the day’s mail: a garish coupon packet, a flyer advertising white wines at Jamestown Liquors, November’s pay-TV program guide, and—the worst thing, the funniest—an already opened, extremely unkind letter from Clark’s married daughter, up North. “You’re an old fool,” Allison read, and “You’re being cruelly deceived.” There was a gift check for twenty-five dollars, made out to Clark, enclosed—his birthday had just passed—but it was uncashable. It was signed “Jesus H. Christ.”

Late, late into this night, Allison and Clark gutted and carved the pumpkins together, at an old table set out on the back porch. They worked over newspaper after soggy newspaper, using paring knives and spoons and a Swiss Army knife Clark liked for the exact shaping of teeth and eyes and nostrils. Clark had been a doctor—an internist—but he was also a Sunday watercolor painter. His four pumpkins were expressive and artful. Their carved features were suited to the sizes and shapes of the pumpkins. Two looked ferocious and jagged. One registered surprise. The last was serene and beaming.

Allison's four faces were less deftly drawn, with slits and areas of distortion. She had cut triangles for noses and eyes. The mouths she had made were all just wedges—two turned up and two turned down.

By one A.M., they were finished. Clark, who had bent his long torso forward to work, moved over to the glider again and looked out sleepily at nothing. All the neighbors' lights were out across the ravine. For the season and time, the Virginia night was warm. Most of the leaves had fallen and blown away already, and the trees stood unbothered. The moon was round, above them.

Allison cleaned up the mess.

"Your jack-o'-lanterns are much much better than mine," Clark said to her.

"Like hell," Allison said.

"Look at me," Clark said, and Allison did. She was holding a squishy bundle of newspapers. The papers reeked sweetly with the smell of pumpkin innards. "Yours are *far* better," he said.

"You're wrong. You'll see when they're lit," Allison said.

She went inside, came back with yellow vigil candles. It took her a while to get each candle settled into a pool of its own melted wax inside the jack-o'-lanterns, which were lined up in a row on the porch railing. Allison went along and relit each candle and fixed the pumpkin lids over the little flames. "See?" she said. They sat together a moment and looked at the orange faces.

"We're exhausted. It's good-night time," Allison said. "Don't blow out the candles. I'll put in new ones tomorrow."

In her bedroom, a few weeks earlier in her life than had been pre-

dicted, she began to die. "Don't look at me if my wig comes off," she told Clark. "Please." Her pulse cords were fluttering under his fingers. She raised her knees and kicked away the comforter. She said something to Clark about the garage being locked.

At the telephone, Clark had a clear view out back and down to the porch. He wanted to get drunk with his wife once more. He wanted to tell her, from the greater perspective he had, that to own only a little talent, like his, was an awful, plaguing thing; that being only a little special meant you expected too much, most of the time, and liked yourself too little. He wanted to assure her that she had missed nothing.

Clark was speaking into the phone now. He watched the jack-o'-lanterns. The jack-o'-lanterns watched him.

THE BAD THING

DAVID GATES

He has never hit me, and only once or twice in our two years has he raised his voice in anger. Even in bed Steven is gentle. To a fault. Why, then, am I wary of him? Obvious. Well, so if you're wary of him, what are you doing here? Also obvious. For one thing, I have his baby inside me.

Ye gods, *his* baby. I think of it that way because he and Marilyn never had children, and what other chance is he going to get? But it's not his baby, of course, nor mine. The baby is its own baby. I think of it as a girl, because the idea of a tiny man inside me is, is, is what? Repulsive, I was going to say, though sometimes I think, *A little man, yes, squeezed out into the world to do my will.* But at other times I pray, *Dear God, if You've made it a boy, go back, in Your time-scrunching omnipotence, and re-do the instant of its conception.* Not forgetting to add, *If it be Thy will.* You know, the kind of thing God does all the time, going back and changing what His will is.

So I'm trying to take it as it comes; even that seems wildly ambitious. Two days ago, after Steven had finished working and I'd come to a stopping place, we climbed the hill up behind Carl's house until we reached the power line. Steven put on his skis, I put on the snowshoes he bought me. I'm not to ski anymore, until after. Another thing I'm not to do is address Carl Porter as Carl; Steven sees it as a class thing. Slipping along by my side, he praised my walking in the snowshoes. "Big deal," I said. "You put one foot in front of the other." "Ah, but that," he said, raising his index finger, "is oftentimes the hardest lesson of all." Big joke with Steven is to intone fake profundities, raising his index finger to make sure you see he's kidding. I thought, *Right, I'm learning that. Being married to you.*

Oh, I know, bad. You should be reaching out to him.

Been tried, honey.

Like our first night in this house. We'd both learned—not from each other; we've both been around the block—that the big moments you plan never work, so we decided against the French restaurant two towns over with the forty-dollar prix fixe dinner, and went to the diner on 28. We took a booth, ordered pancakes and sausage and sat waiting for the modest magic by which the everyday becomes precious. Steven flipped page after page of jukebox selections, fingering the little metal tabs at the bottom. The country songs in green. Then he flipped back through in the other direction.

"Nothing," he said. "Zip. Unless you want to hear fucking Randy Travis."

By this I understood that I was not to want to hear Randy Travis.

I put a hand on his. "Something's worrying you," I said.

"Don't," he said, pulling his hand out from under. I saw tears come up and fill his eyes.

"What?" I said. "Talk to me."

He shook his head. "You've heard the same shit forty-eight times," he said. "Maybe the pills will help."

Forty-eight was one of his numbers I hadn't heard before. Usually they were round and overwhelming, like fifty thousand (*I've done fifty thousand of these fucking children's books*) or ten million (*Ten million fucking fax machines at fucking J&R, and I get the one that craps out*). Afterward I thought about it. Forty-eight was how old he'd be in June. When his first child would be born. Oh, but Steven was such a *complex* man; could it possibly be that simple? One thing that might help: to get my contempt under control. Since he doesn't seem to be doing much about his. Now *that* would be a mood drug I could get behind.

We moved up here for the beauty and the quiet, and so we'd each have a workroom. It's all so postindustrial: no need anymore to be bodily on Lexington Avenue from ten to six. Up here I'd be able to take my job lightly and my work seriously—as seriously as Steven takes his. But needless to say.

Yesterday we had to go to Oneonta for groceries. It had started snowing in the morning; when we got back, it was still coming down and we couldn't get up the driveway. He insisted on trying to shovel—after making three trips all the way up to the house with the stuff, which he wouldn't let me help with. I told him forget it, come inside, we'll drink tea and get snowed in. Thinking, actually, of some Rémy in the tea—what he's taking is one of the new anything-goes antidepressants—and stretching out by the pellet stove, our feet together under the shiny maroon comforter. And so on. We'll get Carl to plow us out in the morning, I said. He said I treated the locals like old family retainers. Which was so uncalled-for when for once I was trying to take some care of him. He was already pale and sweating, and his chest was heaving. I went into the bathroom and cried, then washed my face. When he came in, looking even worse, he found me sipping tea (with Rémy) and reading *Mirabella*. Or, rather, staring at the pages and feeling put-upon because now that I'd cut myself out of the loop, I would never design anything but monthly newsletters and annual reports. *Bitch*, I'm sure he thought, and clomped upstairs.

When it got dark, I opened a can of soup. Then I stopped bothering with the tea and drank myself pretty nearly to sleep. Just managed to get up the stairs. Then woke up, of course, at two in the morning, mouth dry, head killing me. I went to the bathroom to pee and get a drink of water and some aspirin, and heard the music still going in Steven's workroom—his damn Louis Armstrong—and saw a line of golden light along the bottom of his door. Inside was the Kingdom of Art, from which I'd been exiled. I crept back to bed like a dirty animal.

Sneaking around a dark house at night: just like old times.

When I was twenty-two, my boyfriend and I shared a big old farmhouse in Rhode Island with his best friend and the best friend's girlfriend, and once a week or so I would leave Dalton in bed and make my way down the creaky stairs to find Tod waiting on the sofa. He would be drunk, having got Kathleen drunk enough to put her to sleep, and not gentle with me; I would have put Dalton to sleep by fucking him as sweetly as I knew how. More sweetly than I know how anymore. But

saving my orgasm for Tod. Knowing it was of no value to him, except as proof that he could make me do it when Dalton couldn't. Though of course Dalton could. And I didn't always save it.

It started in the summer, one morning when Tod and I were alone in the house. He asked if I wanted coffee, then ran his index finger down my bare arm (me in that blue sundress with the yellow flowers, him in blue jeans and a T-shirt I couldn't imagine how he kept so white) and said, "Wouldn't it be funny if we put the horns on Dalton?" *The horns*. What more did I need to know? And yet. I heard two voices in my head, talking at me as I stood there in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room: my own voice saying *This is bad for you* and a man's voice saying *Do what I say*. I narrowed my eyes, trying to hear which was right, and I could picture myself as Tod saw me, looking intense and tempted. *This is a beautiful boy*, said another voice, a voice that wished me ill, *who knows how to touch you*.

Did I simply have bad character, or was I a strong young woman going after what she wanted and willing to pay the price? Though how strong were you really if you couldn't, finally, get it? One thing I promised myself, I would never again let myself in for this kind of humiliation. When Tod finally dumped me, I did the one bit of bitchy damage I could: I said I'd always known the real romance was between him and Dalton. I hope he still hears me saying that in his head.

It was a mistake to have shown Tod's picture to Steven. At the time, I thought I was doing it to leave nothing unshared. But actually it must've been to put him on notice: that once I had been desired by a beautiful blond boy. Tod's beauty was a means of convincing Steven that *I* was beautiful. (How fucked up is *that*?) I'm sure Steven thought it was more evidence of my bad taste, to have been attracted to the merely beautiful. As if it had never happened to him. Now, there's another thing we were never going to do: marry a man who wasn't on speaking terms with his own desires.

I woke up again at seven and came down and fixed myself a tray with coffee and a bowl of Count Chocula. Steven loves the Grand Union in Oneonta—when we lived in the city he refused to shop in supermar-

kets—and every week he selects another brand of sugared-out kiddie cereal. “I was raised on fucking puffed rice,” he said the first time he placed a box of Cap’n Crunch in the cart. “This is a quiet man’s rebellion.” I don’t generally eat this stuff, but I had to get something in my stomach immediately. I brought the tray up to my workroom and turned on the computer. Out the window, I saw a white cloud issuing from the tailpipe of Carl Porter’s empty truck, so I picked up the phone. “You didn’t need to ask, Mrs. Sturdivant,” he said. “I meant to do you first thing.” Lovely man.

Listening to his truck humming and rumbling as he plowed the driveway, I ate the cereal and looked over the pages I’d laid out yesterday, telling myself that one bowl of Count Chocula wasn’t so irresponsible; they probably spray the stuff with vitamins. And only then did it hit me what I’d done last night: got stinking drunk while four months pregnant. Four months: what did that mean in terms of how major a birth defect might be? Wouldn’t it be more major the earlier you did the bad thing? I pictured a bullet, fired at conception: deflect that bullet almost at the target and it would miss by only a little, but deflect it early on and it would veer off wide. Four months. That was less than halfway there. I slid from my chair to my knees and prayed, *Dear God, since I did it without thinking, please don’t let it count*. Just the kind of prayer God likes to hear. Oh, right, *If it be Thy will*. I listened down into my body to try to discern any damage, any change from yesterday. Nothing. Oh, God. Well, we just wouldn’t think about this. But what if Steven looked at the bottle? I remembered him saying, *I want to make a baby with you. I know you must think I’ve said everything before to somebody else, but this is a first. A first*. He actually said that.

The thing to do was to hop in the car and go buy a pint of Rémy to get the level back up—put anything else in there and Steven would instantly taste something wrong—then hide the empty. But it was twenty miles to Oneonta, the nearest liquor store classy enough to stock the stuff. And it was seven-thirty in the morning.

At nine-thirty I started down to make more coffee. Still another thing I wasn’t to do, drink more than a half cup a day, but I absolutely had to

finish the last six pages this afternoon without fail, and I had nodded out staring at the screen. I was looking at this one page, trying to care whether or not the vertical picture should be moved to the right and the pullquote brought down to compensate, and then I seemed to be at a performance of *Hamlet*, I think it was—and I suppose it's a rule with dreams that if you think it was, it *was*—and my dress was too tight on me and I wanted to go to the ladies' room and let out the waist. All pretty obvious. But before going down the stairs I stopped and eased open the bedroom door with my fingertips. Steven, in pajamas, was clutching my pillow, his mouth gaping. His hair looked damp; he must've taken a shower before coming to bed. It made me sad that I'd never known him when his hair was all black. I tried to think what *his* life must be like—a first?—but I really couldn't see that anything was so terrible. I'd never been able to take seriously enough the Central Tragedy, which was that he'd never become, I don't know, Jackson Pollock or whoever he'd wanted to be when he was eighteen.

Back in my workroom, I drank the fresh coffee and stared at that page. This was a simple decision. Which I still couldn't make. I got up again and went down the hall to Steven's workroom. So cold when I opened the door: the window wide open. He'd finished another illustration. How could I have thought one of my little moods would slow the march of his work? Last night's production was a peasant family standing by a cottage. The cover from *The Forest Is Crying* was sandwiched in my cookbook stand, and he'd spattered paint on the Plexiglas. So that was where he'd gotten the woman peasant's colorful costume; the man peasant and the little boy he'd put in brown shirts and trousers and clumpy boots. There was something familiar about the landscape, too. Then I spotted the Edward Hopper book on the floor. Aha: the thatched-roof cottage was that Mobil station, and the peasant family stood in place of the round-headed gas pumps. He'd done it well, what else was new. I'd said my piece about this new phase when he showed me the first one, for which he'd used a Currier & Ives print of a man knife-fighting a rearing grizzly. "Oh, please," he said. "This is an *homage*." Learn a new word, Paula. Then, probably because he realized he was being a pompous ass, he went into one of his pompous-ass parodies.

"Think of this bear," he said, "not as a bear, but as Old Man Depression. The gallant mountain man? Yours truly." He inclined his head. "And behind the tree here"—he pointed to a second man, who was aiming a gun at the bear—"Dr. Seibert and his magic bullet." He'd only been taking the pills for a couple of days at this point. He gave his snorting laugh, the one that means *I hate myself*.

Even with this fresh cold air, I smelled cigarette smoke. In the wastebasket, under a crumpled page of a sketch pad, I found butts, ashes and burned-out matches. I counted the butts. Sixteen. So he was back at it with a vengeance. How had I not picked up the smell off him? Ah: wet hair.

Paula Wilson-Sturdivant, girl detective.

It's one of my amusements up here. The other morning I was unpacking a box of PAPERS & MISC when I looked out the window and saw him in the backyard by the old oil drum where the people who'd lived here had burned their trash. Steven, who puts the caps from toothpaste tubes in with the number-two plastics to be recycled—I swear—was touching a match to a big sheet of paper and thrusting it from him as flames leaped up. "Just a particularly lousy piece of work," he said when he came in. I said the obvious: if it had bothered him enough to burn it, it must've had something he could use. He asked if I was reverting to hippiedom, saying it in a way I was supposed to think was only kidding.

So when he left to go get the mail, I went out to the barrel. But he'd even smashed up the ashes.

Around one this afternoon, I heard Steven go downstairs. The upstairs bathroom is right over the kitchen, and there's a grate in the floor for heat to come up. I tiptoed into the bathroom and knelt to watch. I could see a corner of the stove and most of the sink, where I'd put the filter basket with soiled filter and spent coffee grounds still in it. I saw him pick it up; his shoulders rose and fell, a martyr's sigh.

I printed out my pages and went downstairs. He was lying on the sofa reading *The Pickwick Papers*. The last time he went on one of his reading binges, it lasted for over a month. This was back in the city. He got

through seven Dickens novels and blew off an album cover that would have paid him three thousand dollars. He told them he'd been mugged and his arm was in a cast. "But what if you run into one of them?" I'd said. He'd said, "I don't plan to be going out."

"Good morning," I said. I didn't mean it as a bitchy way of saying it was already afternoon; it just came out. "Listen, I have to run over to Oneonta to the stationery store. You need anything from the outside world?"

"Am I not invited?" he said.

"Of course," I said. "Sure. You just looked so comfortable." How could I do what I needed to do at the liquor store with him along?

"The master of illusion," he said.

"How's the book?"

He shrugged. "Reads about the same as last time."

"No, I mean the wolf book." The children's book he's working on is about a lost wolf cub, which is adopted by a peasant family but finally returns to the forest to be with its own kind. The crap he's handed is not his fault.

"Oh, the *book*," he said. "Why didn't you say so?" This, I guessed, was meant as a lighthearted peace overture. "Good," he said. "Rockin' right along."

I tried to think of a delicate way to find out if he was on the verge of another Dickens thing. Finally I said, "When do they want them by?"

"What's today?"

"Thursday."

"Thursday," he said. "So, a week from tomorrow. Not a problem. Barring a sudden coffee shortage."

What about a cigarette shortage? I thought. He'd gone through nearly a pack last night. How could he be lying there not jumping out of his skin? Why would he want to come with me to Oneonta instead of trying to hustle me out of here so he could smoke? Then I got it. He must have run out, and at some point he would excuse himself to do an "errand." With any luck, he'd take long enough for me to get to the liquor store. But wait: if he hustled me out of here, he could just walk down to Webster's. I didn't get it.

"I was looking through this," he said, "to see if there was anything in the Seymour stuff I could use. I always thought Phiz was way over-rated, and I sort of wanted to give old Seymour a tip of the Hatlo hat. You know the story, right?"

"What story?" I said, obediently.

"Okay, Seymour was the first illustrator on the book—see, Dickens was just this young guy they hired to crank out text. But in the middle of the thing Seymour kills himself, and they got some bozo to fill in for a couple of weeks or whatever and then they found Phiz. Look at this, this is the last thing Seymour did."

It was an ugly picture of a dying man on a bed.

"Why did he kill himself?" I said.

"Got *me*," he said. "I know Dickens sort of ran roughshod over him, which I guess didn't help matters. But I think it was just, you know, his life."

He got up and located his boots, his checkbook, the car keys, his red plaid hat. "Carl plow the driveway?" he said, peering out the kitchen window as he zipped up his red plaid jacket over his down vest. "Did a great job." As we walked out the door, he handed me the keys.

In Oneonta, he came into the stationery store with me; while I bought a ream of paper I didn't need, he picked out a half-dozen pen tips. Then he wanted to go have rice pudding at the luncheonette, where he got quarters for the jukebox and played Randy Travis singing the forever-and-ever song. How could he bear the irony? How could he put *me* through it? I watched his hand, the one with the ring, beat time on the Formica. He never announced he had an errand; I tried to think how to manage a run to the liquor store, but it couldn't be done. On the way back out of town we hit the Grand Union, where I bought stuff for Chicken in a Bread Loaf, and craftily omitted the dried mint.

When we got home, he kissed me—on the lips, warm—and went up to work. He hadn't had a cigarette, apparently, since sometime last night. If he was a man who could pick up a thing and then just drop it, where did that leave me? Thinking about Marilyn, I suppose. He was married to her for fifteen years, then dumped her because she got old. (He says that's not what happened.) She was only forty-two. I

took the pad from next to the phone and figured it out. Forty-two minus twenty-nine: I would be forty-two in thirteen years. In the same thirteen years, he would be—forty-seven plus thirteen—he would be sixty. Past the point where he could get another twenty-nine-year-old, unless she was supremely stupid, and probably fat as well. Not the kind of security one might desire, but nevertheless. I put the pad back, leaving the sheet with my calculations. On the off chance he might ask what they were.

I waited half an hour (did dishes, cleaned the top of the stove, scrubbed the downstairs toilet, put the dishes away, scoured pot marks out of the kitchen sink), then went up and knocked on his door. Loud saxophone jazz. He called, “Yo.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said to his door. “I have to go back to Grand Union. I forgot the stupid mint for the chicken.”

He opened the door. No smell of smoke. “You forgot *what*?”

“Mint,” I said. “They call for mint.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake. Don’t they carry mint at Webster’s?”

“I doubt it,” I said. I’d forgotten about goddamn Webster’s. Actually they were pretty well stocked if you didn’t mind paying their prices.

“Well, hell,” he said, “just leave it out. You don’t want to go all the way back to Oneonta. How much do they call for?”

“Tablespoon,” I said. It was a teaspoon.

“Bag it,” he said. “It’ll be fine.”

“It really won’t,” I said. “It’s going to taste blah.”

He sighed. “Christ. Well, look. Why don’t you just fix something else? Roast the chicken like you would anyway, and we’ll eat the bread as *bread*, you know?”

“But you like the other so much,” I said, feeling vile.

“Paula,” he said. “It’s truly decadent to drive forty miles round trip for a tablespoon of mint, for Christ’s sake. You’re putting wear and tear on the car, you’re burning up fossil fuels . . .”

I tried to think: if my motives had been pure, would I be justified in thinking he was being a prick? And: would it seem more suspicious to fight him on this or to acquiesce? More suspicious to fight, I decided.

"I don't know," I said, "I guess you're right. Look, what I'll do is, I'll run down to Webster's and if they *don't* have mint I'll figure out something else for dinner, okay? You sure you won't be disappointed?"

"*Au contraire*. I will admire your resourcefulness in the face of domestic crisis." He reached around and patted my ass.

I threw my sketchbook in the backseat—that would be my alibi—and drove to Webster's, where I bought a jar of dried mint and a pack of Care Free peppermint gum. I'd chewed all five sticks by the time I got to the liquor store in Oneonta. They didn't have pints of Rémy, so I had to buy the next size up, which I really couldn't afford. Then on the way back I remembered: fossil fuels. Steven wasn't so anal that he'd know the odometer reading, but he might know how much gas there was. I calculated forty miles at, say, twenty-five miles per gallon. I stopped at Cumberland Farms and put in two dollars' worth. Back at the house, just in case, I pushed the little button on the trip odometer to make all zeroes come up. Let him wonder.

I was smart to leave the bottle in the car: Steven stood there in the kitchen, the orange juice carton (no glass) in his hand. "Where the hell have you been?" he said, putting the carton back in the refrigerator. "Alice Porter called and I got stuck on the phone for an hour." An hour meant five minutes.

"So you shouldn't have picked it up," I said. "Why the good Lord made answering machines."

"I was expecting it to be Martin," he said. "Our auteur has made still more changes in her text, and he had to be sure they didn't affect the pictures. This woman thinks she's Flaubert. I mean, this has been going on and on and on. I told Martin, this is the end of it. *Fini*."

"Are they going to make you change anything?" I said.

"No, it's just stuff like where she had the wolf with his tail 'held high,' it's now 'at a jaunty angle.' *Jaunty*, for Christ's sake. I mean, this is what my life has come down to, 'a jaunty angle.' I told him, I said, 'Look, the picture's done, he's got his tail in the fucking air, and if the goddamn angle isn't *jaunty* enough, they can shove it.' "

"Good for you," I said.

"So where've you been?" he said. "You didn't go all the way back there, did you?"

"No, you were right, they had it at Webster's. I went up to Randolph Pond and tried to do some sketching." I held up my sketch pad as evidence.

"Good for *you*," he said. "You haven't sketched for a long time. Let's see."

I shook my head. "They suck," I said. I got a book of matches out of the drawer. "I'm going to use the Steven Sturdivant method. Burn it before it gets out of hand."

"You're kidding, I hope. You know, you were absolutely on the money with what you said the other day. How does that thing go? 'The man of genius makes no errors'?"

"I'm not a man," I said, "and I'm not of genius. Be back in a second."

"Come on, now," he said, grabbing for the pad. "Let the old doctor have a gander."

"No, Steven." I twisted away. "I'm serious." If he'd gotten the pad away from me, he would've seen that the last sketch in the book was of a little girl at Jones Beach, with pail and shovel. But the word *serious* seemed to back him off. I slammed the door behind me, to lend myself still more power.

Standing over the rusty oil drum, I ripped out two blank pages and set fire to them. Then I ripped out the little girl and burned her up, too. When I came back into the kitchen, I heard the toilet flush upstairs. I listened to Steven's footsteps going back to his workroom, then went out and brought the new bottle in. I brought the level in the old bottle up to something like what I guessed it had been—apparently I'd hit it much harder last night than I remembered—took a slug of what was left for old times' sake and poured the rest into the sink, running hot water to chase it down. I put the empty bottle back in the paper bag, stuffed it into a milk carton and tucked it away in the bottom of the garbage. Okay: crisis averted. I lit the oven, unwrapped the chicken, sawed the top off the bread loaf with the good knife from Broadway Panhandler, and began clawing out the soft inside.

* * *

"I have a confession to make," he said as I lit the candles. "I smoked most of a pack of cigarettes last night."

"Steven," I said. "You *didn't*."

"I decided I'm not going to do it anymore," he said.

"How come you did it at all?"

"Well, we had that—and believe me, I'm not blaming you—but we had that unpleasantness yesterday that never really got resolved, and I felt like I was under the gun with those pictures, which it turns out I'm not, I mean I'm actually in very good shape with them. I think all it really was, I was just looking for an excuse to do it. So I did it."

"I don't know what to say. I'm sorry if I contributed." I began cutting the stuffed bread loaf into inch-thick slices.

He shook his head. "Not your responsibility. It was my choice."

"And you had them around," I said.

"Yeah. I had them around." He did his snorting laugh. "But I think this has taught me something. I mean, if *you* weren't reason enough, there's Trigger Junior to think of." Trigger Junior was his provisional name for the baby.

"What about you?" I said. "Aren't you reason enough?"

"Well, I never *have* been," he said. "Maybe that's changing. Did I tell you? I think these pills might be starting to do something. This morning I woke up and I felt just sort of—I don't know. Not heavy of heart for a change. I can't really describe it. But I definitely didn't want a cigarette, despite putting all that nicotine into my system last night. Which I find almost scary."

"But that's wonderful," I said. I laid a slice on his plate and a slice on mine.

"God, that looks splendid," he said. "At any rate. Full disclosure." He cut off a corner and speared it with his fork. "I'm assuming we still care about that."

"I think we do." What else was I to say?

"Good." He put the corner in his mouth. "Mmm. Surpassed yourself."

"I'm glad you like it," I said, not meaning it to sound that dismal.

"In the interest of even fuller disclosure," he said, "I must further confess to you that I nipped a bit at the cognac while you were out this afternoon. I don't actually know why. Except that it was like, I really wasn't craving a cigarette and *that* freaked me out. It was like nothing was wrong, you know? And that made me suspicious that something was *really* wrong that I didn't even dare bring to consciousness, so I thought I'd better drink to sort of preempt it. Does that make any sense at all?"

"Absolutely," I said. I wasn't paying attention. How could he not have noticed that so much was gone out of that goddamn bottle? And now what? Try to keep him out of the kitchen and pour out some of what you just poured in?

We ate.

He took a second slice.

Half of a third.

Now he was talking about names for the baby. Lately he'd been liking Margaret. Did I know that was the same as Pearl?

"The same in what sense?" I said, getting up to clear the table.

"You know, etymologically," he said. He stood up too, and reached for the platter with the remains of the stuffed bread loaf.

"Sit," I said. "I'll take care of it. I think you've had a hard day."

"Only in my head." He carried the platter and the salad bowl out to the kitchen; I set the plates and glasses on the counter next to the sink. "Tinfoil be the best thing?" he said, pulling open the drawer.

"Why don't you just let me take *care* of it?" I said. I snatched the foil out of his hands. "Just go and sit and relax. Actually, you know what would be lovely? If you would put on some music, I'll take care of this stuff and then bring our desserts out to the living room. How would that be?"

"Now you're talkin'," he said. He took down a brandy snifter.

"What are you doing?" I said. "I'll get that for you. Go and sit *down*."

"I can get it." He opened the cupboard door, took out the bottle of Rémy, looked at it and said, "What the *hell*?"

He looked at me. Then I saw his eyes go down to my hands and get

big. I looked down, too. I was sawing the saw thing on the aluminum-foil box across the thumbprint part of my thumb. There was blood on the front of me.

"You've been drinking," he said.

"Obviously," I said. I couldn't feel the pain yet. I had a picture in my head of a bad person in shame.

"You're pregnant and you're drunk?" he said. "Don't you know what that can do? Do you *care*? How could you *do* it? What the hell is going on in your mind?"

"I'm *not* drunk," I said.

"You're a whore," he said. "Where did you go this afternoon?"

I wasn't angry. Or frightened, really, even though I cringed to appease him. He would never be a hitter. That fist he was raising at me would wham into the cupboard door, hurting only himself. I saw it all happening, then it really did happen. But I didn't understand the whole thing. Why was he confusing the drinking with the other? Then I got it. Obvious. It was all mixed up for him, all the same thing: the drinking, the other, anything that could make a woman free.

FIRST LOVE

ISAAC BABEL

When I was ten years old I fell in love with a woman called Galina Apollonovna. Her last name was Rubtsova. Her husband, an officer, went off to the Japanese war and returned in the October of 1905. He brought many trunks back with him. These trunks contained Chinese objects: screens, precious weapons, thirty *poods* in all. Kuzma told us that Rubtsov had bought these objects with the money he had made in military service in the directorate of the Engineering Corps of the Manchurian Army. Not only Kuzma, but other people said the same thing. People found it hard not to gossip about the Rubtsovs, for the Rubtsovs were happy. Their house was adjacent to our property, their glass veranda usurped a part of our land, but Father had not quarrelled with them on that account. Rubtsov, the tax assessor, had a reputation in our town as a fair man who maintained friendly relations with Jews. And when the officer, the old man's son, arrived back from the Japanese war, we all saw how well and happily they settled down together. Galina Apollonovna held her husband's hands for whole days on end. She could not take her eyes off him, because she had not seen her husband for one and a half years, but I felt horror at her gaze, turned away and trembled. In her exultant eyes I saw the wonderful, shameful life of all people upon earth, I wanted to fall asleep in an extraordinary slumber, in order to forget about that life that exceeded all my dreams. Galina Apollonovna used to stroll about the rooms with her hair down, wearing red shoes and a Chinese peignoir. Under the lace of her low-cut chemise one could see the deepening and beginning of her white, swelling, downwards-crushed breasts, and on her robe there were embroidered pink silk dragons, birds, hollow trees.

All day she lounged about with a vacant smile on her moist lips, bumping into the trunks that had not yet been unpacked and the gymnastic rope ladders that were littered about the floor. If she had bruised herself, she would lift her peignoir above her knees and say to her husband:

‘Give baby a kiss . . .’

And the officer, flexing his long legs in their narrow dragoon’s trousers, their spurs, their close-fitting, kidskin boots, would get down on the dirty floor and, smiling, moving his legs and crawling across on his knees, kiss the hurt place, the place where there was a swollen crease from the garter. I saw those kisses from my window. They caused me suffering. Unbridled fantasies tormented me, but this is not worth talking about, for the love and jealousy of ten-year-old boys are in every respect similar to the love and jealousy of grown men, except that in boys these feelings are more secret, more exalted, more ardent. For two weeks I did not go to the window and avoided Galina until a chance incident brought us together. This chance incident was the anti-Jewish pogrom that in 1905 broke out in Nikolayev and other towns within the Jewish pale. Crowds of hired murderers ransacked my father’s shop and killed my Grand-uncle Shoyl. All this happened in my absence, on the sad morning when I was buying doves from Ivan Nikodimych the hunter. For five years out of the ten I had lived, I had dreamed about doves with all the power of my soul, and then, when I had bought them, Makarenko the cripple had smashed the doves on my temple. Then Kuzma took me to the Rubtsovs. On the gate of the Rubtsovs’ house a cross had been drawn in chalk, they were left alone, they hid my parents in their house. Kuzma took me to the glass veranda. There in the green rotunda sat Mother and Galina.

‘We must wash,’ said Galina, ‘we must wash, little rabbi . . . Our whole face is covered in feathers, and the feathers have blood on them . . .’

She embraced me and led me along a passage that had a sharp odour. My head lay on Galina’s hip, her hip moved and breathed. We arrived at the kitchen, and Rubtsova put me under the tap. A tall goose was simmering on a tiled stove, gleaming kitchen utensils hung along the

walls, and beside the utensils, in the cook's corner, hung Tsar Nicholas, adorned with paper flowers. Galina washed off the remains of the dove that had dried on my cheeks.

'You shall be a bridegroom, my little snub-nose,' she said, kissing me on the lips with her pouting mouth and looking round.

'Little rabbi,' she whispered suddenly, 'look, your papa is upset just now, he walks about the streets all day doing nothing. Why don't you call your papa home . . . ?'

And through the window I saw the deserted street with an enormous sky above it and my red-haired father walking along the roadway. He had no hat covering his lightly ruffled red hair; his cotton shirt-front was turned askew and fastened by some button or other, but not the one it ought to have been fastened by. Vlasov, an emaciated workman in wadded soldier's rags, was following my father relentlessly.

'Babel,' he was saying in a hoarse, earnest voice, touching my father affectionately with both hands, 'we don't need freedom so that the Yids can be free to haggle . . . Give light to the life of a working man for his labour, for this terrible great labour . . . Give it to him, friend, do you hear, give it to him . . .'

The workman was begging Father for something and touching him; flashes of pure, drunken inspiration alternated in his face with dejection and sleepiness.

'Our lives ought to be like those of the Milk-drinkers,' he muttered, tottering on his unsteady legs, 'our lives ought to be like the Milk-drinkers', only without that Old Believers' God. It's the Jews who profit from him, no one else . . .'

And Vlasov, with wild despair, began to shout about the Old Believers' God, who took pity only on the Jews. Vlasov cried out, stumbled and tried to catch up with his unknown God, but at that moment a Cos-sack mounted patrol crossed his path. An officer in trousers with stripes down the seams and a silver parade belt rode at the head of the detachment, a tall peaked cap on his head. The officer rode slowly and without looking to either side. He rode as though he were in a ravine, where one can only look ahead.

'Captain,' whispered Father, when the Cossack drew level with him, 'captain,' said Father, gripping his head, and he got down on his knees in the mud.

'What can I do for you?' replied the officer, looking ahead of him as before, and he brought his hand in its lemon suede glove up to his peaked cap.

Ahead, on the corner of Rybnaya Street, ruffians were smashing our shop and throwing out boxes of nails, the machines and the new portrait of me in school uniform.

'There,' said Father without getting up off his knees, 'they are smashing the things that are vital to me, captain, and why . . .'

'Yes, sir!' the officer muttered, put his lemon glove to his cap and touched the reins, but his horse did not move. Father crawled in front of it on his knees, rubbing against its short, good-natured, slightly ruffled legs and its thick, patient, hairy muzzle.

'Yes, sir!' repeated the captain; he jerked the reins and rode away, the Cossacks moving off after him. They sat dispassionately in their high saddles, they rode through their imaginary ravine and disappeared from view at the turning into Sobornaya Street.

Then Galina again pushed me to the window.

'Call your papa home,' she said, 'he hasn't had anything to eat since early morning.'

And I stuck my head out of the window.

'Papa,' I said.

Father turned round when he heard my voice.

'My little son,' he mouthed with inexpressible tenderness, and began to tremble with love for me.

And together we went to the Rubtsovs' veranda, where Mother lay in the green rotunda. Beside her bed lay dumbbells and gymnastic equipment.

'Lousy copecks,' Mother said to us in greeting, 'human life and children and our unlucky fortune—you gave them everything . . . Lousy copecks,' she shouted in a deep, hoarse voice that was not her own, jerked on the bed and grew quiet.

And then, in the silence, I hiccupped. I stood by the wall with my cap pulled down over my eyes and could not stop hiccupping.

'For shame, my little snub-nose.' Galina smiled with her disdainful smile and flicked me with her stiff peignoir. She walked over to the window in her red shoes and began to hang Chinese curtains on the unusual window ledge. Her exposed arms drowned in the silk, the living tress of her hair moved on her hip and I looked at her with rapture.

A bookish, nervous boy, I looked at her as if she were a remote stage lit by many lights. And at the same time I imagined I was Miron, the son of the charcoal-dealer who traded on our corner. I imagined myself in the Jewish Self-Defence League and there I am, like Miron, walking in tattered shoes that are tied with string. On my shoulder, on a green cord, hangs a worthless rifle; I am kneeling by an old wooden fence, shooting back at the murderers. Behind my fence stretches a vacant lot, and in it there are piles of dusty charcoal. The useless rifle shoots badly, the assassins in beards, with white teeth, are coming closer and closer to me; I experience a proud sense of imminent death and see, high up, in the blueness of the world, Galina. I see an embrasure cut in the wall of a gigantic house that is built of myriads of bricks. This purple house defies the lane in which the grey earth has been badly flattened; at its topmost embrasure stands Galina, flushed with a merciless winter gaiety, like a rich girl at a skating rink. With her disdainful smile she is smiling from the inaccessible window; her officer husband, half-dressed, is standing behind her, kissing her on the neck . . .

As I tried to stop hiccupping I imagined all this so as to love Rubtsova more bitterly, more ardently, more hopelessly, and, perhaps, because the bounds of sorrow are not great for one who is ten years old. The foolish dreams helped me to forget the doves and the death of Shoyl, I might even have forgotten about these murders had not Kuzma come on to the veranda at that moment with that terrible Jew Aba.

It was dusk when they arrived. On the veranda burned a meagre lamp, somehow lopsided at one end, a blinking lamp, the spasmodic travelling companion of misfortunes.

'I've got grandad all dressed up nice,' said Kuzma, as he came in, 'he

lies there very handsome now. And look, I've brought someone from the synagogue, let him say something over the old man . . .'

And Kuzma pointed to the bored beadle, Aba.

'Let him whimper for a bit,' said the yardkeeper, amicably. 'If the beadle stuffs his gut, he will bother God all night . . .'

He stood on the threshold—Kuzma—with his good-natured, broken nose turned in all directions, and was about to describe with as much emotion as possible how he had bound the dead man's jaws, but Father interrupted the old man:

'If you please, Reb Aba,' said Father, 'say a prayer or two over the deceased. I will pay you . . .'

'But I fear you will not pay,' Aba replied in a bored voice, putting his bearded, fastidious face on the tablecloth, 'I fear you will take my money and go away with it to Argentina, to Buenos Aires, and open there a wholesale business with my money . . . A wholesale business,' said Aba, giving his contemptuous lips a chew and pulling towards him the *Son of the Fatherland* newspaper that lay on the table. In this newspaper there was a report about the tsar's manifesto of 17 October and about freedom.

' . . . Citizens of Free Russia,' Aba spelled out, chewing his beard which he had stuffed into his mouth, 'citizens of Free Russia, a bright Sunday of Christ's Resurrection to you . . .'

The newspaper was sideways before the old beadle, swaying: he read it sleepily, singsong-fashion, and pronouncing the Russian words he did not know with extraordinary stresses. Aba's stresses were like the indistinct speech of a Negro who has just arrived in a Russian port from his native land. They made even my mother laugh.

'I am committing a sin,' she cried, leaning out from the rotunda. 'I am laughing, Aba . . . Say, better, how do you live and how is your family?'

'Ask me about something else,' Aba muttered, without releasing his beard from his teeth, and continuing to read the newspaper.

'Ask him about something else,' Father said after Aba, and he went out into the middle of the room. His eyes, smiling at us through tears, suddenly turned in their orbits and fixed themselves on a point that was visible to no one else.

‘Oy, Shoyl,’ Father articulated in a level, false, preparatory voice, ‘oy, Shoyl, dear man . . .’

Father’s face, which had tightened into a spasm, was rent by exultation, and he was preparing to bawl as Jewish widows bawl at funerals or like old women in Morocco, old women who have landed in misfortune. We saw that he was going to bawl horribly, and Mother gave us advance warning.

‘Manus,’ she cried, growing instantly distraught, and beginning to tear at her husband’s breast, ‘look how our child suffers. Why do you not hear his little hiccups, why is this, Manus?’

And Father fell silent. His dying eyes were surrounded by tears.

‘Rakhil,’ he said fearfully, ‘I cannot tell you, Rakhil, how sad I am about Shoyl . . .’

He went into the kitchen and returned from it with a glass of water.

‘Drink, *artiste*,’ said Aba, coming over to me, ‘drink this water, which will help you just as a censer helps a dead man . . .’

And, true enough, the water did not help me. I hiccupped all the more fiercely. A snarl escaped from my breast. A swelling, pleasant to the touch, rose up on my throat. The swelling breathed, filled out, covered my gullet and tumbled out of my collar. Within it bubbled my lacerated breath. It bubbled like boiling water. And when towards night I was no longer the lop-eared boy I had been throughout all of my previous life, and became a writhing ball, rolling in my own green vomit, Mother, wrapping herself in her shawl and gown, taller and more shapely, approached the rigid Rubtsova.

‘Dear Galina,’ said Mother in a loud, singing voice, ‘how we are troubling you and dear Nadezhda Ivanovna, and all your family . . . how ashamed I am, dear Galina . . .’

With flaming cheeks Mother pushed Galina towards the door, then she rushed up to me and stuffed her shawl into my mouth to suppress my groans.

‘Be brave, dear son,’ she whispered, ‘be brave, my poor Babel, be brave for Mama . . .’

But even if I had been able to put up with it, I would not have done so, because I no longer had any feeling of shame. I tossed about on the

bed and, falling to the floor, did not take my eyes off Galina. Fear was shaking the woman and making her writhe; I snarled in her face, so as to prolong my power over her; I snarled in triumph, in exhaustion, with the ultimate exertions of love.

Thus did my illness begin. I was ten at the time. In the morning I was taken to see the doctor. The pogrom continued, but we were left alone. The doctor, a fat man, found that I had a nervous illness.

‘This illness,’ he said, ‘occurs only in Jews and among Jews it occurs only in women.’

So the doctor was surprised to find I had such a strange illness. He told us to go to Odessa and the professors as soon as possible, and there await the warm weather and the sea bathing.

And so we did. A few days later I travelled with Mother to Odessa to stay with Grandfather Levi-Itskhok and Uncle Simon. We sailed in the morning by steamer, and by midday the brown waters of the Bug gave way to the heavy green swell of the sea. Before me opened life in the home of crazy Uncle Levi-Itskhok, and I said farewell for ever to Nikolayev, where ten years of my childhood had passed. And now, when I remember those sad years, I find in them the beginning of the ailments that torment me, and the causes of my premature and dreadful decline.

TONKA

ROBERT MUSIL

I

At a hedge. A bird was singing. And then the sun was somewhere down behind the bushes. The bird stopped singing. It was evening, and the peasant girls were coming across the fields, singing. What little things! Is it petty if such little things cling to a person? Like burrs? That was Tonka. Infinity sometimes flows in drips and drops.

And the horse was part of it too, the roan that he had tied to a willow. It was during his year of military service. It was no mere chance that it was in that year, for there is no other time of life when a man is so deprived of himself and his own works, and an alien force strips everything from his bones. One is more vulnerable at this time than at any other.

But had it really been like that at all? No, that was only what he had worked it up into later. That was the fairy-tale, and he could no longer tell the difference. In fact, of course, she had been living with her aunt at the time when he got to know her. And Cousin Julie sometimes came visiting. That was how it had been. He remembered being disconcerted by their sitting down at the same table with Cousin Julie over a cup of coffee, for she was, after all, a disgrace to the family. It was notorious that one could strike up a conversation with Cousin Julie and take her back to one's lodgings that same evening; she would also go to the bawdy-houses whenever she was wanted. She had no other source of income. Still, she was a relative, after all, even if one didn't approve of the life she led; and even if she was a light woman, one couldn't very well refuse to let her sit down at the table with one. Anyway, she didn't

come very often. A man might have made a row about it, for a man reads the newspaper or belongs to some association with definite aims and is always throwing his weight about, but Auntie merely made a few cutting remarks after Julie had gone, and let it go at that. So long as she was there, they couldn't help laughing at her jokes, for she had a quick tongue and always knew more about what was going on in town than anyone else. So, even if they disapproved of her, there was no unbridgeable gap between them; they had something in common.

The women from the jail were another example of the same thing. Most of them were prostitutes too, and not long afterwards the jail itself had to be moved to another district because so many of them became pregnant while serving their sentence, carrying mortar on the building sites where male convicts worked as bricklayers. Now, these women were also hired out to do housework. For instance, they were very good at laundering, and they were very much sought after by people in modest circumstances, because they were cheap. Tonka's grandmother also had one in on washing-day; she would be given a cup of coffee and a bun, and since one was sharing the work with her it was all right to share breakfast with her too—there was no harm in that. At midday someone had to see her back to the jail, that was the regulation, and when Tonka was a little girl, she was generally the one who had to do it. She would walk along with the woman, chatting away happily, not in the least ashamed of being seen in that company, although these women wore grey prison uniform and white kerchiefs that made them easily recognisable. Innocence one might call it: a young life in all its innocence pathetically exposed to influences that were bound to coarsen it. But later on, when the sixteen-year-old Tonka was still unembarrassed, gossiping with Cousin Julie, could one say that this was still all innocence, or was it that her sensibilities were blunted? Even if no blame attached to her, how revealing it was!

The house must also be mentioned. With its five windows looking on to the street, it was a survival between towering new buildings that had shot up around it. It was in the back premises that Tonka lived with her aunt, who was actually her much older cousin, and her aunt's little son, the illegitimate offspring of a relationship that she had regarded as

permanent, and a grandmother who was not really the grandmother but the grandmother's sister. In earlier days there had also been a brother of her dead mother's living there, but he too had died young. All of them lived together in one room and a kitchen, while the genteel curtains of the five front windows concealed an establishment of ill repute where lower-middle-class housewives of easy morals, as well as professionals, were brought together with men. This was something that the family tacitly ignored, and since they wanted no trouble with the procuress they even passed the time of day with her. She was a fat woman, very set on respectability. She had a daughter of the same age as Tonka, whom she sent to a good school; she had her taught the piano and French, bought her pretty clothes, and took care to keep her well away from the business. She was a softhearted creature, which made it easier for her to follow the trade she did, for she knew it was shameful. In earlier times Tonka had now and then been allowed to play with this daughter, and so had found her way into the front part of the house, at hours when it was empty, and to her the rooms seemed enormous, leaving her with an impression of grandeur and refinement that was only reduced to proper proportions after he came on the scene.

Tonka was not her real name. At her baptism she had been given the German name Antonie, and Tonka was the abbreviated form of the Czech diminutive Toninka. The inhabitants of those back streets talked a queer mixture of the two languages.

But where do such thoughts lead? There it was, she had been standing by a hedge that time, in front of the dark open doorway of a cottage, the first in the village as one came out from town. She was wearing laced boots, red stockings, and a gaily-coloured, stiff, full skirt, and as she talked she seemed to be gazing at the moon, which hung pale over the corn stooks. She was at once pert and shy, and laughed a lot, as though she felt protected by the moon. And the wind blew across the stubble fields as if it were cooling a plate of soup. Riding home, he had said laughingly to his comrade-in-arms, young Baron Mordansky: "You know, I shouldn't at all mind having an affair with a girl like that, only it's too dangerous for my liking. You'd have to promise to make up a threesome, to keep me from going sentimental." And Mordansky, who

had done a spell as a trainee in his uncle's sugar-mill, had thereupon told him about how, when the time came round for digging the beets, hundreds of such peasant girls laboured in the fields belonging to the mill, and it was said they were as submissive as black slaves to the supervisors and their assistants. And once, he remembered quite distinctly, he had cut short a similar conversation with Mordansky because it was an affront to his feelings. Yet it had not been at that time, he knew—what was now trying to impose itself on him as a memory was really something else, the tangle of thorns that had later grown inside his head.

In reality it was in the Ring that he had first seen her, in that main street with the stone arcades where the officers and the gentlemen who worked in the government offices stood chatting at corners, the students and young business men strolled up and down, and the girls wandered along in twos and threes, arm in arm, after the shops closed, or the more curious of them even during the lunch-hour. Sometimes a well-known local lawyer would make his way slowly through the crowd, lifting his hat to acquaintances, or a local deputy, or, say, a respected industrialist; and there were even ladies to be seen, on their way home after shopping. There her glance had suddenly crossed with his, a merry glance, lasting only for the briefest moment—like a ball accidentally landing in a passer-by's face. The next instant she had looked away, with a feigned air of innocence. He had turned round quickly, supposing that now the usual giggling would follow, but Tonka was walking on, looking straight ahead of her, rather tensely. She was with two other girls, and taller than either of them. She was not beautiful, but her face had a clear-cut, definite quality. There was nothing in it of that petty, cunningly feminine look which seems to result from the face as a whole; in this face mouth, nose, and eyes were each something clearly in their own right and could stand up to being contemplated separately, delighting the beholder simply by their candour and the freshness irradiating the whole face. It was odd that so gay a glance should stick fast like a barbed arrow, and she herself seemed to have hurt herself with it.

So much was now clear. Well, then, at that time she had been working in the draper's shop. It was a large shop, employing a great many girls to handle the stock. Her job was to look after the rolls of material

and get the right one down when it was asked for, and the palms of her hands were always slightly moist because of the irritation from the fine hairs of the cloth. There was nothing dream-like about that, and her face was guileless. But then there were the draper's sons, and one of them had a moustache like a squirrel's, turned up at the ends, and always wore patent-leather shoes. Tonka was full of stories about how smart he was, how many pairs of shoes he had, and how his trousers were every night laid between two boards and weighed down with heavy stones to keep them well pressed.

And now, as he got a clear glimpse of something real through the mist, that other smile emerged, the incredulous smile his mother wore—essentially an onlooker's smile, full of pity and disdain for him. That smile was real. What it said was: 'Heavens, not *that* shop, surely?' And although Tonka had still been a virgin when he came to know her, that smile, treacherously furtive or masked, had also turned up in many a tormenting dream he had. Perhaps it had never existed as a single smile; even now he could not be sure of that. And then too there are nuptial nights when one cannot be entirely sure; there are, so to speak, physiological ambiguities, times when even Nature does not give an unequivocal answer. And in the very moment when he remembered that, he knew that Heaven itself was against Tonka.

II

It had been rash of him to bring Tonka to act as nurse and companion to his grandmother. He was still very young then. He had worked out a little stratagem: Tonka's aunt, who went out doing sewing for 'the gentry', sometimes worked for an aunt of his, and he had contrived that she should be asked if she happened to know of a young girl, who . . . and so on. The idea was to get a girl to look after his grandmother, whose merciful release was to be expected in a couple of years. Apart from her wages, the girl would be remembered in the old lady's will.

But meanwhile there had been a number of little episodes. Once, for instance, he was going on an errand with her; there were some children

playing in the street, and suddenly they both found themselves gazing at the face of a little girl who was howling—a face that wriggled and writhed like a worm, in the full blast of sunlight. The pitiless clarity of it there in the light seemed to him a symbol of life, over against the orbit of death that they had both just left. But Tonka was ‘fond of children’. She bent down to the child, cheerfully and consolingly, perhaps even slightly amused by it—and that was all, however much he tried to make her see that behind the appearance there was something else. From however many sides he approached it, in the end he always found himself confronted with the same opacity in her mind. Tonka was not stupid, but something seemed to prevent her from being intelligent; and for the first time he felt this wide expanse of pity for her, this pity that was so difficult to account for.

Another time he said to her: “Tell me, how long is it now you’ve been with Grandmamma, *Fräulein* Tonka?” And when she had told him, he said: “Oh, really? It’s a long time to have spent with an old woman like that.”

“Oh,” Tonka exclaimed, “I like being here.”

“Well, you needn’t be afraid to tell me if you don’t. I can’t imagine how a young girl can manage to put up with it.”

“It’s a job,” Tonka answered, and blushed.

“All right, it’s a job. But that isn’t all one wants from life. Isn’t that true?”

“Yes.”

“And have you got that?”

“No.”

“Yes, no. Yes, no.” He grew impatient. “What’s the sense of talking like that? Can’t you even grumble about us?” But he saw that she was struggling to find an answer, that she kept on discarding possible answers just when they were on the tip of her tongue. And suddenly he felt sorry for her. “I dare say you’ll hardly know what I mean. It’s not that I think badly of my grandmother, poor woman. No, it isn’t that. I’m not looking at it from that point of view at the moment. I can’t help thinking of it from your point of view, and from your point of view she’s a perfect old horror. Now do you see what I mean?”

"Yes," she said in a low voice, blushing more than ever. "I understood all right before. But I can't say it."

At that he laughed. "That's something that's never happened to me! But now I'm more curious than ever to know what you really think. I'll help you." He looked at her so intently that she became more embarrassed than ever. "All right, then. Here goes: do you like just having regular duties, a quiet, steady routine? Is that it?"

"Well, I don't know quite how you mean. I like my work all right."

"You 'like it all right'. But you're not exactly mad about it, I suppose? I mean, there are people who don't want anything but a steady job."

"What are you getting at?"

"Desires, dreams, ambition—that's what I'm getting at. Doesn't a fine day like this start something up in you?"

Between the stone walls of the streets the day was full of a quivering light and the honey of springtime.

Now it was she who laughed. "It isn't that either."

"It isn't that? Well, then, perhaps you have a special liking for darkened rooms, for talking in a whisper, for the smell of medicines, and all that? There are such people too, you know. But I can tell from your face that I haven't hit it this time either."

She shook her head and faintly turned her mouth down at the corners—perhaps in shy mockery, perhaps only out of embarrassment.

But he gave her no peace. "You see how wrong I go, how ridiculous I'm making myself in your eyes by keeping on guessing wrong like this! Doesn't that help you to come out with it? Come on now!"

And now at least she came out with it. Slowly. Hesitantly. As if choosing her words carefully, in order to make intelligible something that was very difficult to understand:

"You see, I have to earn my living."

Ah, how simple it all was!

What an ass he had been, and what a stony eternity lay in that so ordinary answer!

And another such time was once when he had secretly gone for a walk with Tonka. They used to go for long walks in the country whenever she had her day off, which was twice a month. It was summer. When eve-

ning came, the warmth of the air was exactly the same as that of one's face and hands, and, walking for a moment with closed eyes, one felt as though one were dissolving, expanding, floating. . . . He described this to Tonka and, when she laughed, asked her if she knew what he meant.

Oh, yes!

But he was still not sure that she did and so he tried to get her to describe it to him in her own words. And this she could not do.

So then, he said, she *didn't* know what he meant.

Oh, but she did! And suddenly she said: it made you want to sing.

For heaven's sake!

But yes—that *was* it, she protested.

They went on wrangling like this for a while. And then after all they both began to sing, rather in the spirit of someone firmly placing the *corpus delicti* on the table or inspecting the scene of the crime. They sang pretty badly, and something from a musical comedy, at that, but fortunately Tonka sang softly, and he was glad of that little sign of consideration for his feelings. He was positive she had not been to the theatre more than once in her life and that ever since then these trashy tunes summed up her notions of culture and elegance. However, it turned out that she had merely picked them up from the other girls at the shop where she had worked.

He asked her if she really liked these tunes. It always annoyed him to come across anything still linking her with that shop.

She did not know what it was, whether this music was beautiful or silly, merely that it made her want to be on the stage herself and put her whole heart into making the people in the audience happy or sorrowful. This was perfectly ridiculous, of course, in the light of what poor dear Tonka looked like while she was singing. It depressed him, and his own singing faded out on a sort of growl. Then Tonka suddenly broke off too, as if she felt the same thing, and for a while the two of them walked along in silence.

Then Tonka stopped and said: "That's not what I meant at all, about singing."

And since she saw in his eyes a little glint of responsive kindness, she began to sing again, still softly, but this time folk-songs from her

own part of the country. So they walked along, with these simple tunes making everything vaguely sad, like the fluttering of cabbage-whites in the sunshine. And so now all at once it turned out, of course, that Tonka was right.

Now it was he who could not express what was going on in him. Because Tonka did not talk the ordinary language that other people used, but some language of the totality of things, she had had to suffer being thought stupid and insensitive. He realised now what it meant if one said: Songs just come into her head. It seemed to him that she was very lonely. If it were not for him, who would understand her? So they both sang. Tonka recited the Slavonic words and translated them into German for him, and then they joined hands and sang together like children. Whenever they had to leave off to regain their breath, there would be a little moment of silence ahead of them too, where the twilight was creeping across the road—and even if the whole thing was foolishness, the dusk itself was at one with their feelings.

And yet another time they were sitting at the edge of a wood, and he was simply gazing into space through half-shut eyelids, not talking, letting his thoughts roam. Tonka began to be afraid she had offended him again. Several times she took a deep breath, as if about to speak, but then shyness held her back. So for a long time there was no sound but the woodland murmur that is so tormenting, rising and sinking away in a different place at every instant. Once a brown butterfly fluttered past them and settled on a long-stemmed flower, which quivered under the touch, swaying to and fro and then quite suddenly being quite still again, like a conversation broken off. Tonka pressed her fingers hard into the moss on which they were sitting, but after a while the tiny blades stood up again, one after the other, row on row, until there was finally no more trace of the hand that had lain there. It was enough to make one weep, without knowing why. If she had been trained to think, like her companion, at that moment Tonka would have realised that Nature consists of nothing but ugly little things that one hardly notices and which live as sadly far apart from each other as the stars in the night-sky. The beauties of Nature. . . . A wasp was crawling over his shoe. Its head was like a lantern. He watched it, contemplating his

shoe, which was sticking up broad and black, oblique against the brown of the earth.

Tonka had often thought with dread of the moment when a man would stand before her and she would have no way of escape. The stories that the older girls in the shop had told her with such delight gave her a feeling only of a crude, boring frivolity, something that was not love at all, and she was indignant at the way men were always making amorous advances to her after scarcely exchanging more than a few words with her. As she looked at her companion now, she felt a sudden pang. It was the first time since she had been with him that she realised he was a man; for this was something completely different. He was lying back, resting on his elbows, his chin on his chest. Timidly, she tried to see into his eyes.

What she saw was a peculiar smile. He had one eye shut, and with the other he was gazing along the length of his body, as though aiming at something. Doubtless he knew how ugly his shoe looked at that angle, and perhaps too how little it amounted to that he was lying at the edge of a wood with Tonka. But he did nothing to change anything about it. Each detail was ugly, and the whole thing was happiness.

Quietly, Tonka got up. She suddenly felt a burning inside her head, and her heart was thudding. She could not make out what he was thinking, but she read it all in his eye; and all at once she caught herself wanting to take his head in her arms and cover up his eyes.

"It's time to go," she said. "It'll be getting dark soon."

As they were walking along the road, he said: "I'm afraid you must have been bored. But you will have to get used to me." He took her arm, because it was becoming difficult to see the road distinctly, and he tried to excuse himself for his silence and then, almost against his will, for his thoughts too. She did not really know what he was talking about, but in her own way she sensed the meaning of his words, which came so gravely through the rising mist. And when now he went further, even apologising for talking in such a solemn way, she did not know what to do. Even her silent prayer to the Blessed Virgin was of no avail, and so she linked her arm more closely with his, although she felt dreadfully shy of doing so.

He stroked her hand. "I think we get on well together, Tonka. But do you really understand me?"

After a while Tonka answered: "It doesn't matter if I know what you mean, or not. I couldn't say anything anyway. But I like you to be so serious."

These were all very slight experiences, of course, but the remarkable thing was that they happened all over again, exactly the same. Actually they were always there. And, even more remarkably, later they meant the very opposite of what they had meant in the beginning. Tonka always remained so simply and transparently the same that it was almost like having an hallucination, seeing the most incredible things.

III

Then came an event: his grandmother died before the expected time. Events are, after all, only things that happen untimely and out of place; one is, as it were, mislaid or forgotten, and one is as helpless as an object that nobody bothers to pick up. And even the events that took place much later were only the things that happen thousands of times, all over the world, and the only incomprehensible thing about it was that it should have happened with Tonka.

Well, and so the doctor came, the undertaker's men came, the death certificate was signed, and Grandmamma was buried. One thing followed on the other quite smoothly, as is proper in a respectable family. The will was read. He was glad not to be in any way involved. There was only one item among the bequests that demanded attention: the provision made for Fräulein Tonka with that dreamlike surname, one of those Czech surnames that mean things like 'He sang', or 'He came across the meadow'. There was a contract. Under the terms of the will the Fräulein was to receive—apart from her wages, which were low—a certain fixed sum for every completed year of service, and since it had been assumed that Grandmamma would linger on for quite a while, and since the sum had been fixed in gradually increasing amounts in accordance with the expected increase in the strain of nursing her, it turned out to be a sum that was bound to seem outrageously small to a young man who weighed out in minutes the months of her youth that Tonka had sacrificed.

He was present when Hyacinth reckoned up with her. He was pretending to read—the book was Novalis' *Fragments*—but in reality he was attentively following what was going on. He was ashamed when his 'uncle' named the sum. Even his 'uncle' seemed to feel something similar, for he began to explain to the Fräulein, in detail, the terms of the contract that had been made when she entered their service. Tonka listened intently, her lips tightly closed. The solemnity with which she followed the calculations gave her young face a very appealing look.

"So then that's correct, isn't it?" his uncle said, laying the money on the table.

It was obvious that she had absolutely no idea what it was all about. She pulled out her little purse, folded the notes, and squashed them in; but though they were few, folding them so much made a thick wad of them, and when the little purse had been replaced under her skirt, it made a bulge on her thigh, like a swelling.

She had only one question to ask. "When do I have to leave?"

"Well," his uncle said, "I suppose it will be a few days before the house is shut up. You can certainly stay till then. But you can also go before that, if you like, as you won't be needed any more."

"Thank you," she said and went off to her little room.

Meanwhile the others had begun sharing out the old woman's things among themselves. They were like wolves devouring a dead member of the pack, and they were already in a state of general irritation when he asked whether the Fräulein, who had got so little money out of it all, should not at least be given something of some value in memory of Grandmamma.

"We've decided to give her Grandmamma's big prayerbook."

"Well, yes, but I'm sure something useful would please her more. What about this, for instance?" He picked up a brown fur tippet that was lying on the table.

"That's for Emmi"—a cousin of his—"and anyway you must be mad, it's *minik*!"

He laughed. "Is there any law that poor girls can only be given something for the good of their souls? You don't want to make a miserly impression, do you?"

"I'd thank you to leave that to us," his mother said, and because she did not think he was entirely wrong, she added: "These are things you know nothing about. She won't be treated unfairly." And, with a gesture at once lavish and irritable, she put aside for Tonka some of the old woman's handkerchiefs, chemises, and drawers, and then added a black woollen dress that had scarcely been worn. "There, I think that'll do. It's not as though the Fräulein had been such a treasure, and she can't exactly be called sentimental, either. She never shed so much as a single tear, either when Granny died or at the funeral. So please don't let us hear any more about it."

"Some people don't cry easily. I mean, that doesn't prove anything," he said, not because it seemed important to say it, but because he felt the urge to argue for the sake of arguing.

"That will do!" his mother said. "Don't you realise that your remarks are out of place?"

At this rebuke he fell silent, not because he was in awe of his mother, but because suddenly he felt vastly pleased at the thought that Tonka had shed no tears. His relatives were all talking eagerly, all talking at once, and he noticed how skilfully each of them turned the situation to his or her own advantage. They expressed themselves, if not clearly, at least to some purpose and with the courage of their convictions. In the end each of them got what he or she wanted. For them the ability to talk was not a medium of thought, but a sort of capital, something they wore like jewellery to impress others. As he stood by the table with the heaps of things to be given away on it, he found himself recalling a line of verse, 'To him Apollo gave the gift of song, and music sweet to hear', and for the first time he realised that it really was a gift. How inarticulate Tonka was! She could neither talk nor weep. But how is one to define something that neither can speak nor is spoken of, something that dumbly merges with the anonymous mass of mankind, something that is like a little line scratched on the tablets of history? What is one to make of such a life, such a being, which is like a snowflake falling all alone in the midst of a summer's day? Is it real or imaginary? Is it good, or evil, or indifferent? One senses the fact that here the categories have reached a frontier beyond which they cease to be valid.

Without another word he left the room and went to tell Tonka that he would provide for her.

He found her packing up her things. There was a big cardboard box on a chair, and there were two others on the floor. One of them was already tied up with string. The two others were not big enough for the amount of stuff still scattered about the room, and she was trying to solve the problem by taking things out again and putting them in differently—stockings and handkerchiefs, laced boots and sewing things—laying them first this way and then that. However scanty her possessions were, she would never get everything stowed away, for her luggage was still scantier.

Since the door of her little room was ajar, he was able to watch her for some time without her knowing. When she did notice him, she blushed and quickly stepped in front of the open boxes.

"So you're leaving us?" he said, charmed with her embarrassment. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going home to Auntie."

"Do you mean to stay there?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I shall look around for something."

"Won't your aunt be vexed?"

"I've got enough for my keep for a few months. In that time I'll find a situation."

"But that means using up your savings."

"Can't be helped, can it?"

"And what if you don't find it so easy to get a new job?"

"Then I shall just get it served up to me again at every meal."

"Get what served up? How do you mean?"

"Not bringing anything in. That's how it was when I was working at the shop. I wasn't bringing much home, but I couldn't help that, and she never said anything. Only if she was angry. Then she always did."

"And so then you took the job with us."

"Yes."

"Look," he said abruptly, "you mustn't go back to your aunt. You'll find something else. I'll—I'll see to that."

She did not say yes or no. She did not thank him. But as soon as he

had gone she began slowly taking one thing after another out of the boxes and putting them back in their places. She had blushed deeply. Now she could not collect her thoughts, and every now and then stood still with something in her hand, gazing blankly ahead of her, simply realising: So this was love.

But when he had gone back to the room where Novalis' *Fragments* was still lying on the table, he was suddenly aghast at the responsibility he had taken on. Quite unexpectedly something had happened that would determine the course of his life, and it was something that did not really concern him intimately enough. At this moment he perhaps even felt slightly suspicious of Tonka because she had accepted his offer without more ado.

Then he began to wonder: What on earth made me propose such a thing? And he did not know the answer to that question any more than why she had accepted. Her face had revealed just the same helplessness and bewilderment that he had been feeling. The situation was painfully comical: he had gone rushing up somewhere as in a dream and now he did not know how to get down again.

He had another talk with Tonka. He did not want to be anything but completely honest with her. He talked of personal independence, of intellectual values, of having a purpose in life, ambition, his distaste for the proverbial idyllic love-nest, his expectation that he would later have affairs with women of higher social standing—talked, in fact, like a very young man who wants a great deal and has experienced very little. When he saw something flicker in Tonka's eyes, he was sorry, and, all at once overcome by quite a different feeling, the fear of hurting her, he pleaded: "Don't misunderstand what I've been saying!"

"I understand all right," was all the answer Tonka gave.

IV

"But she's only a common little thing who used to work in that draper's shop!" they had said. What was the point of that? There were plenty of other girls who were quite ignorant, who had never been educated.

Talking like that was like pinning a label on to the back of the girl's dress, where she couldn't get at it and take it off. What they meant was that people had to have learned something, had to have principles, had to be conventional and have the right manners. Simply being a human being wouldn't do. And what of all of them, who had all that and who did 'do'? It seemed to him that his mother was afraid of seeing the emptiness of her own life repeating itself in his. Her own choice was not one that she was proud of: her husband, his father, had formerly been an officer of the line—an undistinguished, jolly man. She was bent on seeing her son have a better life. She fought for that. Fundamentally he approved of her pride. So, then, why did the thought of his mother leave him unmoved?

Duty was second nature to her, and her marriage had taken on meaning only when his father fell ill. Henceforth she assumed a soldierly aspect, standing on guard, defending her position against overwhelming odds, at the side of this man who was steadily declining into imbecility. Up to then she had not been able either to go ahead or to withdraw in her relations with Uncle Hyacinth. He was not a kinsman at all, but a friend of both parents, one of those 'uncles' with whom children have to put up with from the age when they begin to notice things. He was a senior civil servant and, besides, a popular writer whose books sold very well indeed. He brought Mother the breath of culture and worldly sophistication that consoled her in the intellectual desert she lived in. He was well read in history, with ideas that seemed all the more grandiose the emptier they were, extending, as they did, over the sweep of the centuries and the great problems of man's fate. For reasons that had never become clear to the boy, his mother had for many years been the object of this man's steadfast, admiring, selfless love. Perhaps it was because as an officer's daughter she had high standards of honour and duty, which were the source of the moral integrity that lent her glamour in his eyes and made her the model for the heroines in his novels. Perhaps too he was obscurely aware that both the fluency of his talk and his narrative gift derived from his own lack of such integrity. But since he naturally did not care to acknowledge this as a deficiency, he had to magnify it and transform it into something universal, full of the *lacrimae rerum*, see-

ing the need to be thus complemented by another's strength of spirit as the inevitable destiny of one so rich in intellectual resources as himself. Thus the situation had no lack of agonising exaltation for the woman either. Even in their own eyes they were at pains to disguise their liaison as a spiritual friendship, but in this they were not always successful. At times they were quite dismayed by Hyacinth's weakness of character, which would land them in dangerous situations, and then they would not know whether to let themselves fall or strong-mindedly climb back again on to their wonted heights. It was only when her husband became ill that their souls were provided with the support they needed and, reaching out for it, they gained that inch in spiritual stature which they had sometimes felt lacking. From that time on she was armoured in her duty as a wife and was able to make up by redoubled dutifulness for whatever sins she still committed in spirit. And, by a simple rule that settled everything for them, they were now safe from that particularly distressful wavering between the obligation to be greatly passionate and that to be greatly loyal.

So that was what respectable people turned out to be like, manifesting their respectability in terms of mind and character. And however much love-at-first-sight there might be in Hyacinth's novels, anyone who without more ado simply went after another being—like an animal that knows where it can drink and where not—would to them have seemed like a wild primeval creature devoid of morality. The son, who felt pity for that good-natured animal, his father, in all the little matters of family life fought Hyacinth and his mother as though they were a spiritual plague. Thus he had let these two drive him into the diametrically opposite corner of the field of contemporary attitudes.

This brilliant and versatile young man was studying chemistry and turned a deaf ear to all questions that had no clear-cut answer. He was, indeed, an embittered opponent of all such considerations and was a fanatical disciple of the cool, soberly fantastical, world-encompassing spirit of modern technology. He was in favour of doing away with the emotions. He was the antagonist of poetry, kindness, virtue, simplicity. Song-birds need a branch to perch on, and the branch a tree, and the tree the dumb brown earth to grow in; but he flew, he was between the

ages, he was somewhere in mid-air. After this age, one that destroys just as much as it constructs, there will come one that will inherit the new premises we are so ascetically creating, and only then will it be possible to say what we ought to have felt about things. Such was more or less his train of thought. For the time being the thing was to be as tough and austere as on an expedition.

With such a strong intellectual drive he could not fail to attract his teachers' attention, even as a schoolboy. He had conceived ideas for new inventions and, after taking his degree, was to spend one or two years devoting himself to working them out—after which he hoped to rise, surely and steadily, above that radiant horizon which is a young man's image of his glamorous unknown future.

He loved Tonka because he did not love her, because she did not stir his soul, but rinsed it clean and smooth, like fresh water. He loved her more than he himself believed. And the occasional tentative, needling enquiries made by his mother, who sensed a danger that she could not come to grips with because she had no certainty of it, impelled him to make all speed. He sat for his examinations and left home.

V

His work took him to one of the big cities in Germany. He had brought Tonka with him, for he felt he would have been leaving her at the mercy of her enemies if he had left her behind in the same town as her aunt and his mother. Tonka bundled up her things and left home as callously, as inevitably, as the wind goes away with the sun or the rain with the wind.

In the city to which they had moved she got herself a job in a shop. She was quick to pick up the new work and earned much praise. But why then was she so badly paid? And why did she never ask for a rise, which she only did not get because she did not ask for it? Whenever she needed money, she had no qualms about accepting it from him. Not because he minded this, but simply because he was sometimes irritated by her humble ways and lack of worldliness, he would occasionally lecture her on the subject.

"Why don't you tell him he must pay you more?"

"I can't."

"You *can*'t. But you keep on telling me you're always the one they call for when they want something special?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, why don't you speak up for yourself?"

Such talk always made Tonka's face take on a stubborn look. She did not argue, but she was impervious to his reasoning.

"Look," he would say, "that's a contradiction." Or: "Look, why don't you tell me——?" It was all no good. Then he would say: "Tonka, I shall be cross with you if you go on like this."

It was only when he cracked that whip that the little donkey-cart of humility and stubbornness would slowly get under way, and then she would come out with some such thing as, for instance, that she was not good at writing and was afraid, too, of making spelling mistakes, things that she had hitherto kept from him out of vanity. Then there would be a quiver of anxiety round her dear kind mouth, and it would curve into a rainbow of a smile only when she realised that she was not going to be found fault with for such blemishes.

On the contrary, he loved these defects as he loved her deformed finger-nail, the result of an injury at work. He sent her to evening classes and was amused by the absurd commercial copperplate that she learnt to write there. Even the wrong-headed notions that she came home with were something he found endearing. She would bring them home, as it were, in her mouth, without eating them. There was something nobly natural in her helplessness, her inability to reject whatever was vulgar and worthless, even while with an obscure sense of rightness she did not adopt it as her own. It was astonishing with what sureness she rejected everything crude, coarse, and uncivilised in whatever guise it came her way, although she could not have explained why she rejected it. And yet she lacked any urge to rise beyond her own orbit into a higher sphere. She remained pure and unspoilt, like Nature herself. But loving this simple creature was by no means so simple.

And at times she would startle him by knowing about things that must be almost outside her ken, such as chemistry. When, preoccupied with

his work, he would talk of it, more to himself than to her, he would suddenly find that this or that was something she had heard of before. The first time this happened he had been amazed and had asked her about it. She told him that her mother's brother, who had lived with them in the little house where the brothel was, had been a student.

"And what's he doing now?"

"He died. Right after the exam."

"And how did you pick it up from him?"

"Well, I was quite small, of course," Tonka recounted, "but when he was studying he used to get me to hear his lessons for him. I didn't understand a word of it, but he used to write the questions out for me, on a piece of paper."

That was all. And for ten years all that had been hidden, like pretty stones whose names one does not know, kept in a box! That was the way it was now, too. Sitting quietly in the same room with him while he worked was all she needed to make her happy. She was Nature adjusting itself to Mind, not wanting to become Mind, but loving it and inscrutably attaching itself to it. She was like one of those animals that actually seek man's company.

His relationship to her was at that time in a queer state of tension, equally remote from infatuation and from any wish for a casual affair. Actually they had got on for a remarkably long time at home, without the temptations of sex entering into their relationship. They had been in the way of seeing each other in the evenings, going for walks together, telling each other of the day's little happenings and little annoyances, and it had all been as pleasant as eating bread and salt. True, after a time he had rented a room, but only because that was part of the whole thing and, anyway, one can't go walking about the streets for hours on end in the winter. There they had kissed for the first time—rather stiffly, more as though to set the seal on something than for the pleasure of it, and Tonka was very agitated and her lips were rough and hard. Even at that time they had talked of 'entirely belonging to each other'. That is to say, he had talked and Tonka had listened in silence. With that painful clarity in which one's bygone follies insist on recurring to one's memory, he recalled his very juvenile and didactic exposition of why it would

have to come to that. It was only then, he had explained, that two people really opened up to each other. And so they had remained suspended between emotion and theory. Tonka merely begged a few times that it might be postponed for some days. Finally, he was rather affronted and asked if she thought it too great a sacrifice. So then a day was fixed.

And Tonka had come: in her little moss-green jacket, in the blue hat with the black bobbles, her cheeks pink from the brisk walk through the evening air. She laid the table, she made the tea. The only difference was that she bustled a little more than usual and kept her eyes fixed on the things she was handling. And he himself, although he had been waiting impatiently all day long, now sat on the sofa, watching her, immobilised by the icy stiffness of his youth. He realised that Tonka was trying not to think of the inevitable, and he was sorry he had insisted on fixing a day for it—it made him feel like a bailiff. But it only now occurred to him that he ought to have taken her by surprise, that he ought to have enticed her into it.

How remote he felt from any joy! On the contrary, he shrank from taking the bloom off that freshness which was wafted to him like a cool breeze every evening they spent together. But it had to be, sooner or later. He clutched at the necessity of it, and while he watched Tonka rather mechanically bustling about, it seemed to him that his intention was like a rope tied round her ankle, shortening at every turn.

After the meal, which they ate almost without speaking, they sat down side by side. He attempted a joke, and Tonka attempted a laugh. But her mouth twisted, her lips were tight, and the next instant she was grave again.

All at once he asked her: “Tonka, are you sure it’s all right? Have we really made up our minds?”

Tonka lowered her head, and it seemed to him that her eyes were veiled for a moment. But she did not say yes, and she did not say that she loved him.

He bent down to her, speaking softly, trying to encourage her, though he himself was embarrassed. “You know, at first it’s all rather strange, perhaps even rather unromantic. After all, you know, we have to be careful. I mean, it isn’t just. . . . So you’d better shut your eyes. And so——?”

The bed was already turned down, and Tonka went over to it. But suddenly irresolute again, she sat down on the chair beside it.

"Tonka!" he called out to her.

She stood up again and, with averted face, began to unfasten her clothes.

An ungrateful thought remained associated with this sweet moment.

Was Tonka giving herself of her own free will? He had not promised her any love. Why did she not rebel against a situation that excluded the highest hopes? She acted in silence, as though she were subdued by the authority of 'the master'. Perhaps she would also obey another who was equally determined?

There she stood in all the awkwardness of her maiden nakedness. It was moving to see how the skin enclosed her body like too tight a garment.

His flesh was wiser and more humane than his youthfully pseudo-sophisticated thoughts, and he made a move towards her.

As though she were trying to escape from him, Tonka slipped into bed, with a movement that was oddly clumsy and unlike her.

All he remembered of what happened after that was that in passing the chair he had felt the thing he was most intimate and familiar with had been left behind on that chair, with the clothes he knew so well. When he came by, there rose from them the dear fresh smell that he was always first aware of whenever they met. What awaited him in the bed was something unknown and strange. He hesitated a moment longer.

Tonka lay there, with her eyes shut and her face turned to the wall, for an endless age, in terrible lonely fear. When at last she felt him beside her, her eyes were wet with warm tears. Then came a new wave of fear, dismay at her ingratitude, a senseless word uttered as though in search of help, as though stumbling out of some infinitely long, lonely corridor, to transform itself into his name—and then she was his. He hardly grasped how magically, and with how much childlike courage, she stole into his being, what simple-minded strategy she had worked out in order to take possession of all she admired in him: it

was only necessary to belong to him entirely and then she would be part of it all.

Later, he could not in the least remember how it had all happened.

VI

And then in a single day, in a single morning, it was all transformed into a tangle of thorns.

They had been living together for some years when Tonka one day realised that she was pregnant. It was not just any ordinary day. Heaven had so ordained it that if one counted back from that day it appeared that the conception must have taken place during a period when he was away on a journey. Tonka, however, claimed to have noticed her condition only when it was no longer quite possible to establish the beginning of it with certainty.

In such a situation there are certain obvious ideas that will occur to anyone. On the other hand, there was no man far and wide whom one could reasonably suspect.

Some weeks later destiny manifested itself still more plainly: Tonka fell ill. It was a disease that the mother's blood had been infected with, either by the child she had conceived or directly by the child's father. It was a horrible, dangerous, insidious disease. But whatever way she had been infected, the curious thing was that in either case there was a discrepancy between the various dates. Apart from this, as far as could be medically established with certainty he was not suffering from the disease himself. So there was either some mystical bond linking him with Tonka or she was guilty on an ordinary human level. There were, of course, also other possible explanations—at least theoretically, ideally speaking—but practically speaking their probability was as good as nil. On the other hand, from the practical point of view the probability that he was neither the father of Tonka's child nor the cause of her illness amounted to a certainty.

If one considers the situation for a moment, one can see how difficult it was for him to grasp this. 'From the practical point of view. . .'

If you go to a business man, not with a commercial proposition that will appeal to his profit-making instincts, but to harangue him about the spirit of the times and the moral obligations of the rich, he will know you have come to get money out of him. On that point he will never be mistaken, although there is of course always the possibility that you might have come quite unselfishly, just to give him some good advice. Similarly, a judge will not have a moment's doubt when the accused tells him that the incriminating article found on his person was given to him by 'a man he had never seen before'. And yet there is no reason why this should not really happen once in a while. But the management of human affairs rests on the fact that there is no need to reckon with all the possibilities, because the most extreme cases practically never do occur. But theoretically? The old doctor to whom he had first taken Tonka, and whom he had seen alone afterwards, had shrugged his shoulders. Was it possible? Well, of course one couldn't say that it was entirely impossible. . . . There was a kindly, mournful look in his eyes, and what he evidently meant was: Don't let us waste time talking about that—it's much too improbable to be worthy of serious consideration. A doctor is, after all, a human being, and rather than assume that he is dealing with something that is medically quite improbable, he will assume the cause to be a human lapse. For freaks of Nature are rare.

So the next phase was that of a kind of medical litigiousness. He went to doctor after doctor. The second doctor came to the same conclusion as the first, and the third to the same conclusion as the second. He argued with them. He tried to play off against each other the views of various medical schools of thought. The physicians listened to him in silence, sometimes with a tolerant smile, as though he were a lunatic or a blockhead past praying for. And of course he himself knew, even while he was arguing, that he might just as well have asked: 'Is there such a thing as immaculate conception?' And they would only have been able to tell him: 'We have no medical evidence of it.' They would not even have been able to produce a law excluding the possibility. All they knew was: There was no evidence. And yet if he were to accept this, he would be a cuckold past praying for!

Perhaps, indeed, one of the doctors whom he had gone to see had

told him so to his face. Or perhaps he himself had thought of it; after all, there was no reason why he should not have thought of it. But it was as if one were to exert oneself thinking out all the possible combinations and permutations of relevant finger-movements just because one could not fix a collar-stud—for all this time, while he was producing theory after theory, he was confronted by the irrefutable experience of Tonka's face. It was all a walking through cornfields, a sense of the air, the swallows dipping and darting, and in the distance the spires of the town, girls singing . . . remote from all truth, in a world that does not know the concept 'truth'. Tonka was now living in the deep world of fairy-tale. It was the world of the Anointed, of the Virgin, and of Pontius Pilate, and the doctors said that Tonka would need to be nursed and cared for if she was to survive.

VII

Still, he went on trying, of course, every now and again to wring a confession out of Tonka. After all, he was a man, and he was no fool. At this time she was working in a big, trashy shop in a working-class district. She had to be there at seven in the morning and could not leave before half-past nine in the evening—kept there often merely for the sake of some belated customer's few pence. She never saw the sun. She did not sleep at his place, and there was no time to thrash out their emotional problems. They could not count on even this scanty source of income for any length of time, for sooner or later her pregnancy would be noticed. And they were already in financial difficulties. He had used up the money provided for his studies, and he was not capable of earning anything; this is always particularly difficult at the beginning of a scientific career, and besides, he had come so near to solving the problem he had set himself—though the solution still just escaped him—that he felt he had to concentrate all his energies on this work.

Living like this, never seeing the daylight and perpetually in anxiety, Tonka began to fade. Poor Tonka, of course she did not fade beautifully, as some women do, radiating an intoxicating splendour in decay;

she wilted like some dim little herb in a kitchen garden that turns an ugly yellow and shrivels away as soon as it loses the freshness of its green. Her cheeks grew pale and hollow, and this made her nose look too big and prominent, her mouth seemed too wide, and even her ears seemed to stick out. Her body grew gaunt, and the full, curving flesh wasted away, letting the peasant skeleton peer through the skin.

He, whose well-bred face wore better under hardship and whose store of good clothes lasted longer, noticed, whenever he went out with her, that passers-by would sometimes cast an astonished glance at them. And because he was not without vanity, he bore Tonka a grudge for not having the pretty clothes that he could not buy her. He was angry with her for being so shabby, although it was his own fault. But actually, if he could have afforded it, he would have bought her pretty, floating maternity-clothes and would only then have charged her with her infidelity.

Every time he tried to extract a confession from her, Tonka would utter the same denial. She said she did not know how it had happened. When he implored her, in the name of their old affection, not to lie to him, an anguished look would come over her face. And when he stormed at her, she merely said she was not lying. And what was anyone to do then? Should he have beaten her and sworn at her? Should he have abandoned her in her dreadful plight? He no longer slept with her. But even on the rack she would not have confessed, if only because she could not talk to him since she had realised that he mistrusted her. And this dumb obstinacy was all the more frustrating for him because his loneliness was no longer alleviated by any element of grace. He had to be tenacious, to watch and wait.

He had made up his mind to ask his mother for financial help. But his father had for a long time been hovering on the brink of death, and this meant there was no money to spare. He had no means of checking this, though he did know his mother was frightened of the possibility that he might intend marrying Tonka some day. Indeed, she was worried by the thought that any other marriage would be made impossible because Tonka was in the way. And when it all dragged on for so long, his studies still unfinished, success not yet achieved, his father still lingering on his death-bed, and all the domestic cares she had to cope with into the

bargain, it seemed in some way or another to be all Tonka's fault. Tonka seemed to be not merely the cause of all that was going wrong now, but positively something like an ill omen, a herald of misfortune, in that it was she who had first disturbed the normal tenor of their life. This obscure conviction of his mother's had become apparent to him, both from her letters and during his visits home. What it came to fundamentally was that she felt it was a blot on the family honour for her son to be more attached to a girl 'of that sort' than was generally the case with young men. Hyacinth was made to give him a talking to on the subject. And when the young man, taken aback by the implicit superstitiousness of this attitude, which reminded him of his own painful, irrational experiences, put up vehement opposition Tonka was referred to as 'an ungrateful creature' who had had no consideration for a family's peace of mind. Awkward allusions were then made to 'amorous arts' by means of which she kept 'a hold on him'. In short, what came to light was every respectable mother's entire ignorance of real life. The same thing was manifest in the answer that he got now, as though every single coin that helped to keep him with Tonka could only contribute to his undoing.

At this point he decided to write again and acknowledge himself to be the father of Tonka's child.

By way of answer his mother came in person, 'to straighten the whole thing out'.

She did not come to his lodgings, as though she were afraid of encountering something intolerable there. She summoned him to her hotel. By taking refuge in her sense of duty she had rid herself of a certain amount of embarrassment, and she spoke of the great concern he was causing them all, of the added danger to his ailing father's life, and bonds that would last a lifetime. With clumsy cunning she pulled out all the stops of proper feeling. Yet a note of indulgence pervading all she said kept her listener, bored though he was by the maternal tactics he could so easily see through, in a state of mistrustful curiosity.

"You see," she said, "this misfortune might make everything turn out for the best, even now, and that would be a lucky escape for all concerned. The main thing is to prevent any recurrence of such incidents in future."

To this end she had managed to persuade Father to provide a certain sum of money. So—she explained, as though it were a great benefaction—all the girl's claims could be settled and the child provided for.

To her surprise her son, having calmly asked how much was being offered and having heard the answer, shook his head and merely said, in the same calm tone: "It can't be done."

Clinging to her hopes, she retorted: "It must be done! Don't go on deluding yourself. Many young men commit similar follies, but they let it be a lesson to them. This is really your chance to free yourself. Don't miss it out of a misguided sense of honour. You owe it to yourself and to us."

"How do you mean, it's my chance?"

"It's quite obvious. The girl will show more good sense than you are doing. She knows very well that such relationships always come to an end when a child arrives."

He asked for time to think about it—until the next day. Something had flashed upon him.

His mother, the doctors with all their smiling reasonableness, the smooth running of the underground train by which he made his way back to Tonka, the steady movements of the policeman's arms regulating the traffic, the city's roar like the thundering of a waterfall: it was all one and the same thing. He stood in the lonely hollow space under the cascade of it—untouched by even a splash, but utterly cut off.

He asked Tonka if she would agree.

Tonka said: "Yes." How terribly ambiguous this Yes of hers was! In it there lay all the good sense his mother had predicted, but round the mouth that uttered it there was the twitching of bewilderment.

The next day he told his mother point-blank, before she could ask him any questions, that he was perhaps not the father of Tonka's child, that Tonka was ill, and that for all this he would rather consider himself ill and himself the father of the child than abandon Tonka.

His mother smiled in defeat, confronted with such wilful self-deception, bestowed a last, fond glance on him, and left. He realised she would dedicate herself to saving her flesh and blood from shame, and he now had a powerful enemy in league with him.

VIII

Finally, Tonka lost her job. He had been growing almost uneasy over the fact that this misfortune was so long delayed. The shopkeeper for whom Tonka worked was a small, ugly man, but in their distress he had seemed to them like some superhuman power. For weeks they had been guessing: "He must know by now. . . . Well, obviously he's a decent sort and doesn't hit someone who's down. . . ." and then again: "He hasn't noticed, thank heaven he hasn't noticed anything yet!" And then one day Tonka was called into the office and asked, point-blank, about her condition. She could not get any answer out, her eyes merely filled with tears. And this practical man was quite unmoved by the fact that she was too upset to speak. He gave her a month's wages and dismissed her on the spot. He was so furious that he shouted at her, complaining that it was all her fault if he was now shorthanded and that it had been dishonest of her to conceal her condition when she took the job. He did not even send the typist out of the room before saying such things to her.

Afterwards, Tonka felt very wicked, and even he secretly admired that sordid nameless little tradesman, who had not hesitated for a minute but had sacrificed Tonka to his business sense, and with her her tears, a child, and heaven alone knew what inventions, what souls, what human destinies—things of which the man had no notion, things in which he had no interest.

Now they had to have their meals in small, working-class places, amid dirt and incivility, where for a few pence they got a kind of food that did not agree with him. He would call for Tonka punctually and fulfil his duty by taking her to have these meals. He cut a strange figure, in his well-made clothes, among the labourers and market-porters, grave, taciturn, and constant at the side of his pregnant companion. Many sneering glances were cast at him, and many respectful ones, which were no less painful. It was a strange life he was leading, with his invention in his head, and with his conviction of Tonka's infidelity, amid the flotsam and jetsam of the great city. He had never before felt the common beastliness of mankind so intensely: wherever he walked through the streets, there it went, yapping and growling like a pack of hounds, each person

alone in his greed, but all of them together one pack—and only he had no one to whom he could turn for help or to whom he could even have told his story.

He had never had time for friends, doubtless indeed had taken little interest in them, nor had he himself been attractive to others. He went through life burdened with his ideas, and that is a burden dangerous to the very life of him who bears it, so long as people have not realised there is something in it that they can turn to their own advantage. He did not even know in what direction he might have searched for help. He was a stranger in the world. And what was Tonka? Spirit of his spirit? No—perhaps a symbol, some cryptic correspondence to himself, an alien creature who had attached herself to him, with her secret locked within her.

There was a little chink, a far-off gleam towards which his thoughts were beginning to move. The invention he was working at would in the end turn out to be of great importance for others as well as himself, and it was clear that something else was involved besides the intellectual processes—a courage, a confidence, an intuitive sense of the future, that never deceived him, a healthy urge to live, like a star that he followed. And in all this he too was only pursuing the greater probabilities, and always in one of them he would find what he wanted. What he relied on was that everything would turn out to be the way it always was, so that he could hit upon the one thing in which he could discover the desired otherness. If he had set out to test every possible doubt, as he was doing with Tonka, he would never have come to the end of it. Thinking means not thinking too much, and no invention can be made without sacrificing something of the boundlessness of the inventive talent. This half of his life seemed to be under the influence of the star of a happiness or a mystery beyond proving. And the other half lay in darkness.

Now he and Tonka bought sweepstake tickets. On the day of the draw he met Tonka and they went and bought the list of results. It was a miserable little sweepstake with a first prize of only a few thousand marks; but that did not matter, it would have tided them over the immediate future. Even if it had been only a few hundred marks, he could have bought Tonka what she most needed in the way of clothes and

underclothes, or have moved her out of the unhealthy garret where she lived. And if it had been only twenty marks, it would have been some encouragement, and he would have bought more sweepstake tickets. Indeed, even if they had won no more than five marks, it would have been a sign that the attempt to restore contact with life was regarded with favour in unknown regions.

But with all their three tickets they drew blanks. Then, of course, he had to pretend he had only bought them for fun. Even while he had been waiting for Tonka there had been an emptiness in him that heralded failure. The truth probably was that he had been wavering between hope and despair all the time. In his circumstances even a few pennies wasted on a newspaper meant a real loss. He suddenly felt there was an invisible power that wished him ill, and he felt himself to be surrounded by hostility.

After that he became downright superstitious. The man who became so was the one who called for Tonka in the evenings, while the other man he was went on working like a scientist.

He had two rings, which he wore alternately. Both were valuable, but one was a piece of fine old workmanship, and the other was only a present from his parents, which he had never particularly cherished. Then he noticed that on days he was wearing the newer one—which was only an ordinary expensive ring—he seemed to be spared further deterioration of his situation rather more than on days when he was wearing the good, old one; and from that time on he could not bring himself to put it on again, but wore the other, like a yoke laid upon him.

Again, one day when he happened not to have shaved, he had good luck. The next day, when he did shave in spite of having observed the omen, he was punished for his transgression by another of those trivial sordid misfortunes that would not have amounted to anything more than absurdity in a situation less desperate than his. From then on he could not bring himself to shave any more. He grew a beard, doing no more than carefully trimming it to a point, and he continued to wear it through all the sad weeks that followed.

This beard disfigured him, but it was like Tonka: the uglier it looked, the more anxiously it was tended. Perhaps his feeling for her became

all the more affectionate the more profoundly it was disappointed; for like the beard it was inwardly so good because of the outward ugliness. Tonka did not like the beard and did not know what it meant to him. And without her he would never have known how ugly this beard was, for one knows little of oneself unless one has someone else in whom one is reflected. And since what one knows is really nothing, might it not be that at times he wished Tonka dead so that this intolerable existence might be over and done with? And perhaps he liked the beard simply because it was like a mask, concealing everything.

IX

There were still times when he would, as it were, try to ambush her: he would ask what seemed to be a perfectly harmless question, hoping that the smooth sound of the words would take her off her guard. But more often it was he who was taken unawares and defeated.

"Look, it's absolutely senseless going on denying it," he would say coaxingly. "Come on now, tell me. Then everything'll be just the way it used to be. How on earth did it happen?"

But her answer was always the same: "Send me away if you won't believe me."

That was, of course, her way of making the most of her own helplessness, but it was also the most genuine answer she could give. For she had no medical or philosophical arguments to defend herself with: all she could do was to vouch for the truth of her words with the truth of her whole being.

Then he would go with her whenever she went out, because he did not dare to leave her alone. There was nothing definite that he feared, but it made him uneasy to think of her alone in the great alien streets of the city. And when he would meet her somewhere in the evenings, and they walked along, and in the dusk they would pass some man who gave no sign of knowing them, he would sometimes have the feeling that the man's face was familiar, and it seemed to him that Tonka blushed; and all at once he would remember that there had been an occasion when they

had been together with this man. Instantly, then, and with a certainty equal to the certainty he felt when gazing into Tonka's innocent face, he would have the conviction: This is the one! Once it seemed to be a well-to-do young man who was learning the business in an export firm and whom they had met a few times. Once it was a tenor who had worked in a *café chantant* until he lost his voice and who had a room in the same lodging-house as Tonka. They were always such ludicrously marginal figures; they were like dirty parcels thrown into his memory, tied up with string, each parcel containing the truth—but at the first attempt to undo it, the package would disintegrate, leaving him with nothing but an agonising sense of helplessness and a heap of dust.

These certainties of Tonka's infidelity had, indeed, something of the quality of dreams. Tonka endured them with all that touching, dumbly affectionate humility of hers. But how many different meanings that could have! And then, going through his memories, he began to see how ambiguous they all were. For instance, the very simplicity of the way she attached herself to him could equally well mean that she did not care one way or the other or that she was following her heart. The way she served him could indicate either apathy or a delight in doing it. Might that dog-like devotion of hers not mean that she would follow any master like a dog? This was something he had, after all, sensed in that first night. Had it in fact been her first night? He had only paid attention to her emotional reactions, and certainly there had been no very perceptible physical signs. Now it was too late. Her silence was now a blanket over everything, and might equally well indicate innocence or obduracy, it could equally well mean cunning or sorrow, remorse, or fear; but then too it might mean that she was ashamed on his behalf. Yet it would not have helped him even if he could have lived all of it all over again. Once a human being is mistrusted, the plainest signs of faithfulness will positively turn into signs of unfaithfulness. On the other hand, where there is trust, the most glaring evidence of unfaithfulness will seem to be signs of misunderstood faithfulness, crying like a child that the grown-ups have locked out. Nothing could be interpreted on its own merits alone, one thing depended on the other, one had to trust or mistrust the whole of it, love it or take it for deceit and delusion. If one was to understand

Tonka, one had to respond to her in one definite way; one had, as it were, to call out to her, telling her who she was. What she was, depended almost entirely on him. And so Tonka would become a blur, mildly dazzling as a fairy-tale.

And he wrote to his mother: 'Her legs are as long from the foot to the knee as from the knee to the hip, long legs that walk like a pair of twins, without tiring. Her skin is not delicate, but it is white and without blemish. Her breasts are almost a little too heavy, and the hair in her armpits is dark and matted, which looks charmingly shameful on that slender white body. Her hair hangs down in loose strands over her ears, and at time she thinks she has to take the curling-tongs to it and do it up high, which makes her look like a servant-girl. And that, surely, is the only harm she has ever done in her life. . . .'

Or he would write in answer to his mother: 'Between Ancona and Fiume, or perhaps it is between Middelkerke and some town whose name I don't remember, there is a lighthouse, the light of it flashing out over the sea at night like the flick of a fan. One flick, and then there is nothing. And then another flick. And edelweiss grows in the meadows of the Venna valley.

'Is that geography or botany or nautical science? It is a face, it is something that is there, solitary, quite alone, eternally—and so in a way, too, it isn't there at all. Or what is it?'

Naturally he never posted these senseless answers to his mother's letters.

There was something impalpable missing, something that was needed to make his certainty complete.

Once he had been travelling by night with his mother and Hyacinth, and in the small hours, out of the depths of that inexorable fatigue which makes the bodies in a train sway to and fro in search of some support, it seemed to him that his mother was leaning against Hyacinth, and that she knew she was, and that Hyacinth was holding her hand. His eyes had widened with anger at the time, for he was sorry for his father. But when he leaned forward, Hyacinth was sitting at some distance and his mother's head was inclined to the other side, away from him. Then after a while, when he had settled back in his seat, the whole thing happened all

over again. That seeing and not seeing something was torment, and the torment itself was a darkness through which it was hard to see. Finally he told himself that now he was really sure, and he resolved to challenge his mother about it in the morning. But in broad daylight the whole thing had vanished like the darkness itself.

And another time, again when they were on a journey, his mother fell ill. Hyacinth, who had to write to Father on her behalf, said irritably: "But I don't know what to say." This from Hyacinth, who wrote reams to Mother whenever he was away! Then there was a quarrel, for again the boy had grown angry, and his mother began to feel worse: she seemed to be seriously ill. Something had to be done for her, and Hyacinth's hands kept on getting in the way of his, and he kept on pushing them aside. At last Hyacinth asked rather mournfully: "Why do you keep on pushing me away?" The note of unhappiness in that voice quite shocked him. How little one knows what one knows, or wants what one wants.

That is not difficult to understand. Yet he was capable of sitting in his room, tortured by jealousy and telling himself that he was not jealous at all, that it was something quite different, something out of the ordinary, something oddly invented; and yet this was himself and his own feelings. When he raised his head and looked about him, everything seemed to be the same as usual. The wallpaper was green and grey. The doors were reddish brown, with faint gleams of light reflected on them. The hinges were dark, made of copper. There was a chair in the room, brown mahogany and wine-red plush. But all these things seemed to be somehow tilted, leaning to one side. There was a suggestion, in their very uprightness, that they were about to topple over. They seemed endless and meaningless.

He rubbed his eyes and then looked round again. But it was not his eyes. It was the things. The fact was that belief in them had to be there before they themselves could be there; if one did not look at the world with the world's eyes, the world already in one's own gaze, it fell apart into meaningless details that live as sadly far apart from each other as the stars in the night-sky. He only needed to look out of the window to see how the world of, say, a cab-driver waiting in the street below was suddenly intersected by the world of a clerk walking past. The result was

something slashed open, a disgusting jumble, an inside-out and side-by-side of things in the street, a turmoil of focal points moving along their tracks, and around each of them there extended a radius of complacency and self-confidence, all aids to walking upright through a world in which there was no such thing as above and below. Volition, cognition, and perception were like a tangled skein. One noticed this only when one tried to find the end of the thread. But perhaps there was some other way of going through the world, other than following the thread of truth? At such moments, when a veneer of coldness separated him from everything, Tonka was more than a fairy-tale: she was almost a visitation.

'Either I must make Tonka my wife,' he told himself, 'or I must give her up and give up these thoughts.'

But no one will blame him for doing neither one nor the other, despite these reasonings of his. For although all such thoughts and feelings may well be justified, nobody nowadays doubts that they are very largely figments of the imagination. And so he went on reasoning, without taking his reasoning seriously. Sometimes it seemed to him that he was being sorely tried, but when he came to himself again and spoke to himself again, as it were, man to man, he had to tell himself that this ordeal consisted, after all, only of the question whether he would force himself to believe in Tonka against the ninety-nine per cent probability that she had been unfaithful to him and that he was simply a fool. Admittedly this humiliating possibility had by now lost much of its importance.

X

It was, oddly enough, a period in which his scientific work went remarkably well. He had solved the main problems involved in his project, and it could not be long now before he got results. There were already people coming to see him, and even if it was chemistry that they talked about, they brought him some emotional reassurance. They all believed that he was going to succeed. The probability of it already amounted to ninety-nine per cent! And he drugged himself with work.

But even although his social existence was now taking on firmer out-

lines and entering, so to speak, the state of worldly maturity, the moment he stopped working his thoughts no longer ran along in definite grooves. The faintest reminder of Tonka's existence would start a drama going in his mind: figures in a play, one taking over from the other, none of them revealing its meaning, all of them like strangers daily encountering each other in the same street. There was that commercial traveller of a tenor whom he had once suspected of being the man with whom Tonka had betrayed him. And there were all the others to whom he had ever pinned his certainty. It was not that they did anything. They were merely there. Or even if they did do that frightful thing, it no longer meant much. And since they were sometimes two or even more persons rolled into one, it was no straightforward matter being jealous of them. The whole situation became as transparent as the clearest air, and yet clearer still, until it reached that state of freedom and emptiness which was void of all egoism, and under this immovable dome the accidents of terrestrial life pursued their microscopic course.

And sometimes all this turned into dreams. Or perhaps it had all begun in dreams, in a pallid shadowy realm from which he emerged the instant he shed the weight of his working hours, as though it were all meant as a warning to him that this work was not his true life.

These real dreams were on a deeper level than his waking existence; they were warm as low-ceilinged, bright-coloured rooms. In these dream-rooms Tonka would be harshly scolded by her aunt for not having shed any tears at Grandmamma's funeral; or an ugly man acknowledged himself to be the father of Tonka's child, and she, when he looked at her queringly, for the first time did not deny it, but stood there, motionless, with an infinite smile. This had happened in a room with green plants in it, with red rugs on the floor and blue stars on the walls. But when he turned his eyes away from that infinity the rugs were green, the plants had big ruby-red leaves, the walls had a yellow glimmer as of soft human skin, and Tonka, still standing there, was transparently blue, like moonlight.

He almost fled into these dreams as into some simple-hearted happiness. Perhaps it was all mere cowardice. Perhaps all they meant was that if only Tonka would confess, all would be well. He was much confused

by their frequency, and yet they had not the intolerable tension of the half-waking state, which was gradually bearing him higher and higher, away out of it all.

In these dreams Tonka was always as great as love itself, and no longer the care-worn little shop-girl she was in real life. And she looked different every time. Sometimes she was her own younger sister (not that she had ever had a sister) and often she was merely the rustling of skirts, the ring and cadence of another voice, the most unfamiliar and surprising of movements, all the intoxicating charm of unknown adventures, which came to him, the way such things come only in dreams, out of the warm familiarity of her name—and they gave him the floating sense of joy that lies in anticipation, even though still tense with unfulfilment. These ambiguous images made him feel a seemingly undefined, disembodied affection and more than human intensity of emotion, and it was hard to say whether these feelings were gradually detaching themselves from Tonka or only now really beginning to be associated with her. When he reflected on this he guessed that this enigmatic capacity for transference and independence that love had must also manifest itself in waking life. It is not that the woman loved is the origin of the emotions apparently aroused by her; they are merely set behind her like a light. But whereas in dreams there is still a hair's-breadth margin, a crack, separating the love from the beloved, in waking life this split is not apparent; one is merely the victim of *doppelgänger*-trickery and cannot help seeing a human being as wonderful who is not so at all. He could not bring himself to set the light behind Tonka.

The fact that he so often thought of horses at this time must have been somehow connected with this, and obviously was a sign of something significant. Perhaps it was Tonka and the sweepstake in which they drew blanks. Or perhaps it was his childhood—those beautiful brown and dappled horses, their heavy harness decorated with brass and fur. And then sometimes there would be a sudden glowing of the child's heart in him, the heart for which magnanimity, kindness, and faith were not yet obligations that one disregarded, but knights in an enchanted garden of adventures and liberations. Yet perhaps too this was merely the last flaring up of a flame about to die, the itching of a scar that was

beginning to form. For it was like this. The horses were always hauling timber, and the bridge was always echoing under their hooves, a muffled wooden sound, and the timbermen wore their short, checkered jackets, purple and brown. They all doffed their hats as they passed the tall cross, with the tin Christ on it, halfway across the bridge. Only a little boy who stood there by the bridge, looking on, in the winter, refused to doff his hat, for he was a clever little boy and didn't believe in such things any more. And then he suddenly couldn't button up his coat. He couldn't do it. The frost had numbed his little fingers, they grasped a button and tugged at it, hard, but just as they were pushing it into the button-hole, it jumped out again, and his fingers were left helpless and amazed. However hard they tried, they always ended up in paralysed bewilderment.

And it was this memory that came back to him so often.

XI

Amid all these uncertainties Tonka's pregnancy took its course, revealing the harshness of reality.

There was the shambling gait, with Tonka seeming in need of a supporting arm, the heavy body that was mysteriously warm, the manner of sitting down, with legs apart, unwieldy and touchingly ugly: all the changing aspects of the miraculous process, steadily transforming the girlish body into a seed-pod, altering all its proportions, broadening the hips and pressing them down, taking the sharpness from the knees, thickening the neck, making the breasts into udders, streaking the skin of the belly with fine red and blue veins, so that it was startling to see how close to the outer world the blood circulated—as though that were a sign of death. All this unshapeliness was in fact a new shape, moulded as much by passivity as by main force; and the same distortion of human normality was reflected in her eyes: they now had a blank look, and her gaze would linger on things for a long time, shifting only with an effort. It would often rest for a long time on him. She was now keeping house for him again, waiting on him laboriously, as though she wanted to prove to him in these last days that she lived only for him. She showed

no trace of shame for her ugliness and deformation, only the desire to do as much as she could for him in spite of her awkwardness.

They were now spending nearly as much time together as in earlier days. They did not talk much, but they liked to be near each other, for her pregnancy was advancing like the hand of a clock, and they were helpless in the face of it. They ought to have talked the whole thing out together, but they did nothing about it, and time moved on. The shadowy being, the unreal element on him, sometimes struggled for words, and the realisation that everything ought to be measured by quite different standards almost broke surface—but, like all understanding, even this was ambiguous and without certainty. And time was running on, time was running away, time was running out. The clock on the wall had more to do with reality than their thoughts had.

It was a suburban room where nothing of importance could happen. There they sat, and the clock on the wall was a round kitchen clock, telling kitchen time. And his mother bombarded him with letters proving everything up to the hilt. Instead of sending money to him, she spent it on getting opinions from doctors, in the hope of making him see reason. He quite understood this and no longer resented it. Once she sent him a medical statement that made it really clear to him that Tonka *must* have been unfaithful to him at that time. But far from upsetting him, it was almost a pleasant surprise. As though it had nothing to do with him, he wondered how it had happened, and all he felt was: Poor Tonka, she has had to pay so dearly for a single passing aberration! Yes, sometimes he had to pull himself up short, on the point of saying quite cheerfully: 'Listen, Tonka—I've only just realised what we've been forgetting about—who it was you were unfaithful to me with, that time!' So everything petered out. Nothing new happened. There was only the clock. And the old familiar bond between them.

And even although they had not talked about it, this brought back the moments when the bodies desired each other. They came like old friends who, returning after long absence, will simply walk into the room. The windows on the far side of the narrow courtyard were eyeless in the shadow, the people were all out at work; down below the yard was dark as a well; and the sun shone into the room as though

through frosted glass, making each object stand out sharply, in a dead gleam. And there, for instance, lay a little old calendar, open as though Tonka had just been going through it, and on the wide expanse of one leaf, like a memorial erected to that one day, there was a small red exclamation-mark. All the other leaves were covered with everyday domestic entries, shopping-lists, sums, and the like, and only this one was empty except for the one sign. Not for an instant did he doubt that this betokened the memory of the incident that Tonka denied. The time just about fitted. His certainty was like a rush of blood to the head. Yet certainty itself merely lay in this vehemence, and in the next instant it had again dwindled into nothingness. If one was going to believe in what this exclamation-mark might signify, then one might just as well believe in the miraculous. What was so appalling was, after all, the very fact of believing in neither.

There was a startled glance exchanged between them. Tonka had obviously seen him looking at that page in the calendar.

In the queer indoor light all the things in the room now looked like mummies of their former selves. The bodies grew cold, the fingertips became icy, the intestines were hot coils of tubing in which all vital warmth was contained.

True, the doctor had said that Tonka must be spared any sort of stress if complications were to be avoided. But at this moment doctors were the very people whom he must not trust. And yet all his efforts to trust in something else were also futile. Perhaps Tonka was not strong enough? She remained a half-born myth.

"Come here," Tonka said gently.

And they shared their anguish and their warmth, in mournful resignation.

XII

Tonka had gone into hospital. The turn for the worse had come. He was allowed to see her at visiting-hours. So the time had slipped away, irrevocably.

On the day she left the house he had his beard shaved off. Now he was more like himself again.

Later on he discovered that that very day she had lost patience, lost her head, in fact, and had gone and done something she had been putting off all this time for the sake of saving money: as though making a last gesture of independence before going into hospital, she went and had a decayed molar extracted. Her cheek must now be sadly sunken, and all because she would never let herself be properly looked after.

Now his dreams began to intensify again.

One dream recurred in many forms. A fair, plain girl with a pale complexion was telling him that his new girl—some invented figure in the dream—had left him, at which he became curious to hear more and exclaimed: “And do you think Tonka was any better?” He shook his head, with an expression of doubt on his face, to provoke the girl into making some equally vehement protestation of Tonka’s virtues, and he already had a foretaste of the relief he would get from her decisive answer. But then he saw a frightful slow smirk gradually spreading over the girl’s face. And she said: “Oh, her! But she was a dreadful liar! She was quite nice, of course, but you couldn’t believe a word she said. She always wanted to be a smart woman of the world.” What caused him most anguish in this dream was not that dreadful smile, which was like a knife cutting into his flesh, but the fact that he could never ward off the eager platitudes at the end of it: powerless in his sleep, he heard them being uttered as though out of the depths of his own mind.

And so when he went to visit Tonka, he would often sit at her bedside with nothing to say. He would gladly have been as magnanimous as in certain dreams he had had earlier, and he might actually have brought himself to be so if he had devoted to Tonka some of the energy with which he was working on his invention.

Although the doctors had never been able to find any trace of the disease in him, he was linked with Tonka by the possibility of some mysterious connection: he only had to believe her, and instantly he would be diseased. And perhaps (he told himself) that would have been possible in some other age. He was beginning to enjoy letting his imagination rove back into the past, telling himself such things as that in some other

age Tonka's fame might have spread far and wide and that princes would not have disdained to woo her. But nowadays? This was something he really ought to think about at length some day.

So he would sit at her bedside, being kind and affectionate to her, but never uttering the words: 'I believe you.' And this although he had long believed in her. For he believed her only in such a way that he was no longer able to be unbelieving and angry, and not in such a way that he could face the rational consequences of it. This not believing kept him immune and safely anchored to the earth.

The things that went on in the hospital tormented his imagination: it was all doctors, examinations, routine. The world had snatched Tonka away and strapped her to the table. Yet he was almost beginning to regard this as her own fault; if she was indeed something of deeper significance, under the surface of what the world was doing to her, then everything in the world ought to be different too, so that one would want to fight for it. And he was already beginning to surrender. Only a few days after their separation she was already a little remote from him, for he was no longer able to make daily amends for the strangeness of her all too simple life, that strangeness which he had always felt, in however slight degree.

And because he usually had so little to say when he visited Tonka in hospital, he wrote letters to her, saying a great deal that he otherwise kept to himself. He wrote to her almost as seriously as to some great love. Yet even these letters stopped short of ever declaring: 'I believe in you.' He was quite disconcerted to receive no answers from Tonka, until he realised that he had never posted these letters. The fact was, he could not be sure that he meant what he wrote; it was simply a state of mind that he could do nothing about except write it out of his system. That made him realise how lucky he was, despite everything—he could express himself. Tonka could not do that. And the moment he saw that, he saw Tonka for just what she was; a snowflake falling all alone in the midst of a summer's day. But the very next moment this no longer explained anything. Perhaps it all amounted to no more than that she was a dear, good girl. And time was passing too quickly. One day he was horribly overtaken by the news that she would not last much longer. He

reproached himself bitterly for having been so careless, for not having looked after her properly, and he did not attempt to hide this from her.

Then she told him of a dream she had had a few nights earlier. For Tonka also had dreams.

"In my dream I knew I was going to die soon," she said. "And it's a funny thing, you know, but I was very glad. I had a bag of cherries, and I said to myself: 'Never mind, you just gobble them up quick before you go.' "

The next day they would not let him in to see her.

XIII

Then he said to himself: 'Perhaps Tonka wasn't really so good as I imagined.' But that again only went to prove how mysterious her goodness was. It was the kind of goodness that a dog might have had.

He was overwhelmed by a dry, raging grief that swept through him like a storm. It went howling round the solid walls of his existence, crying: 'I can't write to you any more, I can't see you any more.' 'But I shall be with you like God Himself,' he consoled himself, without even knowing what this was supposed to mean. And sometimes he could simply have cried out: 'Help me, help me! Here I am kneeling before you!' Sadly he said to himself: 'Think of it, a man walking all alone with a dog in the mountains of the stars, in the sea of the stars!' And he was agonised with tears that became as big as the globe of the sky and would not come out of his eyes.

Wide awake, he now dreamt Tonka's dreams for her.

Once, he dreamed to himself, when all Tonka's hope had gone he would suddenly come into the room again and be there with her. He would be wearing his large-checked, brown tweed travelling-coat. And when he opened it, underneath it he would be quite naked, nothing on his slender white body but a thin gold chain, with tinkling pendants on it. And everything would be like one single day, she would be quite sure of that.

This was how he longed for Tonka, as she had longed for him. Oh,

she was never a loose woman! No man tempted her. If someone pays court to her, she will rather give him to understand, with slightly awkward mournfulness, that such affairs are likely to come to a bad end. And when she leaves the shop in the evening, she is quite full of all the noisy, jolly, annoying events of her day, her ears are full of it all, inwardly she goes on talking of it all, and there is no scrap of room for any stranger. But she knows too that there is a part of her that remains untouched by all this: there is a realm where she is grand, noble, and good, where she is not a little shop-girl, but his equal, deserving of a great destiny. And this was why, in spite of all the difference between them, she always believed she had a right to him. What he was concerned with achieving was something of which she understood nothing at all; it did not affect her. But he belonged to her because at bottom he was good; for she too was good, and somewhere, after all, there must be the palace of goodness where they would live united and never part again.

What then was this goodness? It did not lie in action, nor yet in being. It was a gleam when the travelling-coat opened. And time was moving much too fast. He was still clinging to the earth, he had not yet uttered the thought 'I believe in you!' with conviction, he was still saying: 'And even supposing everything were like that, who could be sure of it?' He was still saying that when Tonka died.

XIV

He gave one of the nurses a tip, and she told him of Tonka's last hours and that she had sent her love to him.

Then it crossed his mind, casually, as one remembers a poem and wags one's head to the rhythm of it, that it was not really Tonka at all he had been living with: it was something that had called to him.

He said these words to himself over and over again; he stood in the street with these words in his mind. The world lay around him. He realised, indeed, that he had been changed in some way and that in time he would be yet again another man, but this was, after all, his own doing and not really any merit of Tonka's. The strain of these last weeks—the

strain, that is, of course, of working on his invention—was over. He had finished. He stood in the light and she lay under the ground, but all in all what he felt was the cheer and comfort of the light.

Only, as he stood there looking about him, suddenly he found himself gazing into the face of one of the many children round about—a child that happened to be crying. There in the full blast of sunlight the face wriggled and writhed like a ghastly worm. Then memory cried out in him: ‘Tonka! Tonka!’ He felt her, from the ground under his feet to the crown of his head, and the whole of her life. All that he had never understood was there before him in this instant, the bandage that had blindfolded him seemed to have dropped from his eyes—yet only for an instant, and the next instant it was merely as though something had flashed through his mind.

From that time on much came to his mind that made him a little better than other people, because there was a small warm shadow that had fallen across his brilliant life.

That was no help to Tonka now. But it was a help to him. And this even though human life flows too fast for anyone to hear each of its voices clearly and find the answer to each of them.

J O N

GEORGE SAUNDERS

Back in the time of which I am speaking, due to our Coordinators had mandated us, we had all seen that educational video of *It's Yours to Do With What You Like!* in which teens like ourselves speak on the healthy benefits of getting off by oneself and doing what one feels like in terms of self-touching, which what we learned from that video was, there is nothing wrong with self-touching, because love is a mystery but the mechanics of love need not be, so go off alone, see what is up, with you and your relation to your own gonads, and the main thing is, just have fun, feeling no shame!

And then nightfall would fall and our facility would fill with the sounds of quiet fast breathing from inside our Privacy Tarps as we all experimented per the techniques taught us in *It's Yours to Do With What You Like!* and what do you suspect, you had better make sure that that little gap between the main wall and the wall that slides out to make the Gender Areas is like really really small.

Which, guess what, it wasn't.

That is all what I am saying.

Also all what I am saying is, who could blame Josh for noting that little gap and squeezing through it snakelike in just his Old Navy boxers that Old Navy gave us to wear for gratis, plus who could blame Ruthie for leaving her Velcro knowingly un-Velcroed? Which soon all the rest of us heard them doing what the rest of us so badly wanted to be doing, only we, being more mindful of the rules than them, just laid there doing the self-stuff from the video, listening to Ruth and Josh really doing it for real, which believe me, even that was pretty fun.

And when Josh came back next morning so happy he was crying,

that was a further blow to our morality, because why did our Coordinators not catch him on their supposedly nighttime monitors? In all of our hearts was the thought of, okay, we thought you said no boy-and-girl stuff, and yet here is Josh, with his Old Navy boxers in his hand and a hickey on his waist, and none of you guys is even saying boo?

Because I for one wanted to do right, I did not want to sneak through that gap, I wanted to wed someone when old enough (I will soon tell who) and relocate to the appropriate facility in terms of demographics, namely Young Marrieds, such as Scranton, PA, or Mobile, AL, and then along comes Josh doing Ruthie with imperity, and no one is punished, and soon the miracle of birth results and all our Coordinators, even Mr. Delacourt, are bringing Baby Amber stuffed animals? At which point every cell or chromosome or whatever it was in my gonads that had been holding their breaths was suddenly like, Dude, slide through that gap no matter how bad it hurts, squat outside Carolyn's Privacy Tarp whispering, Carolyn, it's me, please un-Velcro your Privacy opening!

Then came the final straw that broke the back of me saying no to my gonads, which was I dreamed I was that black dude on MTV's *Hot and Spicy Christmas* (around like Location Indicator 34412, if you want to check it out) and Carolyn was the oiled-up white chick, and we were trying to earn the Island Vacation by miming through the ten Hot 'n' Nasty Positions before the end of "We Three Kings," only then, sadly, during Her On Top, Thumb In Mouth, her Elf Cap fell off, and as the Loser Buzzer sounded she bent low to me, saying, Oh, Jon, I wish we did not have to do this for fake in front of hundreds of kids on Spring Break doing the wave but instead could do it for real with just each other in private.

And then she kissed me with a kiss I can only describe as melting.

So imagine that is you, you are a healthy young dude who has been self-practicing all these months, and you wake from that dream of a hot chick giving you a melting kiss, and that same hot chick is laying or lying just on the other side of the sliding wall, and meanwhile in the very next Privacy Tarp is that sleeping dude Josh, who a few weeks before, a baby was born to the girl he had recently did it with, and nothing bad happened, except now Mr. Slippen sometimes let them sleep in.

What would you do?

Well, you would do what I did, you would, you would slip through, and when Carolyn un-Velcroed that Velcro wearing her blue Guess kimono, whispering, Oh my God, I thought you'd never ask, that would be the most romantic thing you had ever underwent.

And though I had many times seen LI 34321 for Honey Grahams, where the stream of milk and the stream of honey enjoin to make that river of sweet-tasting goodness, I did not know that, upon making love, one person may become like the milk and the other like the honey, and soon they cannot even remember who started out the milk and who the honey, they just become one fluid, this like honey/milk combo.

Well, that is what happened to us.

Which is why soon I had to go to Mr. Slippen hat in hand and say, Sir, Baby Amber will be having a little playmate if that is okay with you, to which he just rolled his eyes and crushed the plastic cup in his hand and threw it at my chest, saying, What are we running in here, Randy, a freaking playschool?

Then he said, Well, Christ, what am I supposed to do, lose two valuable team members because of this silliness? All right all right, how soon will Baby Amber be out of that crib or do I have to order your kid a whole new one?

Which I was so happy, because soon I would be a father and would not even lose my job.

A few days later, like how it was with Ruthie and Josh, Mr. Delacourt's brother the minister came in and married us, and afterward barbecue beef was catered, and we danced at our window while outside pink and purple balloons were released, and all the other kids were like, Rock on you guys, have a nice baby and all!

It was the best day of our lives thus far for sure.

But I guess it is true what they say at LI 11006 about life throwing us not only curves and sliders but sometimes even worse, as Dodger pitcher Hector Jones throws from behind his back a grand piano for All-state, because soon here came that incident with Baby Amber, which made everybody just loony.

Which that incident was, Baby Amber died.

Sometimes it was just nice and gave one a fresh springtime feeling to sit in the much-coveted window seat, finalizing one's Summary while gazing out at our foliage strip, which sometimes slinking through it would be a cat from Rustic Village Apartments, looking so cute that one wished to pet or even smell it, with wishful petting being the feeling I was undergoing on the sad day of which I am telling, such as even giving the cat a tuna chunk and a sip of my Diet Coke! If cats even like soda. That I do not know.

And then Baby Amber toddled by, making this funny noise in her throat of not being very happy, and upon reaching the Snack Cart she like seized up and tumped over, giving off this sort of shriek.

At first we all just looked at her, like going, Baby Amber, if that is some sort of new game, we do not exactly get it, plus come on, we have a lot of Assessments to get through this morning, such as a First-Taste Session for Diet Ginger-Coke, plus a very critical First View of Dean Witter's Preliminary Clip Reel for their campaign of "Whose Ass Are You Kicking Today?"

But then she did not get up.

We dropped our Summaries and raced to the Observation Window and began pounding, due to we loved her so much, her being the first baby we had ever witnessed living day after day, and soon the paramedics came and took her away, with one of them saying, Jesus, how stupid are you kids, anyway, this baby is burning up, she is like 107 with meningitis!

And maybe we were stupid, but also, I would like to see them paramedics do that many Assessments and still act smart, as we had a lot of stress on our plate at that time.

So next morning there was Carolyn all freaked out with her little baby belly, watching Amber's crib being dismantled by Physical Plant, who wiped all facility surfaces with Handi Wipes in case the meningitis was viral, and there was the rest of us, just like thrashing around the place kicking things down, going like, This sucks, this is totally fucked up!

Looking back, I commend Mr. Slippen for what he did next, which

was he said, Christ, folks, all our hearts are broken, it is not just yours, do you or do you not think I have Observed this baby from the time she was born, do you or do you not think that I too feel like kicking things down while shouting, This sucks, this is totally fucked up? Only what would that accomplish, would that bring Baby Amber back? I am at a loss, in terms of how can we best support Ruth and Josh in this sad tragic time, is it via feeling blue and cranky, or via feeling refreshed and hopeful and thus better able to respond to their needs?

So that was a non-brainer, and we all voted to accept Mr. Slippen's Facility Morale Initiative, and soon were getting our Aurabon® twice a day instead of once, plus it seemed like better stuff, and I for one had never felt so glad or stress-free, and my Assessments became very nuanced, and I spent many hours doing and enjoying them and then redoing and reenjoying them, and it was during this period that we won the McDorland Prize for Excellence in Assessing in the Midwest Region in our demographic category of White Teens.

The only one who failed to become gladder was Carolyn, who due to her condition of being pregnant could not join us at the place in the wall where we hooked in for our Aurabon®. And now whenever the rest of us hooked in she would come over and say such negative things as, Wake up and smell the coffee, you feel bad because a baby died, how about honoring that by continuing to feel bad, which is only natural, because a goddam baby died, you guys?

At night in our shared double Privacy Tarp in Conference Room 11, which our Coordinators had gave us so we would feel more married, I would be like, Honey look, your attitude only sucks because you can't hook in, once baby comes all will be fine, due to you'll be able to hook in again, right? But she always blew me off, like she would say she was thinking of never hooking in again and why was I always pushing her to hook in and she just didn't know who to trust anymore, and one night when the baby kicked she said to her abdomen, Don't worry angel, Mommy is going to get you Out.

Which my feeling was: Out? Hello? My feeling was, Hold on, I like what I have achieved, and when I thought of descending Out to some-

where with no hope of meeting luminaries such as actress Lily Farrell-Garesh or Mark Belay, chairperson of Thatscool.com, descending Out to, say, some lumberyard, like at LI 77656 for Midol, merely piling lumber as cars rushed past, cars with no luminaries inside, only plain regular people who did not know me from Adam, who, upon seeing me, saw just some mere guy stacking lumber having such humdrum thoughts as thinking, Hey, I wonder what's for lunch, duh—I got a cold flat feeling in my gut, because I did not want to undergo it.

Plus furthermore (and I said this to Carolyn) what will it be like for us when all has been taken from us? Of what will we speak of? I do not want to only speak of my love in grunts! If I wish to compare my love to a love I have previous knowledge of, I do not want to stand there in the wind casting about for my metaphor! If I want to say like, Carolyn, remember that RE/MAX one where as the redhead kid falls asleep holding that Teddy bear rescued from the trash, the bear comes alive and winks, and the announcer goes, Home is the place where you find yourself suddenly no longer longing for home (LI 34451)—if I want to say to Carolyn, Carolyn, LI 34451, check it out, that is how I feel about you—well, then, I want to say it! I want to possess all the articulate I can, because otherwise there we will be, in non-designer clothes, no longer even on TrendSetters & TasteMakers gum cards with our photos on them, and I will turn to her and say, Honey, uh, honey, there is a certain feeling but I cannot name it and cannot cite a precedent-type feeling, but trust me, dearest, wow, do I ever feel it for you right now. And what will that be like, that stupid standing there, just a man and a woman and the wind, and nobody knowing what nobody is meaning?

Just then the baby kicked my hand, which at that time was on Carolyn's stomach.

And Carolyn was like, You are either with me or agin me.

Which was so funny, because she was proving my point! Because you are either with me or agin me is what the Lysol bottle at LI 12009 says to the scrubbing sponge as they approach the grease stain together, which is making at them a threatening fist while wearing a sort of Mexican bandolera!

When I pointed this out, she removed my hand from her belly.

I love you, I said.

Prove it, she said.

So next day Carolyn and I came up to Mr. Slippen and said, Please, Mr. Slippen, we hereby Request that you supply us with the appropriate Exit Paperwork.

To which Mr. Slippen said, Guys, folks, tell me this is a joke by you on me.

And Carolyn said softly, because she had always liked Mr. Slippen, who had taught her to ride a bike when small in the Fitness Area, It's no joke.

And Slippen said, Holy smokes, you guys are possessed of the fruits of the labors of hundreds of thousands of talented passionate men and women, some of whom are now gone from us, they poured forth these visions in the prime of their lives, reacting spontaneously to the beauty and energy of the world around them, which is why these stories and images are such an unforgettable testimony to who we are as a nation! And you have it all within you! I can only imagine how thrilling that must be. And now, to give it all up? For what? Carolyn, for what?

And Carolyn said, Mr. Slippen, I did not see you raising your babies in such a confined environment.

And Slippen said, Carolyn, that is so, but also please note that neither I nor my kids have ever been on TrendSetters & TasteMakers gum cards and believe me, I have heard a few earfuls vis-à-vis that, as in: Dad, you could've got us In but no, and now, Dad, I am merely another ophthalmologist among millions of ophthalmologists. And please do not think that is not something that a father sometimes struggles with, in terms of coulda shoulda woulda.

And Carolyn said, Jon, you know what, he is not even really listening to us.

And Slippen said, Randy, since when is your name Jon?

Because by the way my name is really Jon. Randy is just what my mother put on the form the day I was Accepted, although tell the truth I do not know why.

But in my dimmest mind I can very clear recall her voice calling me Jon in my possibly baby days.

It is one thing to see all this stuff in your head, Carolyn said. But altogether different to be Out in it, I would expect.

And I could see that she was softening into a like daughter role, as if wanting him to tell her what to do, and up came LI 27493 (Prudential Life), where, with Dad enstroked in the hospital bed, Daughter asks should she marry the guy who though poor has a good heart, and we see the guy working with inner-city kids via spray-painting a swingset, and Dad says, Sweetie the heart must lead you. And then later here is Dad all better in a tux, and Daughter hugging the poor but good dude while sneaking a wink at Dad, who raises his glass and points at the groom's shoe, where there is this little smudge of swingset paint.

I cannot comment as to that, Slippen said. Everyone is different. Nobody can know someone else's experiences.

Larry, no offense but you are talking shit, Carolyn said. We deserve better than that from you.

And Slippen looked to be softening, and I remembered when he would sneak all of us kids in doughnuts, doughnuts we did not even need to Assess but could simply eat with joy with jelly on our face before returning to our Focused Purposeful Play with toys we would Assess by coloring in on a sheet of paper either a smiling duck if the toy was fun or a scowling duck if the toy bit.

And Slippen said, Look, Carolyn, you are two very fortunate people, even chosen people. A huge investment was made in you, which I would argue you have a certain responsibility to repay, not to mention, with a baby on the way, there is the question of security, security for your future that I—

Uncle, please, Carolyn said, which was her trumpet cart, because when she was small he had let her call him that and now she sometimes still did when the moment was right, such as at Christmas Eve when all of our feelings was high.

Jesus, Slippen said. Look, you two can do what you want, clearly. I cannot stop you kids, but golly I wish I could. All that is required is the required pre-Exit visit to the Lerner Center, which as you know you

must take before I can give you the necessary Exit Paperwork. When would you like to take or make that visit?

Now, Carolyn said.

Gosh, Carolyn, when did you become such a pistol? Mr. Slippen said, and called for the minivan.

The Lerner Center, even when reached via blackened-window minivan, is a trip that will really blow one's mind, due to all the new sights and sounds one experiences, such as carpet on floor is different from carpet on facility floor, such as smoke smell from the minivan ashtrays, whereas we are a No Smoking facility, not to mention, wow, when we were led in blindfolded for our own protection, so many new smells shot forth from these like sidewalkside blooms or whatever that Carolyn and I were literally bumping into each other like swooning.

Inside they took our blindfolds off, and, yes, it looked and smelled exactly like our facility, and like every facility across the land, via the PervaScent[®] system, except in other facilities across the land a lady in blue scrubs does not come up to you with crossed eyes, sloshing around a cup of lemonade, saying in this drunk voice like, *A barn is more than a barn it is a memory of a time when you were cared for by a national chain of caregivers who bring you the best of life with a selfless evening in Monterey when the stars are low you can be thankful to your Amorino Co broker!*

And then she burst into tears and held her lemonade so crooked it was like spilling on the Foosball table. I had no idea what Location Indicator or Indicators she was even at, and when I asked, she didn't seem to know what I meant by Location Indicator, and was like, *Oh I just don't know anymore what is going on with me or why I would expose that tenderest part of my baby to the roughest part of the forest where the going gets rough, which is not the accomplishment of any one man but an entire team of dreamers who dream the same dreams you dream in the best interests of that most important system of all, your family!*

Then this Lerner Center dude came over and led her away, and she slammed her hand down so hard on the Foosball table that the little goalie cracked and his head flew over by us, and someone said, Good one, Doreen, now there's no Foosball.

At which time luckily it was time for our Individual Consultation.

Who we got was this Mid-Ager from Akron, OH, who, when I asked my first question off my Question Card they gave us, which was, What is it like in terms of pain, he said, There is no pain except once I poked myself in my hole with a coffee stirrer and Jesus that smarted, but otherwise you can't really even feel it.

So I was glad to hear it, although not so glad when he showed us where he had poked his hole with the stirrer, because I am famous as a wimp among my peers in terms of gore, and he had opted not to use any DermaFill®, and you could see right in. And, wow, there is something about observing up close a raw bloody hole at the base of somebody's hair that really gets one thinking. And though he said, in Question No. 2, that his hole did not present him any special challenges in terms of daily maintenance, looking into that hole, I was like, Dude, how does that give you no challenges, it is like somebody blew off a firecracker inside your freaking neck!

And when Carolyn said Question No. 3, which was, How do you now find your thought processes, his brow dorkened and he said, Well, to be frank, though quite advanced, having been here three years, there are, if you will, places where things used to be when I went looking for them, brainwise, but now, when I go there, nothing is there, it is like I have the shelving but not the cans of corn, if you get my drift. For example, looking at you, young lady, I know enough to say you are pretty, but when I direct my brain to a certain place, to find there a more vivid way of saying you are pretty, watch this, some words will come out, which I, please excuse me, oh dammit—

Then his voice changed to this announcer voice and he was like, *These women know that for many generations entrenched deep in this ancient forest is a secret known by coffee growers since the dawn of time man has wanted one thing which is to watch golf in peace will surely follow once knowledge is dispersed via the World Book is a super bridge across the many miles the phone card can close the gap!*

And his eyes were crossing and he was sputtering, which would have been sort of funny if we did not know that soon our eyes would be the crossing eyes and out of our mouths would the sputter be flying.

Then he got up and fled from the room, hitting himself hard in the face.

And I said to Carolyn, Well, that about does it for me.

And I waited for her to say that about did it for her, but she only sat there looking conflicted with her hand on her belly.

Out in the Common Room, I took her in my arms and said, Honey, I do not really think we have it all that bad, why not just go home and love each other and our baby when he or she comes, and make the best of all the blessings what we have been given?

And her head was tilted down in this way that seemed to be saying, Yes, sweetie, my God, you were right all along.

But then a bad decisive thing happened, which was this old lady came hobbling over and said, Dear, you must wait until Year Two to truly know, some do not thrive but others do, I am Year Two, and do you know what? When I see a bug now, I truly see a bug, when I see a paint chip I am truly seeing that paint chip, there is no distraction and it is so sweet, nothing in one's field of vision but what one opts to put there via moving one's eyes, and also do you hear how well I am speaking?

Out in the minivan I said, Well, I am decided, and Carolyn said, Well, I am, too. And then there was this long dead silence, because I knew and she knew that what we had both decided was not the same decision, not at all, that old crony had somehow rung her bell!

And I said, How do you know what she said is even true?

And she said, I just know.

That night in our double Privacy Tarp, Carolyn nudged me awake and said, Jon, doesn't it make sense to make our mistakes in the direction of giving our kid the best possible chance at a beautiful life?

And I was like, Chick, please take a look in the Fridge, where there is every type of food that must be kept cold, take a look on top of the Fridge, where there is every type of snack, take a look in our Group Closet, which is packed with gratis designerwear such as Baby Gap and even Baby Ann Taylor, whereas what kind of beautiful life are you proposing, with a Fridge that is empty both inside and on top, and the three of us going around all sloppently, because I don't know about you but

my skill set is pretty limited in terms of what do I know how to do, and if you go into the Fashion Module for Baby Ann Taylor and click with your blinking eyes on Pricing Info you will find that they are not just giving that shit away.

And she said, Oh, Jon, you break my heart, that night when you came to my Tarp you were like a lion taking what he wanted but now you are like some bunny wiffing his nose in fright.

Well, that wasn't nice, and I told her that wasn't nice, and she said, Jesus, don't whine, you are whining like a bunny, and I said I would rather be a bunny than a rag, and she said maybe I better go sleep somewhere else.

So I went out to Boys and slept on the floor, it being too late to check out a Privacy Tarp.

And I was pissed/sad, because no dude likes to think of himself as a rabbit, because once your girl thinks of you as a rabbit, how will she ever again think of you as a lion? And all of the sudden I felt very much like starting over with someone who would always think of me as a lion and never as a rabbit, and who really got it about how lucky we were.

Laying there in Boys, I did what I always did when confused, which was call up my Memory Loop of my mom, where she is baking a pie with her red hair up in a bun, and as always she paused in her rolling and said, Oh, my little man, I love you so much, which is why I did the most difficult thing of all, which was part with you my darling, so that you could use your exceptional intelligence to do that most holy of things, help other people. Stay where you are, do not get distracted, have a content and productive life, and I will be happy too.

Blinking on End, I was like, Thanks, Mom, you have always been there for me, I really wish I could have met you in person before you died.

In the morning Slippen woke me by giving me the light shock on the foot bottom which was sometimes useful to help us arise if we had to arise early and were in need of assistance, and said to please accompany him, as we had a bit of a sticky wicket in our purview.

Waiting in Conference Room 6 were Mr. Dove and Mr. Andrews and Mr. Delacourt himself, and at the end of the table Carolyn, looking

small, with both hands on her pile of Exit Paperwork and her hair in braids, which I had always found cute, her being like that milkmaid for Swiss Rain Chocolate (LI 10003), who suddenly throws away her pail and grows sexy via taking out her braids, and as some fat farm ladies line up by a silo and also take out their braids to look sexy their thin husbands look dubious and run for the forest.

Randy, Mr. Dove said, Carolyn here has evinced a desire to Exit. What we would like to know is, being married, do you have that same desire?

And I looked at Carolyn like, You are jumping to some conclusion because of one little fight, when it was you who called me the rabbit first, which is the only reason I called you rag?

It's not because of last night, Jon, Carolyn said.

Randy, I sense some doubt? Mr. Dove said.

And I had to admit some doubt was being felt by me, because it seemed more than ever like she was some sort of malcontentish girl who would never be happy no matter how good things were.

Maybe you kids would like some additional time, Mr. Andrews said. Some time to talk it over and be really sure.

I don't need any additional time, Carolyn said.

And I said, You're going no matter what? No matter what I do?

And she said, Jon, I want you to come with me so bad, but, yes, I'm going.

And Mr. Dove said, Wait a minute, who is Jon?

And Mr. Andrews said, Randy is Jon, it is apparently some sort of pet name between them.

And Mr. Slippen said to us, Look, guys, I have been married for nearly thirty years and it has been my experience that, when in doubt, take a breath. Err on the side of being together. Maybe, Carolyn, the thing to do is, I mean, your Paperwork is complete, we will hold on to it, and maybe Randy, as a concession to Carolyn, you could complete your Paperwork, and we'll hold on to it for you, and when you both decide the time is right, all you have to do is say the word and we will—

I'm going today, Carolyn said. As soon as possible.

And Mr. Dove looked at me and said, Jon, Randy, whoever, are you prepared to go today?

And I said no. Because what is her rush, I was feeling, why is she looking so frantic with furrowed anxious brow like that Claymation chicken at LI 98473 who says the sky is falling the sky is falling and turns out it is only a Dodge Ramcharger, which crushes her from on high and one arm of hers or wing sticks out with a sign that says March Madness Daze?

And Slippen said, Guys, guys, I find this a great pity. You are terrific together. A real love match.

Carolyn was crying now and said, I am so sorry, but if I wait I might change my mind, which I know in my heart would be wrong.

And she thrust her Exit Paperwork across at Slippen.

Then Dove and Andrews and Delacourt began moving with great speed, as if working directly from some sort of corporate manual, which actually they were, Mr. Dove had some photocopied sheets, and reading from the sheets, he asked was there anyone with whom she wished to have a fond last private conversation, and she said, Well duh, and we were both left briefly alone.

She took a deep breath while looking at me all tender and said, Oh Gadzooks. Which that broke my heart, Gadzooks being what we sometimes said at nice privacy moments in our Privacy Tarp when overwhelmed by our good luck in terms of our respective bodies looking so hot and appropriate, Gadzooks being from LI 38492 for Zookers Gum, where the guy blows a bubble so Zookified it ingests a whole city and the city goes floating up to Mars.

At this point her tears were streaming down and mine also, because up until then I thought we had been so happy.

Jon, please, she said.

I just can't, I said.

And that was true.

So we sat there quiet with her hands against my hands like Colonel Sanders and his wife at LI 87345, where he is in jail for refusing to give up the recipe for KFC Haitian MiniBreasts, and then Carolyn said, I didn't mean that thing about the rabbit, and I scrinkled up my nose rabbit-like to make her laugh.

But apparently in the corporate manual there is a time limit on fond

last private conversations, because in came Kyle and Blake from Security, and Carolyn kissed me hard, like trying to memorize my mouth, and whispered, Someday come find us.

Then they took her away, or she took them away rather, because she was so far in front that they had to like run to keep up as she clomped loudly away in her Kenneth Cole boots, which by the way they did not let her keep those, because that night, selecting my pajamas, I found them back in the Group Closet.

Night after night after that I would lay or lie alone in our Privacy Tarp, which now held only her nail clippers and her former stuffed dog Lefty, and during the days Slippen let me spend many unbillable hours in the much-coveted window seat, just scanning some images or multiscanning some images, and around me would be the other facility Boys and Girls, all Assessing, all smiling, because we were still on the twice-a-day Aurabon®, and thinking of Carolyn in those blue scrubs, alone in the Lerner Center, I would apply for additional Aurabon® via filling out a Work-Affecting Mood-Problem Notification, which Slippen would always approve, being as he felt so bad for me.

And the Aurabon® would make things better, as Aurabon® always makes things better, although soon what I found was, when you are hooking in like eight or nine times a day, you are always so happy, and yet it is a kind of happy like chewing on tinfoil, and once you are living for that sort of happy, you soon cannot be happy enough, even when you are very very happy and are even near tears due to the beauty of the round metal hooks used to hang your facility curtains, you feel this intense wish to be even happier, so you tear yourself away from the beautiful curtain hooks and with shaking happy hands fill out another Work-Affecting Mood-Problem Notification, and then, because nothing in your facility is beautiful enough to look at with your new level of happiness, you sit in the much-coveted window seat and start lendelling in this crazy uncontrolled way, calling up, say, the Nike one with the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (LI 89736), and though it is beautiful, it is not beautiful enough, so you scatter around some Delicate Secrets lingerie models from LI 22314, and hang fat Dole oranges and bananas in the

trees (LI 76765), and add like a sky full of bright stars from LI 74638 for Crest, and from the Smell Palate supplied by the antiallergen Capaviv® you fill the air with jasmine and myrrh, but still that is not beautiful enough, so you blink on End and fill out another Work-Affecting Mood-Problem Notification, until finally one day Mr. Dove comes over and says, Randy, Jon, whatever you are calling yourself these days—a couple of items. First, it seems to us that you are in some private space not helpful to you, and so we are cutting back your Aurabon® to twice a day like the other folks, and please do not sit in that window seat anymore, it is hereby forbidden to you, and plus we are going to put you on some additional Project Teams, since it is our view that idle hands are the devil's work area. Also, since you are only one person, it is not fair, we feel, for you to have a whole double Privacy Tarp to yourself, you must, it seems to us, rejoin your fellow Boys in Boys.

So that night I went back with Rudy and Lance and Jason and the others, and they were nice, as they are always nice, and via No. 10 cable Jason shared with me some Still Photos from last year's Christmas party, of Carolyn hugging me from behind with her cute face appearing beneath my armpit, which made me remember how after the party in our Privacy Tarp we played a certain game, which it is none of your beeswax who I was in that game and who she was, only believe me, that was a memorable night, with us watching the snow fall from the much-coveted window seat, in which we sat snuggling around midnight, when we had left our Tarp to take a break for air, and also we were both sort of sore.

Which made it all that much more messed-up and sad to be sleeping once again alone in Boys.

When the sliding wall came out to make our Gender Areas, I noticed they had fixed it so nobody could slide through anymore, via five metal rods. All we could do was, by putting our mouths to the former gap, say good night to the Girls, who all said good night back from their respective Privacy Tarps in this sort of muffled way.

But I did not do that, as I had nobody over there I wished to say good night to, they all being like merely sisters to me, and that was all.

So that was the saddest time of my life thus far for sure.

Then one day we were all laying or lying on our stomachs playing Hungarian Headchopper for GameBoy, a new proposed one where you are this dude with a scythe in your mother's garden, only what your mother grows is heads, when suddenly a shadow was cast over my game by Mr. Slippen, which freaked up my display, and I harvested three unripe heads, but the reason Slippen was casting his shadow was, he had got a letter for me, from Carolyn!

And I was so nervous opening it, and even more nervous after opening it, because inside were these weird like marks I could not read, like someone had hooked a pen to the back leg of a bird and said, Run little bird, run around this page and I will mail it for you. And the parts I could read were bumming me out even worse, such as she had wrote all sloppently, *Jon a abbot is a cove, a glen, it is something with prayerful guys all the livelong day in silence as they move around they are sure of one thing which is the long-term stability of a product we not only stand behind we run behind since what is wrong with taking a chance even if that chance has horns and hoofs and it is just you and your worst fear in front of ten thousand screaming supporters of your last chance to be the very best you can be?*

And then thank God it started again looking like the pen on the foot of the running bird.

I thought of how hot and smart she had looked when doing a crossword with sunglasses on her head in Hilfiger cutoffs, I thought of her that first night in her Privacy Tarp, naked except for her La Perla panties in the light that came from the Exit sign through the thin blue Privacy Tarp, so her flat tummy and not-flat breasts and flirty smile were all blue, and then all of the sudden I felt like the biggest jerk in the world, because why had I let her go? It was like I was all of the sudden waking up! She was mine and I was hers, she was so thin and cute, and now she was at the Lerner Center all alone? Shaking and scared with a bloody hole in her neck and our baby in her belly, hanging out with all those other scared shaking people with bloody holes in their necks, only none of them knew her and loved her like I did? I had done such a dumb-shit thing to her, all the time thinking it was sound reasoning, because isn't that how it is with our heads, when we

are in them it always makes sense, but then later, when you look back, we sometimes are like, I am acting like a total dumbass!

Then Brad came up and was like, Dude, time to hook in.

And I was like, Please Brad, do not bother me with that shit at this time.

And I went to get Slippen, only he was at lunch, so I went to get Dove and said, Sir, I hereby Request my appropriate Exit Paperwork.

And he said, Randy, please, you're scaring me, don't act rash, have a look out the window.

I had a look, and tell the truth it did not look that good, such as the Rustic Village Apartments, out of which every morning these bummed-out-looking guys in the plainest non-designer clothes ever would trudge out and get in their junky cars. And was someone joyfully kissing them goodbye, like saying when you come home tonight you will get a big treat, which is me? No, the person who should have been kissing them with joy was yelling, or smoking, or yelling while smoking, and when the dudes came home they would sit on their stoops with heads in hand, as if all day long at work someone had been pounding them with clubs on their heads, saying they were jerks.

Then Mr. Dove said, Randy, Randy, why would a talented young person like yourself wish to surrender his influence in the world and become just another lowing cattle in the crowd, don't you know how much people out there look up to you and depend on you?

And that was true. Because sometimes kids from Rustic Village would come over and stand in our lava rocks with our TrendSetters & TasteMakers gum cards upheld, pressing them to our window, and when we would wave to them or strike the pose we were posing on our gum cards, they would race back all happy to their crappy apartments, probably to tell their moms they had seen the real actual us, which was probably like the high point of their weeks.

But still, when I thought of those birdlike markings of Carolyn's letter, I don't know, something just popped, I felt I was at a distinct tilt, and I blurted out, No, no, just please bring me the freaking Paperwork, I am Requesting, and I thought when I Requested you had to do it!

And Dove said sadly, We do, Randy, when you Request, we have to do it.

Dove called the other Coordinators over and said, Larry, your little pal here has just Requested his Paperwork.

And Slippen said, I'll be damned.

What a waste, Delacourt said. This is one super kid.

One of our best, Andrews said.

Which was true, with me five times winning the Cooperative Spirit Award and once even the Denny O'Malley Prize, Denny O'Malley being this Assessor in Chicago, IL, struck down at age ten, who died with a smile on his face of leukemia.

Say what you will, it takes courage, Slippen said. Going after one's wife and all.

Yes and no, Delacourt said. If you, Larry, fall off a roof, does it help me to go tumbling after you?

But I am not your wife, Slippen said. Pregnant wife.

Wife or no, pregnant or no, Delacourt said. What we then have are two folks not feeling so good in terms of that pavement rushing up. No one is helped. Two are crushed. In effect three are crushed.

Baby makes three, Andrews said.

Baby does make three, said Delacourt.

Although anything is possible, Slippen said. You know, the two of them together, the three of them, maybe they could make a go of it—

Larry, whose side are you on? Dove said.

I am on all sides, Slippen said.

You see this thing from various perspectives, Andrews said.

Anyway, this is academic, Delacourt said. He has Requested his Paperwork and we must provide it.

His poor mother, Dove said. The sacrifices she made, and now this.

Oh, please, Slippen said. His mother.

Larry, sorry, did you say something? Dove said.

Which mother did he get? Slippen said.

Larry, please go to that Taste-and-Rate in Conference Room 6, Delacourt said. See how they are doing with those CheezWands.

Which mother did we give him? Slippen said. The redhead baking the pie? The blonde in the garden?

Larry, honestly, Dove said. Are you freaking out?

The brunette at prayer? Slippen said. Who, putting down her prayer book, says, as they all say: Stay where you are, do not get distracted, have a content and productive life, and I will be happy too?

Larry has been working too hard, Andrews said.

Plus taking prescription pills not prescribed to him, Delacourt said.

I have just had it with all of this, Slippen said and stomped off to the Observation Room.

Ha, that Larry! Dove said. He did not even know your mom, Randy.

Only we did, Andrews said.

Very nice lady, Delacourt said.

Made terrific pies, Dove said.

And I was like, Do you guys think I am that stupid, I know something is up, because how did Slippen know my mom's exact words said to me on my private Memory Loop?

Then there was this long silence.

Then Delacourt said, Randy, when you were a child, you thought as a child. Do you know that one?

And I did know that one, it being LI 88643 for Trojan Ribbed.

Well, you are not a child anymore, he said. You are a man. A man in the middle of making a huge mistake.

We had hoped it would not come to this, Dove said.

Please accompany us to the Facility Cinema, Delacourt said.

Which that was a room off of Dining, with a big-screen plasma TV and Pottery Barn leather couch and a deluxe Orville Redenbacher Corn Magician.

Up on the big-screen came this old-fashioned-looking film of a plain young girl with stringy hair, smoking a cigarette in a house that looked pretty bad.

And this guy unseen on the video said, Okay, tell us precisely why, in your own words.

And the girl said, Oh, I dunno, due to my relation with the dad, I got less than great baby interest?

Okay, said the unseen voice. And the money is not part?

Well, sure, yeah, I can always use money, she said.

But it is not the prime reason? the voice said. It being required that it not be the prime reason, but rather the prime reason might be, for example, your desire for a better life for your child?

Okay, she said.

Then they pulled back and you could see bashed-out windows with cardboard in them and the counters covered with dirty dishes and in the yard a car up on blocks.

And you have no objections to the terms and conditions? the voice said. Which you have read in their entirety?

It's all fine, the girl said.

Have you read it? the voice said.

I read in it, she said. Okay, okay, I read it cover to freaking cover.

And the name change you have no objection to? the voice said.

Okay, she said. Although why Randy?

And the No-Visit Clause you also have no objection to? the voice said.

Fine, she said, and took a big drag.

Then Dove tapped on the wall twice and the movie Paused.

Do you know who that lady is, Randy? he said.

No, I said.

Do you know that lady is your mom? he said.

No, I said.

Well, that lady is your mom, Randy, he said. We are sorry you had to learn it in this manner.

And I was like, Very funny, that is not my mom, my mom is pretty, with red hair in a bun.

Randy, we admit it, Delacourt said. We gave some of you stylized mothers, in your Memory Loops, for your own good, not wanting you to feel bad about who your real mothers were. But in this time of crisis we

must give you the straight skinny. That is your real mother, Randy, that is your real former house, that is where you would have been raised, had your mother not answered our ad all those years ago, that is who you are. So much in us is hardwired! You cannot fight fate without some significant help from an intervening entity, such as us, such as our resources, which we have poured into you in good faith all these years. You are a prince, we have made you a prince. Please do not descend back into the muck.

Please reconsider, Randy, Dove said. Sleep on it.

Will you? Delacourt said. Will you at least think about it?

Tell the truth, that thing with my mom had freaked me out, it was like my foundation had fallen away, like at LI 83743 for Advil, where the guy's foundation of his house falls away and he thunks his head on the floor of Hell and thus needs a Advil, which the devil has some but won't give him any.

So I said I would think about it.

As he left, Dove unhit Pause, and I had time to note many things on that video, such as that lady's teeth were not good, such as my chin and hers were similar, such as she referred to our dog as Shit Machine, which what kind of name is that for a dog, such as at one point they zoomed in on this little baby sitting on the floor in just a diaper, all dirty and looking sort of dumb, and I could see very plain it was me.

Just before Dinner, Dove came back in.

Randy, your Paperwork, per your Request, he said. Do you still want it?

I don't know, I said. I'm not sure.

You are making me very happy, Dove said.

And he sent in Tony from Catering with this intense Dinner of steak au poivre and our usual cheese tray with Alsatian olives, and a milkshake in my monogrammed cup, and while I watched *Sunset Terror Home* on the big-screen, always a favorite, Bedtime passed and nobody came and got me, them letting me stay up as late as I wanted.

Later that night in my Privacy Tarp I was wakened by someone crawling in, which, hitting my Abercrombie & Fitch nightlight, I saw it was Slippen.

Randy, I am so sorry for my part in all of this, he whispered. I just want to say you are a great kid and always have been since Day One and in truth I at times have felt you were more of a son than my own personal sons, and likewise with Carolyn, who was the daughter I never had.

Well I did not know what to say to that, it being so personal and all, plus he was like laying or lying practically right on top of me and I could smell wine on his breath. We had always learned in Religion that if something is making you uncomfortable you should just say it, so I just said it, I said, Sir, this is making me uncomfortable.

You know what is making me uncomfortable? he said. You farting around in here while poor Carolyn sits in the Lerner Center all alone, big as a house, scared to death. Randy, one only has one heart, and when that heart is breaking via thinking of what is in store for poor Carolyn, one can hardly be blamed for stepping in, can one? Can one? Randy, do you trust me?

He had always been good to me, having taught me so much, like how to hit a Wiffle and how to do a push-up, and once he even brought in this trough and taught me and Ed and Josh to fish, and how fun was that, all of us laughing and feeling around on the floor for the fish we kept dropping during those moments of involuntary blindness that would occur as various fish-related LIs flashed in our heads, like the talking whale for Stouffer's FishMeals (LI 38322), like the fish and loafs Jesus makes at LI 83722 and then that one dude goes, Lord, this bread is dry, can you not summon up some ButterSub?

I do trust you, I said.

Then come on, he said, and crawled out of my Privacy Tarp.

We crossed the Common Area and went past Catering, which I had never been that far before, and soon were standing in front of this door labeled Caution Do Not Open Without Facility Personnel Accompaniment.

Randy, do you know what is behind this door? Slippen said.

No, I said.

Take a look, he said.

And smiling a smile like that mother on Christmas morning at LI 98732 for Madpets.com, who throws off that tablecloth to reveal a real horse in their living room chewing on the rug, Slippen threw open that door.

Looking out, I saw no walls and no rug and no ceiling, only lawn and flowers, and above that a wide black sky with stars, which all of that made me a little dizzy, there being no glass between me and it.

Then Slippen very gently pushed me Out.

And I don't know, it is one thing to look out a window, but when you are Out, actually Out, that is something very powerful, and how embarrassing was that, because I could not help it, I went down flat on my gut, checking out those flowers, and the feeling of the one I chose was like the silk on that Hermès jacket I could never seem to get Reserved because Vance was always hogging it, except the flower was even better, it being very smooth and built in like layers? With the outside layer being yellow, and inside that a white thing like a bell, and inside the white bell-like thing were fifteen (I counted) smaller bell-like red things, and inside each red thing was an even smaller orange two-dingly-thing combo.

Which I was like, Dude, who thought this shit up? And though I knew very well from Religion it was God, still I had never thought so high of God as I did just then, seeing the kind of stuff He could do when He put His or Her mind to it.

Also amazing was, laying there on my gut, I was able to observe very slowly some grass, on a blade basis! And what I found was, each blade is its total own blade, they are not all exact copies as I had always thought when looking at the Rustic Village Apartments lawn from the much-coveted window seat. No, each blade had a special design of up-and-down lines on it, plus some blades were wider than others, and some were yellow, with some even having little holes that I guessed had been put there via bugs chewing them?

By now as you know I am sometimes a kidder, with Humor always ranked by my peers as one of my Principal Positives on my Yearly Evaluation, but being totally serious? If I live one million years I will never

forget all the beautiful things I saw and experienced in that kickass outside yard.

Isn't it something? Slippen said. But look, stand up, here is something even better.

And I stood up, and here came this bland person in blue scrubs, and my first thought was, Ouch, why not accentuate that killer bone structure with some makeup, and also what is up with that dull flat hair, did you never hear of Bumble & Bumble Plasma Volumizer?

And then she said my name.

Not my name of Randy but my real name of Jon.

Which is how I first got the shock of going, Oh my God, this poor washed-out gal is my Carolyn.

And wow was her belly ever bigger.

Then she touched my face very tender and said, *The suspense of waiting is over and this year's Taurus far exceeds expectations already high in this humble farming community.*

And I was like, Carolyn?

And she was like, *The beauty of a reunion by the sea of this mother and son will not soon again be parted and all one can say is amen and open another bag of chips, which by spreading on a thin cream on the face strips away the harsh effect of the destructive years.*

Then she hugged me, which is when I saw the gaping hole in her neck where her gargadisk had formerly been.

But tell you the truth, even with a DermaFilled® neckhole and nada makeup and huge baby belly, still she looked so pretty, like someone had put a light inside her and switched it on.

But I guess it is true what they say at LI 23005, life is full of ironic surprises, where that lady in a bikini puts on sunscreen and then there is this nuclear war and she takes a sip of her drink only she has been like burned to a crisp, because all that time Out not one LI had come up, as if my mind was stymied or holding its breath, but now all of the sudden here came all these LIs of Flowers, due to I had seen those real-life flowers, such as big talking daisies for Polaroid (LI 10119), such as that kid who drops a jar of applesauce but his anal mom totally melts when

he hands her a sunflower (LI 22365), such as the big word PFIZER that as you pan closer is made of roses (LI 88753), such as LI 73486, where as you fly over wildflowers to a Acura Legend on a cliff the announcer goes, Everyone is entitled to their own individual promised land.

And I blinked on Pause but it did not Pause, and blinked on End but it did not End.

Then up came LIs of Grass, due to I had seen that lawn, such as an old guy sprinkling grass seed while repetitively checking out his neighbor-girl who is sunbathing, and then in spring he only has grass in that one spot (LI 11121), such as LI 76567, with a sweeping lawn leading up to a mansion for Grey Poupon, such as (LI 00391) these grass blades screaming in terror as this lawnmower approaches but then when they see it is a Toro they put on little party hats.

Randy, can you hear me? Slippen said. Do you see Carolyn? She has been waiting out here an hour. During that hour she has been going where she wants, looking at whatever she likes. See what she is doing now? Simply enjoying the night.

And that was true. Between flinches and blinks on End I could dimly persee her sitting cross-legged near me, not flinching, not blinking, just looking pretty in the moonlight with a look on her face of deep concern for me.

Randy, this could all be yours, Slippen was saying. This world, this girl!

And then I must have passed out.

Because when I came to I was sitting inside that door marked Caution Do Not Open Without Facility Personnel Accompaniment, with my Paperwork in my lap and all my Coordinators standing around me.

Randy, Dove said. Larry Slippen here claims that you wish to Exit. Is this the case? Did you in fact Request your Paperwork, then thrust it at him?

Okay, I said. Yes.

So they rushed me to Removals, where this nurse named Vivian was like, Welcome, please step behind that screen and strip off, then put these on.

Which I did, I dropped my Calvin Klein khakis and socks and removed my Country Road shirt as well as my Old Navy boxers, and put on the dreaded blue scrubs.

Best of luck, Randy, Slippen said, leaning in the door. You'll be in my prayers.

Out out out, Vivian said.

Then she gave me this Patient Permission Form, which the first question was, Is patient aware of risk of significantly reduced postoperative brain function?

And I wrote, Yes.

And then it said, Does patient authorize Dr. Edward Kenton to perform all procedures associated with a complete gargadisk removal, including but not limited to e-wire severance, scar-tissue removal, forceful Kinney Maneuver (if necessary to fully disengage gargadisk), suturing, and postoperative cleansing using the Foreman Vacuum Device, should adequate cleaning not be achievable via traditional methods?

And I wrote, Yes.

I have been here since Wednesday, due to Dr. Kenton is at a wedding.

I want to thank Vivian for all this paper, and Mr. Slippen for being the father I never had, and Carolyn for not giving up on me, and Dr. Kenton, assuming he does not screw it up.

(Ha ha, you know what, Dr. Kenton, I am just messing with you, even if you do screw it up, I know you tried your best. Only please do not screw it up, ha ha ha!)

Last night they let Carolyn send me a fax from the Lerner Center, and it said, I may not look my best or be the smartest apple on the applecart, but believe me, in time I will again bake those ninety-two pies.

And I faxed back, However you are is fine with me, I will see you soon, look for me, I will be the one with the ripped-up neck, smacking himself in the head!

No matter what, she faxed, at least we will now have a life, that life dreamed of by so many, living in freedom with all joys and all fears, let it begin, I say, the balloon of our excitement will go up up up, to that land which is the land of true living, we will not be denied!

I love you, I wrote.

Love you too, she wrote.

Which I thought that was pretty good, it being so simple and all, and it gave me hope.

Because maybe we can do it.

Maybe we can come to be normal, and sit on our porch at night, the porch of our own house, like at LI 87326, where the mom knits and the dad plays guitar and the little kid works very industrious with his Speak & Spell, and when we talk, it will make total sense, and when we look at the stars and moon, if choosing to do that, we will not think of LI 44387, where the moon frowns down at this dude due to he is hiding in his barn eating Rebel CornBells instead of proclaiming his SnackLove aloud, we will not think of LI 09383, where this stork flies through some crying stars who are crying due to the baby who is getting born is the future Mountain Dew Guy, we will not think of that alien at LI 33081 descending from the sky going, Just what is this thing called a Cinnabon?

In terms of what we will think of, I do not know. When I think of what we will think of, I draw this like total blank and get scared, so scared my Peripheral Area flares up green, like when I have drank too much soda, but tell the truth I am curious, I think I am ready to try.

RED ROSE, WHITE ROSE

EILEEN CHANG

There were two women in Zhenbao's life: one he called his white rose, the other his red rose. One was a spotless wife, the other a passionate mistress. Isn't that just how the average man describes a chaste widow's devotion to her husband's memory—as spotless, and passionate too?

Maybe every man has had two such women—at least two. Marry a red rose and eventually she'll be a mosquito-blood streak smeared on the wall, while the white one is “moonlight in front of my bed.” Marry a white rose, and before long she'll be a grain of sticky rice that's gotten stuck to your clothes; the red one, by then, is a scarlet beauty mark just over your heart.

But Zhenbao wasn't like that; he was logical and thorough. He was, in this respect, the ideal modern Chinese man. If he did bump into something that was less than ideal, he bounced it around in his mind for a while and—poof!—it was idealized: then everything fell into place.

Zhenbao had launched his career the proper way, by going to the West to get his degree and factory training. He was smart and well educated, and having worked his way through school, he had the energy and determination of a self-made man. Now he held an upper-level position in a well-known foreign textile company. His wife was a university graduate, and she came from a good family. She was gentle and pretty, and she'd never been a party girl. One daughter, age nine: already they'd made plans for her college tuition.

Never had a son been more filial, more considerate, than Zhenbao was to his mother; never was a brother more thoughtful or helpful to his siblings. At work he was the most hardworking and devoted of col-

leagues; to his friends, the kindest, truest, and most generous of men. Zhenbao's life was a complete success. If he had believed in reincarnation—he didn't—he'd have hoped simply to pick up a new name, then come back and live the same life all over again.

Rich idlers laughed at Zhenbao and called him vulgar—literary youths and progressive types did too. But since he was vulgar in a Western way, they didn't really hold it against him. Zhenbao wasn't tall, but he was vigorous and quick. He had a soy-brown face and wore black-rimmed glasses, with something peculiarly unresolved in his facial expression. His posture was excellent and he didn't joke around—unless, that is, it was appropriate to joke. He seemed frank and open, a man you could take in at a glance—and if you couldn't quite pinpoint the sincerity in his eyes, those eyeglasses were proof enough.

Zhenbao came from a poor family. If he hadn't struggled to rise in the world, he probably would have had to stand behind a counter in a shop, and then his whole existence would have been one tiny round of ignorance and stupidity. Instead, starting in on his new job after his studies abroad, his window opened up on the whole world: he had plenty of opportunities to look forward to and the benefits of an unfettered mind. An amazing degree of freedom, all in all. And yet the average man's life, no matter how good, is only a "peach blossom fan." Like the loyal, beleaguered beauty in the story, you bang your head and blood drips on the fan. Add a few strokes of ink, and the bloodstain becomes a peach blossom. Zhenbao's fan was still blank, but he had a dry brush, a wet inkstone, a sunny window, and a clean table—all just waiting for him to lower his brush and begin.

That blank fan did have some hazy figures in the background, like the images of people in old-fashioned clothes that one sees printed in light purple ink on elegant, mock-antique stationery. Before the wife and mistress, there had been two insignificant women.

The first was a Paris whore.

Zhenbao had studied textile manufacturing at a school in Edinburgh. Poor students don't have a chance to see much when abroad, and all that Zhenbao remembered of Britain was the Underground, cabbage, fog, hunger, and stuffing himself sick. As for things like opera, not until he

returned home to Shanghai did he have an opportunity to see a Russian company perform. But one summer he'd laid out some money, taken off some time, and gone on a tour of the Continent. When he got to Paris, naturally he wanted to see how very naughty the Parisians were, except that he didn't have any friends who knew the town well enough to show him around. He couldn't afford—and didn't want—that kind of friend. So he plunged in all on his own, afraid of what it might cost, afraid of being cheated too.

One evening in Paris, he found himself with nothing to do. He'd eaten supper early and was walking to his lodgings in a quiet back street. "And all my friends will think that I've really seen Paris," he said to himself, almost plaintively. The streetlamps had already been lit but overhead the sun still shone, dropping bit by bit down to the roofs of the square cement buildings, dropping farther and farther. The shimmering white of the roofs seemed to be crumbling away. Zhenbao walked down the street, feeling forlorn. In one of the houses someone was playing a piano with one hand, picking out the notes: Christmas songs played very slowly, one after another. Christmas carols are joyful on Christmas Eve, but this was a summer afternoon on a long quiet street flooded with sunlight. The timing felt all wrong, like a dream so mixed-up and meaningless that it was almost funny. Zhenbao didn't know why, but he couldn't bear the sound of that one-finger melody.

He picked up his pace; his hand started to sweat in his pocket. He walked quickly, but then the woman in front of him, wearing a black dress, slowed down; she turned her head just a bit and gave him a glance. She was wearing a red slip under her black lace dress. Zhenbao liked red lingerie. He hadn't realized that a woman of this sort would be in this neighborhood, with a little hotel nearby.

Years later, when Zhenbao was telling the story to friends, he would adopt a mocking manner, happy but a tad rueful. "Before I went to Paris," he'd say, "I was just a boy! I really ought to go back someday, for old times' sake." The memory should have been a romantic one, but oddly enough he couldn't recall any of the romantic parts, only the upsetting ones. Foreigners always have more body odor than Chinese people do; this woman couldn't stop worrying about it. He noticed how she'd half

consciously raise one arm and turn her head to sniff. The armpits of her clothing were sprayed with perfume; cheap perfume mixed with armpit odor and sour sweat made for a strange smell that he couldn't get out of his head. But what he hated most was her constant worrying. When she came out of the bathroom in her slip, she rested her hand high on the wall, tilted her head to the side, and smiled at him—but he knew that at some level she was sniffing herself.

With a woman like this—even with a woman like this!—though he could spend money on her, he couldn't be her master. The half hour he spent with her filled him with shame.

There was another detail he could never forget. She was putting her clothes back on, pulling her dress over her head, and when she was half there, with the fabric still piled up around her shoulders, she stopped for a moment as if she'd thought of something. Right then, he saw her in the mirror. She had a mass of tousled blond hair, pulled tight by the dress so that only her long, thin face showed. Her eyes were blue, a blue that ran down into the shadows under her eyes, while the eyes themselves were like two transparent glass balls. It was a cold, severe, masculine face, the face of an ancient warrior. Zhenbao was badly shaken.

When he came out, the sun was still shining, with the shadows of the trees lying crooked in the sunlit street. This too was not right. It was terrifying.

Whoring can be sleazy, low-class, filthy-miserable, and it won't matter—that just makes it all the earthier. But it wasn't like that, not this time. Later, when Zhenbao had figured out how to get what he wanted out of a whore, he'd think back to that time in Paris, his first time, when he'd been such a fool. Now he was the master of his own world.

From that day on, Zhenbao was determined to create a world that was "right," and to carry it with him wherever he went. In that little pocket-size world of his, he was the absolute master.

Zhenbao lived in England for a considerable time. His factory internship paid a stipend, and he rustled up odd jobs on the side. Once he'd made himself a bit more comfortable, financially speaking, he acquired a few girlfriends. He was a nice fellow, and he wanted to meet a nice girl, not some prostitute. But he was also a busy man who couldn't spend

lots of time on courting; naturally he liked girls who were a little more forthright. There were only a few Chinese girls in Edinburgh, two of them classmates who hailed from the inland provinces—he found them too affected, too churchy, altogether too pious. Nowadays the churches have become something of a social scene, with quite a few beauties on display, but ten years ago, the fervent churchgoers who had love in their hearts weren't, in fact, lovely. The lively ones were the overseas Chinese; mixed-blood girls went even farther.

Zhenbao met a girl named Rose. She was his first love, which is why he also likened his two later women to roses. Rose's father was a good-looking English businessman who'd lived in southern China for many years and then, thanks to a passing fancy, married a Cantonese girl and brought her home to Edinburgh. The wife had to be living in the house still, but she was practically invisible and never took part in social events. Rose attended an English school, and because she wasn't completely English she acted more English than the English themselves. The English students liked to affect a certain dashing indifference, and when something really important was at stake, the affectation grew even stronger. Zhenbao couldn't figure out whether or not Rose really loved him; he, for his part, was rather dazzled. They both liked to do things fast, and on Saturday nights they made the rounds of different dance halls. When they weren't out on the dance floor, but just sitting around and talking, Rose never seemed to pay much attention. She'd take out some matches and try to balance a glass on top of them. Zhenbao was supposed to help. That was Rose: solemn as could be when she was horsing around. There was a canary at her place, and whenever it sang she thought it was calling to her. "Yes, bird?" she'd answer right off, standing on tiptoe with her hands behind her back, and her face tilted up toward the birdcage. Her tan face was long, not round like a child's, but at such moments she seemed remarkably childlike. She'd gaze wide-eyed at the bird in the cage, the whites of her eyes tinged blue, as if she were staring into deep blue skies.

Rose may have been the most ordinary of girls, but her very youth made her remarkably hard to read. Like that canary—calling out but not really saying anything to anyone.

Her short skirt ended above her knees, and her legs were light and nimble, as delicately made as wooden legs in a shop window; her skin was as smooth and glistening as freshly planed and oiled wood. Her hair was cut very short, shaved down to a little point at the nape of her neck. No hair to protect her neck, no sleeves to protect her arms—Rose did not watch her words, and her body was open for the taking. She was carefree with Zhenbao, and he put that down to her being innocent, but her being so carefree with everyone struck him as slightly nutty. This kind of woman was common enough in foreign countries, but in China it would never do. Marrying her, then transplanting her to his hometown—that would be a big waste of time and money, not a good deal at all.

One evening he drove her home, as he often did. But this time it seemed different because he was going to leave England soon and if he had anything to say he should have said it by now. He hadn't. Her house was quite far from town. The faint black-and-white of the late-night road patted their faces like a powder puff. The conversation in the car was desultory in the English fashion, starting and stopping again. Rose knew that she had already lost him. Then, out of a kind of hopeless obstinacy, her heart caught fire. "Stop here," she said, when they had almost reached her house. "I don't want to let my family see us saying good-bye." "I'd kiss you even in front of them," Zhenbao said, smiling. He reached out to wrap his arm around her shoulder, and she buried her face into his chest. The car kept going—they were well past her house before it stopped. Zhenbao slid his hand under her velvet coat and pulled her toward him. Behind her aching-cold diamonds, crinkly silver lace, hundreds of exquisite nuisances, her young body seemed to leap out of her clothes. Zhenbao kissed her, and tears streamed over her face till neither of them could tell who was crying. Outside the car, a damp, limitless fog floated in the wind. Its emptiness sapped their strength, and all they could do was hang on to each other. Rose clung to his neck, this way then that, trying to pull ever closer, wishing she could fuse her body with his, press herself into it. Zhenbao was so confused that he couldn't think. He had never dreamed that Rose loved him so much; he could have done whatever he wanted. But . . . this would not do. Rose, after all, was a decent girl. This sort of thing was not for him.

Rose's body leapt out of her clothes, leapt onto his body, but he was his own master.

Afterward, even he was surprised by his self-control. He'd hardened his heart and taken Rose home. Just before he left, he held her moist face, with its snuffles and tears and quivering eyelashes that fluttered in his palms like some tiny winged creature. In later days, he'd recall this experience whenever he needed to rally his strength: "If you could control yourself then, in that situation, surely you can do so now."

His behavior that evening filled him with astonishment and admiration, and yet in his heart he felt regret. Without admitting it, he felt quite a lot of regret.

He seldom mentioned the incident, but there was not one of his friends who was unaware of Zhenbao's reputation as a regular Liu Xiaohui, a man who could keep perfectly calm with a beautiful woman in his lap. Word had gotten around.

Zhenbao's grades were excellent, and before he'd even graduated he was offered a position at Great Beneficence, an English dyeing and weaving company; he started there immediately upon his return to Shanghai. Zhenbao's family home was in Jiangwan, quite far from his job, and at first he stayed with some old family friends. But when his younger brother, Tong Dubao, finished his secondary schooling, Zhenbao made arrangements for Dubao to come and live with him, so he could help him with his studies; he wanted Dubao to take the entrance exam for the technical school that was affiliated with the Great Beneficence Dyeing and Weaving Company. They couldn't both stay in the friends' home; that would be too great an imposition. As it happened, an old classmate of Zhenbao's, Wang Shihong, had an empty room in his place. Wang Shihong had been abroad and had come back to Shanghai two years before Zhenbao; now he was living in an apartment on Ferguson Road. He and Zhenbao struck a deal—the room was even furnished.

On the day he was to move in, Zhenbao left work just after dusk. He and his brother were busy supervising the coolies as they carried the trunks in, and Wang Shihong was standing arms akimbo in the doorway, when a woman walked in from the room behind. She was washing her hair, which was all lathered up with shampoo, the white curls stand-

ing high on her head like a marble sculpture. "While the workmen are here," she said to Shihong, holding her hair with her hands, "have them arrange all the furniture and things. It's no use asking our majordomo to help: he'll just make excuses—if he's not in the mood he won't do anything."

"Let me introduce everyone," said Wang Shihong. "Zhenbao, Dubao, my wife. I believe you haven't met yet?"

The woman withdrew her hand from her hair to shake hands with the guests, but seeing the shampoo on her fingers, she hesitated. She nodded and smiled instead, then wiped her fingers on her dressing gown. A little shampoo splashed the back of Zhenbao's hand. Instead of rubbing it off, he let it dry there. The skin puckered up slightly, as if a mouth were lightly sucking at the spot.

Mrs. Wang turned and went back into the other room. Zhenbao directed the workers as they moved the bed and wardrobe, but he felt troubled, and the sucking sensation was still there. His mind wandered as he headed to the bathroom to wash his hands, thinking about this Mrs. Wang. He'd heard that she was an overseas Chinese from Singapore who, when she was studying in London, was quite a party girl. She and Wang Shihong got married in London, but Zhenbao had been too busy to attend the wedding. Seeing her was much better than hearing about her: under her white, shampoo-sculpted hair was a tawny gold face, the skin glistening and the flesh so firm that her eyes rose at a long upward slant, like the eyes of an actress. Her striped dressing gown, worn without a belt, hugged her body loosely, and the black-and-white stripes hinted at her figure, each line, each inch, fully alive. People like to say that the wide, long-sleeved gowns of former times didn't flatter curvaceous beauties, but Zhenbao had just discovered that this was not the case. He turned on the faucet. The water wasn't very hot, though the water heater downstairs was certainly on, and yet the lukewarm stream seemed to have a lighted wick running through it. Twisting and winding, the water ran from the faucet, every inch of it alive, while Zhenbao's mind went running off to who knows where.

Wang Shihong heard the sound of running water and came into the bathroom. "Do you want to take a bath? The water never comes up hot

in this bathroom. The hot water pipe wasn't connected properly. That's one bad thing about this apartment. If you want to wash, come into our bathroom."

"Oh no, please don't bother," Zhenbao said. "Isn't your wife washing her hair?"

"She must be finished by now. I'll go and have a look."

"Oh, really, it's not that important."

Wang Shihong went to speak with his wife, and his wife said, "I'm just finishing. Tell the amah to draw him a bath."

A little later, Wang Shihong told Zhenbao to bring his soap, towel, and clothes into their bathroom. Mrs. Wang was still in front of the mirror, struggling to get a comb through her tightly permed hair. The bathroom was full of steam, and the night wind blew in through the open window. On the floor, clusters of fallen hair swirled about like ghostly figures.

Zhenbao stood outside the door holding his towel and watching the tangled hair, in the glare of the bathroom light, drifting across the floor. He felt quite agitated. He liked women who were fiery and impetuous, the kind you couldn't marry. Here was one who was already a wife, and a friend's wife at that, so there couldn't be any danger, but . . . look at that hair! It was everywhere. She was everywhere, tugging and pulling at him.

The couple stood in the bathroom talking, but the water filling the tub was loud and Zhenbao couldn't hear what they said. When the tub was full, they came out so he could take his bath. After his bath, Zhenbao crouched down and started picking up stray hairs from the floor tiles and twisting them together. The permed hair had turned yellow at the ends; it was stiff, like fine electrical wire. He stuffed it into his pocket. His hand stayed there, and his whole body tingled. But this was too ridiculous. He extracted the hair from his pocket and tossed it into the spittoon.

Carrying his soap and towel, he returned to his own room—Dubao was opening the trunks and arranging things. "What kind of person could the previous tenant have been?" Dubao asked. "Look, here under the chair slipcovers, and under the carpet here—those have got to be cigarette burns! And these marks under the table—they won't come off. Mr. Wang isn't going to blame us is he?"

"Of course not. They must know about it already. Besides, we're classmates from way back, so they won't be as petty as you are!" Zhenbao smiled.

Dubao fell silent. Then he asked, "Do you know who the previous tenant was?"

"His family name is Sun I think; he's back from England, teaching at a university now. Why do you ask?"

Dubao smiled before he spoke. "Just now when you were gone, the majordomo and the amah came to put up the curtains. They said something about not knowing how long we'll stay, and they said that Mr. Wang had wanted to kick out the man who lived here before. Mr. Wang was planning to go to Singapore on business, and he should have left a long time ago, but something happened and he got nervous—he wouldn't leave till the other fellow was out. Neither of them budged—not for two whole months."

Zhenbao told him to shush. "How can you believe such nonsense! When you live in someone's house, the first rule is never to discuss the family with the servants. That only leads to trouble!" Dubao didn't say anything more.

A bit later, the amah came to call them to dinner, and the brothers went into the dining room together. The cooking in the Wang household had a slightly Southeast Asian flavor, Chinese food prepared Western style, and the main dish was lamb curry. Mrs. Wang had nothing but a thin slice of toast and a piece of ham in front of her. She even cut the fatty part off the meat and gave it to her husband.

"Such a small appetite?" Zhenbao smiled.

"She's afraid of getting fat," said Shihong.

Zhenbao's face expressed disbelief. "Mrs. Wang looks just right. She's not fat at all."

"I've just lost five pounds, so I'm a lot thinner than I was," she said.

Shihong grinned and reached over to pinch her cheek. "A lot thinner? Then what's this?"

His wife gave him a sharp glance. "That's the London lamb I ate last year." Everyone laughed hard at this.

Even though the Tong brothers and Mrs. Wang had just met for the

first time, their hostess hadn't bothered to change before coming to the dinner table. She was still in her dressing gown and her hair was still wet. A white towel was wrapped carelessly around it, and every so often the towel dripped, spangling her eyebrows. Dubao was a country boy, and Mrs. Wang's free-and-easy ways struck him as strange indeed. But even Zhenbao found her pretty remarkable. Mrs. Wang was extremely attentive, asking all sorts of questions. She wasn't very good at keeping house, that was clear, but she did know how to entertain.

"I haven't had time to tell you," Shihong said to Zhenbao, "but I'm leaving tomorrow. I have some business in Singapore. It's good that you've moved in and can take care of things here."

"Mrs. Wang is very capable," Zhenbao said with a smile. "She'll be taking care of us, I'm sure. I very much doubt that it will be us taking care of her."

"Don't be fooled by her chatter," said Shihong. "She doesn't understand a thing. She's been in China for three years now, but she still isn't used to it here, and she can't really speak Chinese well."

Mrs. Wang smiled slightly and didn't disagree. She merely summoned the amah to fetch a bottle of medicine from the cabinet, and poured out a spoonful. Zhenbao saw the thick liquid, like white paint, in the spoon, and winced. "Is that cream of calcium? I've taken that before—it tastes terrible."

Mrs. Wang emptied the spoon down her throat. For a moment she was speechless, but then she swallowed the medicine. "It's like drinking a wall!" she said. Zhenbao smiled again. "When Mrs. Wang talks, she hits the nail right on the head!"

"Mr. Tong," said Mrs. Wang, "don't keep calling me Mrs. Wang." She got up and went over to a desk near the window. It's true, Zhenbao was thinking to himself, the name "Mrs. Wang" is just too commonplace. She sat at the desk, apparently writing something. Shihong went over to her, put his hand on her shoulder, and bent down to ask, "You're perfectly healthy, so why are you taking doses of that?"

Mrs. Wang kept on writing, without turning her head. "The heat is rising in my system—I've got a pimple on my face."

"Where?" said Shihong, leaning his face close. She moved aside

lightly, frowning and smiling at once. "Hey there, hey there!" she warned him.

Dubao, raised in an old-fashioned family, had never seen a husband and wife like this. He was unable to sit still and left to admire the scenery. He opened the glass door and walked onto the balcony. Zhenbao went on peeling an apple with a fair degree of composure. But Mrs. Wang came back across the room, and thrust a piece of paper at him. "There, I too have a given name," she said.

"The way you write Chinese characters, you shouldn't show them around," Shihong said with a smile. "People will just laugh."

When Zhenbao saw the three crooked words on the paper, each one bigger than the last, and the last one breaking apart into three distinct fragments—wang jiAO RUI—he really had to laugh.

"I told you people would laugh, didn't I?" Shihong said with a clap of his hands.

"No, no," said Zhenbao, controlling himself. "Really it's a pretty name!"

"Those overseas Chinese—the names they pick never have any style," said Shihong.

Pouting, Jiaorui grabbed the piece of paper and crumpled it up. She turned on her heels and walked off, seemingly in a huff. Not thirty seconds later she came back with an open jar of candied walnuts, which she'd already started to eat, and she offered them to Zhenbao and Dubao.

"I thought you were afraid of getting fat!" laughed Shihong.

"It's true," said Zhenbao. "Sweets are very fattening."

"You don't know about those overseas Chinese, they—" Shihong started to say, but Jiaorui hit him. "It's always 'they, them, those overseas Chinese'!" she said. "Don't call me 'them'!"

Shihong went right on. "They have the bad habits of the Chinese and the bad habits of foreigners as well. From the foreigners they learn to be afraid of getting fat, won't eat this, won't eat that, always taking purgatives but can't stop eating sweets. But then—go ahead, just ask her! If you ask her why she's eating this, she'll say she's had a little cough recently, and candied walnuts are good for a cough."

"That really is the old Chinese way," Zhenbao said with a smile. "Anything you like to eat is, of course, good for something."

Jiaorui picked up a walnut and slid it between her teeth. She pointed her little finger at Zhenbao. "Stop that now—there really is some truth to it!"

To Zhenbao, she seemed drunk. Fearing the kind of faux pas that so often follows drink, he mumbled something inconsequential and strolled onto the balcony. The breeze was cool on his skin: most likely his face had been pretty red a moment before. Now he was even more troubled. He'd just put an end to his relationship with Rose, and here she was again, in a new body, with a new soul—and another man's wife. But this woman went even further than Rose. When she was in the room, the walls seemed to be covered with figures in red chalk, pictures of her half naked, on the left, on the right, everywhere. Why did he keep running into this kind of woman? Was it his fault that he always reacted the way he did? Surely that couldn't be. After all, there really weren't many women of this sort, not among the pure Chinese. He'd just returned to China, so he was running with the half-Chinese, half-Western crowd. Any Chinese he met while abroad was "an old friend found in a far-away land." When he returned home and saw those "old friends" again, the first time they met they were bosom friends, the second time mere acquaintances, and by the third time they were strangers to each other.

And yet, when it came to this Wang Jiaorui, hadn't Shihong done pretty well for himself by marrying her? Of course, Wang Shihong's father had money; if a man had to forge ahead on his own, as Zhenbao did, such a woman would be a major impediment. And he wasn't easy-going like Wang Shihong, who let a woman flout every rule. What was the point if you had to argue all day long? That was sure to sap a man's energy and drain him of ambition. Of course . . . she was like this precisely because her husband couldn't control her; if Wang Shihong had managed to get a handle on her, she wouldn't be quite so unruly.

Zhenbao leaned on the railing, his arms folded. Down below, an electric tram with a brightly burning lamp stopped at the entrance of the building. Several people got on and off, and the lamp moved away. Wide and quiet, the street stretched beyond him; the only light was from a

little restaurant on the first floor. Two leaves skittered by in the wind like ragged shoes not worn by anyone, just walking along by themselves. So many people in the world—but they won't be coming home with you. When night fell and silence took over—or when, as could happen at any time, you stood at the brink of death—there in the dark, you needed a wife you really loved, otherwise there would be nothing but loneliness. Zhenbao didn't think this through clearly, but he was overwhelmed by a sense of foreboding.

Shihong and his wife were chatting as they walked onto the balcony. "Is your hair dry?" Shihong asked. "If you stand in the breeze your cough is going to get worse."

"It doesn't matter," said Jiaorui, unwrapping the towel and shaking out her hair.

Zhenbao figured that since Shihong was leaving the next day, the couple would want to speak in privacy. Raising a hand to disguise a forced yawn, he said, "We'll go to bed now. Dubao has to get up very early tomorrow so he can go to school and get a student handbook."

"I'm leaving in the afternoon," Shihong said, "so I probably won't see you." The two men shook hands and said good-bye. Zhenbao and Dubao went to their room.

The next day, when Zhenbao came back from work and pressed the doorbell, Jiaorui opened the door, phone receiver in hand. It was dim in the hallway, which made it hard to see, but Shihong's hat and coat were gone from the coatrack, along with the leather suitcase that had been under the rack. He must have left already. Taking off his coat and hanging it on the rack, Zhenbao heard Jiaorui dial a phone number in the other room. "Please ask Mr. Sun to come to the phone," she said. Zhenbao listened. He heard her ask, "Is this Timmy? No, I'm not going out today, I'm at home waiting for a boyfriend." She started to giggle. "Who is he? I'm not telling you. Why should I tell you? . . . Ah, so you're not interested? Not even interested in yourself, are you . . . Anyway, I'm waiting for him to come for tea at five o'clock. I'm waiting specially for him, so don't come over."

Zhenbao went to his room without waiting for her to finish. His brother wasn't there, or in the bathroom either. He went out to see if he

was on the balcony, and Jiaorui emerged from the living room to greet him. "Dubao asked me to tell you that he's making the rounds of the used bookstores to see if he can find some books."

"Oh, thank you," said Zhenbao. He took a good long look. She was wearing a long dress that trailed on the floor, a dress of such intense, fresh, and wet green that anything it touched turned the same color. When she moved a little, the air was streaked with green. The dress had been cut a bit too small, it seemed: the seams along the side were split open an inch and a half, then laced together, in a crisscross pattern, over a green satin strip that didn't fully cover a startling pink slip. Looked at too long, those eye-popping colors would prove blinding. Only Jiaorui could wear a dress like that with such utter insouciance.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked, turning back into the living room. She sat down at the table, and lifted the pot to pour the tea. The table was set for two, with a plate of butter biscuits and toast. Zhenbao stood by the glass door.

"Isn't there a guest coming?"

"We won't wait for him. Let's go ahead and have something to eat."

Zhenbao hesitated, unable to figure out what she had in mind. Then, just for the time being, he sat down.

"Do you take milk?" Jiaorui asked.

"Either way."

"Oh, that's right, you like green tea. You were abroad so many years and couldn't get it there—that's what you said yesterday."

"You have a good memory."

Getting up to ring the bell, Jiaorui threw him a glance. "No, you don't know. Usually my memory is terrible."

Zhenbao's heart jumped, and he was knocked off balance. The amah came in. "Make two cups of green tea," Jiaorui ordered.

"Ask her to bring another teacup and plate while she's at it," said Zhenbao, "for the guest who's coming later."

Jiaorui gave him a sharp look. "Who is this guest that you're so anxious about? Amah, bring me a pen and a piece of paper." She dashed off a note, then pushed it across to Zhenbao. Two lines, simple and succinct: *Dear Timmy, So very sorry, but I have something to do today. I've gone*

out.—*Jiaorui*. She folded the paper over and gave it to the amah. “Mr. Sun will come in a little while. When he does, give this to him and tell him I’m not home.”

The amah went out. Zhenbao took a biscuit. “I don’t understand you,” he said. “Why go to so much trouble, asking a man to come to your house, then turn him away empty-handed?”

Jiaorui leaned forward, carefully considering the selection of biscuits on the plate, but she couldn’t find any that she liked. “When I asked him to come I didn’t plan to turn him away.”

“Oh? A last-minute decision?”

“Don’t you know the saying? It’s a woman’s prerogative to change her mind.”

The amah brought the green tea, leaves floating all over the surface of the water. Zhenbao held the glass in both hands without drinking. His eyes were fixed on the tea but his mind was elsewhere, working things out. Jiaorui was still carrying on with that Mr. Sun behind her husband’s back, and evidently she was worried that Zhenbao would see what was going on. That’s why she’d put on this sweet act today. She wanted to win him over so he’d keep his mouth shut. But in fact Zhenbao had no intention of interfering in their private lives. It wasn’t that his bond with Wang Shihong was too weak—even if they’d been blood brothers, stirring up disputes between a husband and wife was not his style. Even so, this woman could cause a lot of trouble. Zhenbao redoubled his caution.

Jiaorui set down her tea glass and rose to get a jar of peanut butter from the cabinet. “I’m a trashy person, and I like to eat trashy things.”

“Oh, my! This stuff is very rich, very fattening!”

Jiaorui took off the lid. “I love breaking the rules. Don’t you approve of rule-breaking?”

Zhenbao put his hand on top of the glass jar. “No.”

Jiaorui hesitated for a long moment. Then she said, “How about this? You put some on the bread for me. I’m sure you won’t give me too much.”

Her expression was so pitiful that he couldn’t help laughing. Zhenbao spread peanut butter on the bread. Jiaorui watched him closely over

the edge of her cup, pursed her lips, and laughed. "Do you know why I had you do it for me? If I did it myself, all of a sudden I might turn conscientious and spread it as thin as possible. But I know that you'd feel bad if you only gave me a little!" At this they both laughed. Unable to resist Jiaorui's childlike charm, Zhenbao gradually softened.

As they were drinking their tea, the doorbell sounded. Zhenbao got restless. For the third time now he asked, "Is that the guest you invited? Don't you feel embarrassed?" Jiaorui shrugged.

Taking his glass with him, Zhenbao went out to the balcony. "When he comes back through the door, I want to see the kind of person he is."

"Him?" said Jiaorui, following behind. "Very pretty. Too, too pretty."

"You don't like pretty men?" said Zhenbao, leaning against the railing.

"Men should not be pretty. Men get spoiled even more easily than women do."

Zhenbao lowered his eyelids, then looked at her. "You shouldn't talk about others," he said with a smile. "You've been terribly spoiled."

"Maybe. But you're just the opposite. You deny yourself when in fact you like to eat and play around as much as I do."

"Really?" Zhenbao laughed. "And you know all about it!"

Jiaorui looked down and started picking tea leaves out of her glass. She kept picking away, until at last she took a sip. Zhenbao too drank his tea in silence.

A little while later, a man in a Western suit came out of the building. Zhenbao couldn't see much from the third floor, but it looked like the man rushed around the corner, his body tense with anger.

"Poor guy," Zhenbao couldn't help saying. "He came all this way for nothing!"

"So what? He has nothing to do all day long! I too have nothing to do, but I have no respect for people like me. What I like most is to wrest a bit of time from a man who's already very busy—the way a tiger seizes its prey. Pretty despicable, don't you think?"

Zhenbao was leaning against the railing. He tapped his foot against

the railing and then, bit by bit, not entirely intentionally, he started kicking at her rattan chair. When the chair shook, the flesh on her arm trembled slightly. She wasn't fat at all, but because of her small frame she seemed plump. "So you like busy men?" Zhenbao smiled.

Jiaorui hid her eyes with her hand. "Actually, it doesn't matter. My heart's an apartment."

"So—is there an empty room for rent?" Jiaorui didn't answer. "I'm not used to living in an apartment. I want to live in a single-family house."

She gave a little grunt of disbelief. "Well," she said, "let's see if you can tear one down and build the other!"

Zhenbao gave her chair a good hard kick. "Just watch me!"

Jiaorui took her hand from her eyes and gave him a long look. "You're wicked!"

"Can't help myself, with you."

"Come on, be serious," Jiaorui said. "Why don't you tell me something about your past."

"What past?"

Jiaorui's leg swept out, almost spilling the tea in his hand. "Faker! I already know all about it."

"If you know, why ask? Wouldn't it be better if you told me something about your past?"

"My past?" She leaned her head to one side and rubbed her cheek on her shoulder. After a long moment's silence, she softly said, "There isn't much to tell." There was another long silence.

"Well then, please tell," Zhenbao urged. But Jiaorui fell into thought and said nothing, her eyes fixed straight ahead. "How did you and Shihong meet?" he asked.

"In a very ordinary way," she said. "The student associations held a meeting in London. I was a representative and so was he."

"Were you at the University of London?"

"My family sent me to London to study, but the real reason was to find a suitable husband. I was quite young and had no wish at all to get married, but I used this as an excuse to escape from home and have a good

time. After a few years of having a good time, my reputation wasn't all that good, so I looked around and grabbed this Shihong fellow."

Zhenbao kicked her chair lightly. "And you still haven't had enough of the good times?"

"It's not a question of having enough or not. Once you've learned to do something, you can't just put it aside and give it up."

"Don't forget that you're in China now," Zhenbao said with a smile.

Jiaorui finished her tea in one swallow, stood, and spat the tea leaves over the railing. "In China, you have Chinese freedoms: you can spit on the street if you want."

The doorbell rang again, and Zhenbao guessed that it was his brother. It was in fact Dubao, and now that he was back, things took a different turn.

Later on, Zhenbao reviewed the whole scene in his mind. Out on the dusky balcony he hadn't been able to see her clearly; he'd only heard her soft voice secretly rustling, tickling his ear like a breath. There in the dark, her heartrending body slipped out of his mind for a moment, and he had a chance to see what else there was to her. She seemed smart and straightforward, but with the emotions of a still-maturing girl—even though she was a wife already. That, for him, was her most appealing feature. There was a danger here, a danger much greater than simple lust. He could not, must not, get serious about her! It would only be looking for trouble. Maybe . . . maybe it was just her body after all. When a man yearns for a woman's body, then starts to care about her mind, he fools himself into believing that he's in love. Only after possessing her body can he forget her soul. This may be the only way to free himself. And why not? Jiaorui had a lot of lovers—one more or one less wouldn't make much difference. He couldn't pretend that Wang Shihong wouldn't care, but then again it wouldn't make things any worse than they already were, for him.

Suddenly, Zhenbao realized that he was digging for reasons to justify sleeping with this woman. He was mortified, and resolved to avoid her from this point on. He would look for another place to live. As soon as

he found something, he would move. Zhenbao asked someone to help him get a bed for his brother in the dormitory at the technical school. With only himself to look after, things were easy to arrange. He'd been taking his lunches at a restaurant near the office; now he went out for dinner too. He stayed away until late at night and went straight to bed.

But one night the phone rang for a long time, and no one picked up. Zhenbao had just run out of his room to get it when he thought he heard Jiaorui's door opening. Afraid of running into her in the dark hallway, he beat a retreat. Jiaorui was groping around in the dark, seemingly unable to find the phone, and since Zhenbao was right by the light switch, he turned it on. He was stunned when he saw Wang Jiaorui in the light. She was wearing pajamas made out of a sarong fabric often worn by overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and it looked like she had just come from her bath. The design on the fabric was so heavy and dark that he couldn't tell whether it was snakes and dragons, or grasses and trees, the lines and vines all tangled up together, black and gold flecked with orange and green. Night deepened in the house. The dim lamp-lit hallway felt like a train car traveling from one strange place to another. On the train you meet a woman quite by accident—a woman who could be a friend.

Jiaorui lifted the receiver with one hand, the other hand searching along her side to find a little golden peach-stone button and slip it through its loop. She couldn't get it to button properly. Zhenbao didn't see anything, but he was shaken. His heart hung in midair. Jiaorui had turned sideways, and swept her loose, uncombed hair back across her shoulders. Her face was shadowy and golden, like an idol's; her lowered eyelashes cast long shadows that touched her cheek like the fingers of a small hand. She'd been in such a hurry that she'd lost one of her leather slippers. The bare foot rested on the slipped one.

Zhenbao noticed a trace of heat-rash powder on her ankle. Jiaorui hung up the phone. It was a wrong number. She stood there unsteadily, then sank into a chair, the phone still in her hand. Zhenbao put his hand on the doorknob to show that he didn't intend to chat. He nodded. "How is it that I haven't seen you lately?" he said. "I thought you'd melted away like candy." He knew, of course, that it was he who'd been

avoiding her, not the other way around, but jumping in before she'd had a chance to speak was a form of self-defense. It was tiresome, no doubt, but when he saw her, he had to flirt. Some women are like that.

"Am I so sweet?" she replied nonchalantly, feeling around for her slipper with her bare foot.

"I don't know," Zhenbao replied boldly. "Haven't tasted."

Jiaorui gave a little laugh. She still couldn't find the slipper, and Zhenbao couldn't stand it anymore. He walked over and leaned down to pick it up for her, but just then her foot slipped in.

Now he was embarrassed. "Where have your servants gone?" he demanded, for no reason.

"An old hometown neighbor came to visit the majordomo and amah, and the three of them went off to the Cosmo to have some fun."

"Oh." Then, with a smile, he said, "Aren't you afraid of being alone in the house?"

Jiaorui stood up. Her slippers scuffed along as she went toward her room. "Afraid of what?"

"You're not afraid of me?"

"What?" she said without turning her head. "I'm not afraid of being alone with a gentleman!"

Now Zhenbao leaned back against the doorknob, his hand behind him, as if he had no intention of leaving. "I've never pretended to be a gentleman."

"A real gentleman doesn't need to pretend." She had opened her door, but then reached back to flick off the hall light. Zhenbao stood in the darkness, thoroughly shaken. In spite of his excitement, she was gone.

Zhenbao tossed and turned all night, telling himself that it wouldn't matter, that Jiaorui and Rose were not the same, that a married woman who did what she liked was the loosest of women, that he didn't owe her anything. But he felt a sense of duty toward himself. When he thought about Rose, he thought of that night in the car in the open fields when his conduct had been so sterling: How could he shrug off the man he'd shown himself to be?

Two weeks passed, and all at once the weather turned warm. Zhen-

bao went to work in his shirtsleeves, but before long it started to sprinkle and a chill blew in. He went back during his lunch break to get his coat. It had been hanging on the rack in the hall, but now it was gone. He searched and searched for it and eventually he started to worry. He saw that the living-room door had been left ajar. He pushed it open and there was his coat, hooked on the frame of an oil painting: Jiaorui was sitting on the sofa beneath, quietly lighting a cigarette. Surprised, Zhenbao quickly retreated, squeezing himself out of sight. But he couldn't resist taking another peek. Jiaorui, it turned out, wasn't smoking at all. There was an ashtray on the arm of the sofa, and she struck a match, lit the stub of an old cigarette, and watched it burn all the way down. When at last it singed her fingers, she threw the butt aside, lifted her fingers to her mouth and blew on them lightly, a look of utter contentment on her face. The cloisonné ashtray, he realized, was from his room.

Zhenbao was bewildered, and he slipped away like a thief. It seemed incomprehensible at first, and even after thinking it through, he was mystified: Jiaorui, smitten, sitting near his coat and letting the cigarette scent from his clothes waft down over her. As if that weren't enough, she'd lit his used cigarette butts . . . she really was a child, spoiled rotten, someone who'd always gotten whatever she wanted, and now that she'd run into someone with an ounce of resistance, she dreamed only of him. The mind of a child and the beauty of a grown woman: the most tempting of combinations. Zhenbao could no longer resist.

He still ate dinner in a restaurant and arranged to meet several friends there, but the longer he sat in the crowd the more insipid he found the talk, the more detestable the company. He was impatient throughout the meal, and afterward he jumped on a bus to go back to the apartment. Jiaorui was playing the piano: "Shadow Waltz," a tune popular at the time. Hands thrust into his pockets, Zhenbao paced the balcony. The lamp on the piano lit up Jiaorui's face; he had never seen her looking so peaceful. Zhenbao hummed along with the piano, but she seemed not to hear; she just kept playing, beginning a new tune. Zhenbao didn't have the courage to sing. Standing in the doorway, he watched Jiaorui for a long time, tears welling up in his eyes, because he and she were really

in the same place now, two people together, body and soul. He wished that she'd look up and see his tears, but instead she kept on playing. Zhenbao started to worry. He came over to turn the pages, intending to distract her. She paid no attention. She wasn't even looking at the music, she knew it all by heart and was focusing only on the unhurried flow of it from the tips of her fingers. Suddenly Zhenbao was angry and afraid. It was as if there were no connection between them. He sat down next to her on the piano bench, put his arm around her, and pulled her close. The music stopped abruptly; she tilted her face—all too skillfully. They kissed. Zhenbao's passion mounted. With a deafening crash he pushed her down onto the keyboard. There was a chaotic tempest of sound. Surely this was different from all the other times she'd been kissed.

Jiaorui's bed was too fancy for Zhenbao; he didn't sleep well on the thick bedding. Even though he rose early, he still felt as if he'd overslept. Combing his hair he found a sliver of clipped fingernail, a tiny red crescent moon. She'd scratched him with her long nails; as he was drifting off to sleep, he'd seen her sitting on the bed clipping them. Had there been a moon that night? He hadn't checked, but it must have been a red crescent moon.

After that, he came straight home after work, sitting on the top of a double-decker bus and facing the setting sun, the windowpane a sheet of light as the bus roared toward the sun, toward his happiness, his shameful happiness. How could it not be shameful? His woman ate another man's rice, lived in another man's house, went by another man's name. But feeling that he shouldn't be doing this only made his happiness more perfect.

It was if he'd fallen from a great height. An object that falls from high above is many times heavier than its original weight. Jiaorui, struck by that startlingly great weight, was knocked dizzy.

"I really love you," she said. But she was mocking him still, just a little. "Want to know something? Every day, when I sit here waiting for you to come back, I hear the elevator slowly clanking its way up. When it goes past our floor without stopping, it feels like my own heart's gone up, that it's just hanging in midair. But when the elevator stops before it reaches our floor, it seems like my breath's been cut off."

"So—there's an elevator in your heart. It looks as though your heart is still an apartment."

Jiaorui smiled gently, then walked over to the window and looked out, hands clasped behind her back. After a moment, she said, "The house that you wanted has been built."

At first Zhenbao didn't understand; when he did, he was staggered. He'd never been one to fool around with words, but now he tried something new. Taking a pen from the desk, he wrote "Happy heartwarming! Many congratulations on your new home!" And yet he couldn't really say that he was pleased. The thrill of pleasure had made his whole body sing, but all at once it was quiet. Now there was only a desolate calm; he felt sated and empty at the same time.

When they embraced again, Jiaorui wrapped herself around him, she held him so tightly that she blushed. "It's the same, isn't it, even if there's no love? If I could be like this with you, without any real feeling of love, you'd certainly lose all respect for me." She gripped him still more tightly. "Don't you feel the difference? Don't you?"

"Of course I do." But actually he couldn't tell. The old Jiaorui had been too good at feigning love.

Never before had she been in love like this. Even she didn't know why she loved Zhenbao so much. She'd watch him closely, her gaze both tender and mocking, mocking him and mocking herself.

He was a man with a future, of course, a top-notch textile engineer. His working style was special: nose to the grindstone, too busy to lift his head. The foreign boss was constantly calling for him: "Tong! Tong! Where's Tong?" Zhenbao pushed a lock of hair from his forehead, eyes gleaming behind his glasses, the frames flashing. He liked summer, but even when it wasn't summer he'd be so busy that he'd work up a sweat. The elbows and knees of his Western-style suit were full of creases like laugh lines. Chinese colleagues would complain about the shabby way he looked.

He told Jiaorui how competent he was and how efficient. She praised him, rubbing his hair. "Oh yes. My little one is really talented. But you know that. If you didn't, where would we be? It's in other ways that you're not so clever. I love you—did you know that? I love you."

He showed off in front of her, and she showed off in front of him. The only thing she was really good at was leading men on. Like the tumbler who excelled at turning somersaults and turned somersaults for the Virgin Mary, Jiaorui was sincerely pious: she offered up her art to her beloved. She'd provoke a man, and when he responded accordingly, she'd glance over at Zhenbao with a humble smile, as if to say, "This is what I know—and if I didn't, where would we be?" That Timmy Sun of hers was still in a sulk, and yet she found ways to tease him. Zhenbao understood what she was doing; it was tiresome, he thought, but he put up with it because it was just her childishness. Being with Jiaorui was like living with a swarm of teenagers—enough to make you old in no time.

Sometimes they discussed her husband's return. Zhenbao would wear a dark, defeated smile. His eyes and his eyebrows drooped; his whole face hung down in a mess like a mop. The entire relationship was illicit, but he kept using this sinfulness as a spur, pushing himself to love her even more fiercely. Jiaorui didn't understand the full nature of his feeling, but it made her happy to see him suffer. Back when she was a student in England—jumping out of bed, putting on lipstick without even bothering to wash her face, and running out to see her boyfriends—men had of course threatened to kill themselves for her sake. "I spent the whole night pacing under your window," they'd say. "I couldn't sleep." That meant nothing. But making a man suffer for real—that was something else again.

One day she said, "I've been thinking about how to tell him when he comes back," just as if it had already been decided that she would inform Shihong about everything, divorce him, and marry Zhenbao. Zhenbao wasn't brave enough to say anything then. But his dark, defeated smile was not having the desired effect, so later on he said, "Let's not rush into this blindly. Let me talk to a lawyer friend of mine first—get things clear. You know, if this isn't handled properly, there could be quite a price to pay." As a businessman, he felt that merely by uttering the word "lawyer" he'd gotten seriously involved in something—much too seriously. But Jiaorui didn't notice his qualms. She was full of confidence, sure that once the problem on her side was solved, it would all be clear sailing.

Jiaorui often called him at his office. She had no restraint, and it upset him. One day she phoned to say, "Why don't we go out later and have some fun?"

Zhenbao wanted to know why she was so happy.

"You like me to wear those prim and proper Chinese fashions, don't you? I had a new outfit made, and it came today. I want to wear it someplace."

"How about a movie?"

He and some colleagues had chipped in together to buy a small car, and Jiaorui liked to go out for a ride. She had a plan that Zhenbao was going to teach her to drive. "After I've learned I'll buy a car too," she announced. So Shihong would buy it for her? Her words stuck in Zhenbao's craw; he couldn't quite digest it.

Jiaorui didn't seem all that excited about seeing a movie. "Okay," she said, "if we can take the car."

"So what are your feet for?" he laughed.

"Chasing you!" And she laughed too. After that, things got busy at the office. Zhenbao had to get off the phone.

But that day another colleague happened to need the car, and Zhenbao was always self-sacrificing, especially when it came to pleasures. He was dropped off at the street corner—from the apartment window Jiaorui saw him stop to buy the evening paper, though she couldn't tell if he was looking at ads for the movies. She rushed out to meet him at the street door. "If we don't have the car, we can't make it to the 5:15 movie. Let's forget about it."

Zhenbao looked at her and smiled. "So do you want to go someplace else? You look great."

Jiaorui hooked her arm in his. "Won't it be fun just to walk along the avenue?"

But Zhenbao kept fretting, wanting to know how she felt about this place, then that one. They passed a Western-style restaurant with music. She turned it down. "The truth is, I'm pretty broke these days!" he said.

"Oh, dear," she laughed. "If I'd known that, I'd never have gotten mixed up with you!"

Just then, Zhenbao recognized an old foreign lady that he knew—somebody through whom his family had sent money and packages when he was studying abroad. Mrs. Ashe was British but she'd married a Eurasian, which made her self-conscious and as British as British can be. She was tall and stooped and wore an elaborate dress, a foreign-style print that sagged around her frame and made her look like an old beggar. Her hat was a robin's egg blue, mottled with black, and she'd stuck a pearlheaded hatpin and a swallow feather in it. Under the hat was a circle of gray hair, pressed flat like a wig, and her eyes looked as if they were made of pale blue porcelain. Her English came out very softly, her voice breathy and conspiratorial. Zhenbao shook hands with her. "Are you still living in the same place?" he asked.

"At first we were going to go home this summer, but my husband just can't get away!" Going to England was "going home" even though her husband's family had lived in China for three generations, and she herself had no living relatives in England.

Zhenbao introduced Jiaorui. "This is Mrs. Shihong Wang. Wang was in Edinburgh also, and Mrs. Wang spent many years in London. I'm living at their place now."

Mrs. Ashe was accompanied by her daughter. Zhenbao, of course, had considerable experience with mixed-blood girls. Miss Ashe pursed her red lips but didn't say much. She had dark brown eyes peering out of a pointed, white-peach face. A woman who doesn't yet have her own household, her own portion of worry and duty and joy, will often have that watchful, waiting look. And yet Miss Ashe, young as she was, didn't yearn for domesticity; she wasn't a girl with a heart "launched like an arrow toward home." Career girls in the city often have a harried look, and Miss Ashe's eyes were puffy, her face drawn and pale. In China, as elsewhere, the constraints imposed by the traditional moral code were originally constructed for the benefit of women: they made beautiful women even harder to obtain, so their value rose, and ugly women were spared the prospect of never-ending humiliation. Women nowadays don't have this kind of protective buffer, especially not mixed-blood girls, whose status is so entirely undefined. There was a razor edge to Miss Ashe's exhausted peering gaze.

Jiaorui could see at a glance that in going home mother and daughter would be headed straight into the English lower middle class. But they were Zhenbao's friends, and she was eager to make a good impression; also, for some reason, the presence of other females made her feel like a "proper woman" again. She was a full-status wife. She ought to exude an air of dignified affluence. Zhenbao rarely saw her smiling so serenely, almost like a movie star; suddenly she became a sapphire from whose depths a flickering lamp draws waves of light and shadow. Jiaorui was wearing a cheongsam of dark purple-blue georgette, and a little heart-shaped gold pendant gleamed faintly at her breast, cold and splendid—as if she had no other heart. Zhenbao looked at her, and he was both pleased and suspicious; if there'd been a man around how different things would have been!

Mrs. Ashe asked about Mrs. Tong, and Zhenbao said, "My mother's health is fine. She still looks after the whole family." He turned to Jiaorui. "My mother often does the cooking, and she's a very good cook. I always say we're very lucky to have a mother like that!" Whenever he praised his widowed mother, he was reminded of the many years of grievous hardship his family had endured, and he couldn't help gnashing his teeth. He smiled, but as the full weight of his ambitions bore down on him, his heart was like a rock.

Mrs. Ashe asked about his younger brother and sisters. "Dubao is a good kid, he's in technical school now, and later on our factory might send him to England to study." Even the two sisters were praised—the whole family was ideal—until Mrs. Ashe had to exclaim, "You really are something! I've always said that your mother must be very proud of you!" Zhenbao was suitably modest. He asked how things were going for everyone in the Ashe family.

Seeing the newspaper rolled up in his hand, Mrs. Ashe inquired if there was any news this evening. Zhenbao handed her the paper, but her eyesight was so poor that even when she held it at arm's length she still couldn't make anything out. She asked her daughter to read it for her.

"I was planning to take Mrs. Wang to see a movie, but there aren't any good ones," Zhenbao said. In front of other people his attitude toward Jiaorui was a little stiff—he wanted to show that he was only a family

friend—but Miss Ashe's quiet, watchful eyes made him feel he was giving everything away. Zhenbao leaned close to Jiaorui. Very familiarly, he said, "I'll make it up to you another time, okay?" He looked at her with shining eyes and laughed. Immediately after, he was sorry—as if he'd gotten too excited while talking and sprayed spit in someone's face. He had always taken this Miss Ashe for a keen observer. She was young and she had nothing, not even a personality; she was just waiting for the approach of everything in the world. Already its huge shadow had fallen across her otherwise expressionless features.

Jiaorui was young, and she had all sorts of things, but somehow they didn't count. She seemed scatterbrained, like a child who goes out and picks dozens of violets, one by one, gathers them into a bunch and tosses them all away. Zhenbao had only his future to bank on, a future he'd prepared for all on his own. How could he bear to see it thrown to the wind? Rich young men and women are free to be careless—security is an inheritance for them—but for him it was not so easy! The four of them walked slowly down the same street, Mrs. Ashe in the safety and comfort of a room full of flowered wallpaper, while the three young people faced menace on every side—it boomed beneath them like a drum.

It was not yet dark, but the neon lights were shining; in the daylight they looked even more artificial, like costume jewelry. They passed a shop with lamps for sale, innumerable lamps under the neon glow, the whole place blazing with light. Behind the tin grill of a snack shop, a waitress leaned forward to pick up a piece of pastry; her rouge-red cheeks looked good enough to eat. Did old people also see it like that? Walking next to the old woman, Zhenbao couldn't help feeling the brevity of youth. A row of shiny round-head spikes, their heads indented on four sides, marked off a pedestrian crosswalk; beside them the asphalt road looked as dark and soft as rubber. Zhenbao swayed along, letting his body go. He couldn't tell whether it was his own gait that was rubbery or the road underfoot.

Mrs. Ashe praised the fabric of Jiaorui's dress. Then she said, "I saw a piece like that, last time I was at the Huilou fine goods shop. Dolly turned it down because she thought it was too dark. I still wanted to buy it, but then I thought, well, I don't often have an occasion for wearing

such clothes . . .” She didn’t seem to feel that what she said was sad, but the others all fell silent, unable to respond. “So Mr. Ashe must be very busy?” Zhenbao finally asked.

“Oh, yes. Otherwise, we’d go home for a visit this summer. But he really can’t get away!”

“Some Sunday when I have the car, I’ll come and fetch you all and take you to Jiangwan to have some Chinese snacks made by my mother.”

“That would be wonderful! My husband simply dotes on Chinese things!”

She sounded just like a rich foreign visitor; no one would have guessed that her husband was half Chinese.

After saying good-bye to Mrs. Ashe and her daughter, Zhenbao remarked to Jiaorui, as if in explanation, “That Mrs. Ashe is a really good person.”

Jiaorui looked at him and smiled. “I think you are a really good person.”

“Just how am I so very good?” Suddenly his face was right in hers.

“I’ll tell you—don’t get angry. When a woman sees a man who’s good like you, she wants to fix him up with someone else. She doesn’t even think of keeping him for herself.”

“So you don’t like good men?”

“When a woman likes a good man it’s because she thinks she can trap him.”

“Oh-ho! So you’re planning to trap me, is that it?”

Jiaorui paused. She gave him a sideways glance and started to smile but she stopped. “This time, it’s the bad girl who’s been trapped!”

That sideways glance, those soft words—they were intolerable to him at the moment. Later that evening, stretched out in Jiaorui’s bed, he thought about the meeting with Mrs. Ashe on the street, about his studies in Edinburgh, when his family had sent him money and packages, and about how it was now time to repay his mother. He wanted to get ahead, move up in the world, and the first step was to rise in his profession. After he’d made it to a suitably high position, he’d contribute something to society—for instance, he could set up an industrial-science school for

poor boys, or a model textile factory in his hometown, Jiangwan. Vague as it all was, even now he had a fuzzy intimation of the warm welcome awaiting him—not just from his own mother but from a whole world of mothers, tearful, and with eyes only for him.

Jiaorui was fast asleep, curled up close to him, the sound of her breathing loud in his ear. Suddenly she seemed a thing apart, and somehow alien. He sat up on the edge of the bed and groped around in the dark until he found a cigarette and lit it. He didn't think Jiaorui had noticed, but in fact she was awake. After a long while she reached out, feeling for his hand. "Don't worry," she said softly, "I'll be good." She laid his hand on her shoulder.

Her words made him weep, but the tears too were a thing apart, and somehow alien.

Zhenbao didn't answer, letting his hands roam over familiar places. Soon the sun would rise. The city was full of the muffled noise of crowing cocks.

The next day, they spoke again of her husband's return. "Anyway, he'll be back sometime in the next few days," Jiaorui said with great certainty.

Zhenbao asked her how she knew, and only then did she tell him that she'd sent Shihong a letter by airmail telling him everything and asking for her freedom. Zhenbao gasped, the sound coming from deep within. He stood up and ran out onto the street. When he looked back at the towering apartment building, with its tall, flowing red-and-gray lines, it looked like a roaring train—incredibly huge and barreling straight down upon him, blocking out sun and moon. The situation was beyond repair. He'd thought that he had it all under control and that he could stop whenever he wanted, but now things had rushed forward on their own, there was no use in even arguing. The worst thing was that he didn't even want to argue—not when he was with her. It was so clear, then, that they loved each other and should go on loving each other. It was only when she wasn't there that he could think up all sorts of reasons against it. Right now, for instance, it struck him as all too likely that he'd been played for a fool in a deeper game with her true love, Timmy Sun. She'd pulled the wool over Zhenbao's eyes by saying that it was

because of him that she wanted a divorce, and now if there was a scandal, *his* future would be ruined.

He walked a long way without caring where. At a little restaurant, he had a few drinks and a bite to eat. When he came out, his stomach hurt. He got into a rickshaw, thinking he would visit Dubao in his dormitory, but in the rickshaw his stomach felt worse still. He lost control of himself—the tiniest tremor of pain was more than he could bear—and he panicked. Imagining he had cholera, he told the rickshaw driver to take him to the nearest hospital. Once he'd been admitted, he informed his mother; she rushed to the hospital right away. The next day she came bearing lotus-root powder and grape juice that she'd bought for him. Jiaorui showed up as well. His mother suspected that something was going on between them, and she made sure to scold him in front of Jiaorui.

"Getting sick to your stomach, that's nothing in itself, but I tossed and turned all night, worrying about you—a grown man and you still don't know how to take care of yourself! How on earth am I supposed to look after you all the time? And if I just let you do as you please, I'll be constantly worrying. But if you had a wife, I wouldn't have to. Mrs. Wang, please tell him—he'll listen to what his friends say, even if he won't listen to me. Oh, dear! Here I've been waiting so long till you'd finished your schooling and begun your career. Now that you're finally getting somewhere, don't think you can just let go, let everything fall apart! You have to earn the respect you receive. Mrs. Wang, please, you tell him for me."

Jiaorui pretended not to understand Chinese; she just stood there smiling. Zhenbao's thoughts were in fact very similar to his mother's, but when he heard her, he felt that the way she put things was somehow humiliating. He was embarrassed, and found an excuse to send her away.

That left him with Jiaorui. She walked over to the bed and leaned over the white metal railing, her whole body a painful question mark. Zhenbao rolled away impatiently; he couldn't explain and he couldn't escape his mother's logic. Jiaorui closed the curtain, and the sunlight on his pillow turned to cool shadow. She didn't leave, but stayed to

nurse him, bringing tea, water, the bedpan. The enamel basin was ice-cold against his skin; her hands were just as cold. When he happened to glance her way, she seized the chance to speak: "Don't be afraid . . ." He hated her saying that he was afraid; his expression changed, and she stopped. More time passed. "I have really changed . . ." she said. Again he shifted uncomfortably, to keep her from speaking. "I won't bring you any trouble, I promise . . ." And then, "You can't leave me, Zhenbao . . ." Her broken sentences hung in midair like the pendulums of several clocks, each ticking along at a different speed, each following its own logic and reaching its own conclusions, each rising up at a different moment, each hammering its bell at a different time . . . to Zhenbao it seemed that the room was filled with Jiaorui's voice, even though she had long since fallen silent.

Evening came, and with the lamps still unlit she threw herself on him and wept. Even in her humiliation she had strength. Through the blanket and the sheet he could feel the firmness of her arms. But he didn't want her strength; he already had his own.

She threw herself across his waist and legs and she wailed. Her hair, a mess of soft, loose curls, exuded heat like a brazier. She was like a child who's been wronged, who cries so much that she can't stop, doesn't know how to, hoarsely crying on and on, having forgotten why she started to cry in the first place. For Zhenbao it was the same. "No, no, no . . . Don't go on like this, it won't do . . ." The words required an enormous struggle; he was fighting hard to subdue the surging waves of longing. He spent all his strength in saying "No, no, no" even though he'd forgotten what it was he meant to refuse.

But finally he found something suitable to say. With great effort, he raised his knees, making her get up. "Jiaorui," he said, "if you love me, then you have to consider my situation. I can't cause my mother pain. Her way of thinking is different from ours, but we have to think about her, since she has only me to depend on. The world would never forgive me. And Shihong is, after all, my friend. Our love can only be love between friends. What happened before is my mistake, and I'm very sorry. But now you've written and told him without letting me know—that's your mistake. Jiaorui, what do you say? When he comes, tell him

you were only fooling, that you just wanted him to come back early. He'll believe you—if he wants to.”

Jiaorui lifted a red, swollen face and stared. In a flash, she stood straight up, apparently astonished to find herself in such a state. She took a small mirror out of her purse, glanced into it while tilting her head this way and that, tossed her hair back loosely, wiped her eyes with a handkerchief, blew her nose, and, without looking at him once, walked out.

Zhenbao didn't sleep well that night, and with dawn came new awareness; it seemed as if someone had come during the night and fallen across him, weeping. At first he thought it was a dream, but then he realized that it was Jiaorui: probably she'd been there for a long time now crying. The warmth of the woman's body lay over him like an eider-down quilt on satin sheets. He luxuriated in the moment, breaking out in a gentle sweat.

When he was fully awake, Jiaorui left without a word. He didn't say anything either. Later he heard that she and Wang Shihong had decided to divorce, but it all seemed very remote. His mother cried in front of him a few times, urging him to marry, and he put it off for a while, then finally agreed. His mother arranged the introductions. “She's the one then,” he said to himself, when he met Miss Meng Yanli.

They met first in someone's living room. Yanli was standing by a glass door wearing a silk shift with ruddy orange stripes on a gray background. Zhenbao's immediate impression, however, was of a vague, enveloping whiteness. Yanli was tall and slender, like a single straight line; the only hint of a twist or turn came at the tips of her girlish breasts and the jutting bones of her hips. When a breeze stirred, and her dress swept out behind her, it made her look thin and frail. Her face was soft and very pretty, and yet the main effect was of whiteness. Yanli's father had died, and her family's fortunes had gone into decline, but at one time they had been a wealthy merchant family, so the two of them had similar family backgrounds. The young lady was twenty-two years old and would soon be graduating from college. Her college wasn't a very good one, just the best she could get into, but Yanli was a good student in a mediocre place; she studied hard and didn't associate much with

her classmates. Her whiteness, like a portable hospital screen, separated her from the bad things in her environment. It also separated her from the things in her books. For ten years now Yanli had gone to school, diligently looking up new words, memorizing charts, copying from the blackboard, but between her and everything else there always seemed to be a white membrane. In middle school, she'd received letters from some boys—the elder brothers of her classmates, for the most part. When her family found out about it, they told her not to get involved with people like that. Yanli had never written back.

Zhenbao planned to marry her in two months, after her graduation. During this time, he took her out to the movies a few times. Yanli rarely spoke or raised her head and always walked a little behind him. She knew very well that according to modern etiquette she should walk in front, let him help her put on her coat and wait on her, but she was uncomfortable exercising her new rights. She hesitated, and this made her seem even slower and more awkward. Zhenbao himself wasn't a natural-born gentleman, but he had worked hard to learn the part: he took the matter seriously and thought Yanli quite remiss in this regard. Fortunately, a shy shrinking manner in a young girl is not too unpleasant.

The engagement was short, and secretly Yanli was very disappointed; she'd always heard that these were the best days of one's life. Even so, she was very happy when the wedding day arrived. That morning, combing her hair while still half asleep, she lifted her arms up, looked in the mirror, and felt a strange sense of invigoration—as if she'd been crammed into a glass test tube and was now pushing her head up to pop the lid off, ready to leap from the present into future. The present was good, but the future would be better. Yanli stretched her arms out of the window of the future, and a vast wind blew through her hair.

The wedding was at Yi Pin Xiang Restaurant, with the banquet at Dongxing Restaurant. Zhenbao liked to make a good impression, but he was also careful with money—good enough was good enough for him. He rented a new house not far from his office and had his mother come from Jiangwan to live with them. He spent most of his earnings on work-related socializing, so the household budget was very tight. His mother and Yanli got along fairly well, but Zhenbao had many com-

plaints about Yanli and no one to tell them to. Yanli didn't like exercise; even "the best sort of indoor exercise" had no appeal for her. Zhenbao made a real effort to be a good husband and help her like it, but he didn't feel much physical attraction. At first she'd seemed cute, one undeveloped breast nestling in his hand like a sleeping bird with its own lightly beating heart, its sharp beak pecking at his palm, firm yet without strength—but then his hand had also lost its strength. Later on even this little bit of girlish beauty was gone. Gradually Yanli settled into her new environment, and as she did, she turned into a very dull wife.

Zhenbao started going to prostitutes. Once every three weeks—his life was, in every respect, well regulated. He and some friends would take rooms in a hotel and call in the women; they'd tell their families they'd gone to Suzhou and Hangzhou on business. He wasn't particular about faces, but he liked girls who were dark and a little bit plump. He wanted them fleshy and ashamed, which was his way of taking revenge on Rose and Wang Jiaorui, though he wouldn't let himself view it that way. If such a thing did enter his mind, he immediately reproached himself for desecrating treasured memories. For these two lovers, he reserved a sensitive spot, a sacred corner of his heart. Wang Jiaorui and Rose gradually became so mixed up in his mind that they became one: a naïve, passionate girl who had doted on him, a girl with no brains, or anything to cause him any trouble, though he—with his self-denying logic and steely, superhuman will—had left her.

Yanli had no idea about the prostitutes. She loved him simply because he, among so many others, happened to be her man. She was always saying things like "Wait and ask Zhenbao about it" or "Better take an umbrella, Zhenbao said it's going to rain." Zhenbao was her God, and assuming that role was no problem for him. When Yanli made a mistake, he'd reprimand her in front of other people, and if something escaped his attention, it never failed to escape his mother's. Each time she was scolded in front of the maidservant, Yanli could feel her authority crumbling away beneath her. When her orders weren't carried out, she was again to blame. She hated the disdain in the servants' eyes, and in dealing with them she protected herself by knitting her brows and pouting before she even spoke, her whole face a study in childish chagrin. When

she threw a tantrum, she always seemed to be talking back, like a maid or a concubine who has grown used to occupying the bottom rung.

The only time Yanli managed to be mistress of the house—for a few days at least—was when the servants were new, so she liked getting new servants as often as she could. Zhenbao's mother told everyone that her daughter-in-law was useless: "Poor Zhenbao, working so hard at his job to support the family, but when he comes home he's pestered with all sort of domestic details. He can't get a moment's peace." Her words got around to Yanli, and the anger built up in her heart. She grew angrier and angrier, and then she had a child. The delivery was difficult. Yanli felt she'd earned the right to throw a fit. But the child was a girl, and Yanli's mother-in-law had no intention of humoring her. Soon they were irritated with each other all the time. Fortunately, Zhenbao played peacemaker and the embarrassment of a direct confrontation was avoided, but his mother sullenly insisted on moving back to Jiangwan. Zhenbao was very disappointed in his wife: having married her for her tractability, he felt cheated. He was also unhappy with his mother—moving out like that and letting people say he wasn't a good son. He was still busy-busy, but gradually he succumbed to fatigue. Even the smiling wrinkles of his suit looked tired.

When Dubao graduated, Zhenbao, in his role as talent scout, found his brother a job at the factory. But Dubao didn't live up to his potential. Overshadowed by his older brother, he became a loafer, without ambition. He was still single, and quite content to live in a dormitory.

One morning Dubao showed up at Zhenbao's place with a question. The assistant manager of the factory would soon be returning to his home country, and everyone had contributed toward a gift which it was Dubao's job to purchase. Zhenbao advised him to go to a department store and see what sort of silver items they had. The two brothers left the house together and caught the same bus. Zhenbao sat down next to a woman who, without a glance, picked up the child beside her and put him on her lap. Zhenbao didn't pay any attention, but Dubao, sitting across the aisle, gasped in surprise. Lifting himself in his seat, he signaled to Zhenbao with his head. Only then did Zhenbao recognize Jiaorui. She was plumper than before, though certainly not paunchy, as

she'd once feared would happen to her. She looked tired, but she was carefully made up, and the pendants of her earrings were gold-colored Burmese Buddha heads. Jiaorui was middle-aged now, and her beauty had turned to plain good looks.

"Mrs. Zhu," said Dubao, smiling, "it's been a long time!"

Zhenbao remembered hearing that she had remarried—that she was now Mrs. Zhu. Jiaorui smiled back. "Yes, it really has been a long time!" she said.

Zhenbao nodded. "How have you been?" he asked.

"Just fine, thank you."

"Have you been in Shanghai all this time?" Dubao asked.

Jiaorui nodded.

"It seems a bit early in the morning for running errands," he continued.

"It certainly is!" Jiaorui said. She put her hand on the child's shoulder. "I'm taking him to the dentist. He got a toothache yesterday, kept me up all night with his fussing, and now I've got to take him in early."

"Which is your stop?" asked Dubao.

"The dentist's office is on the Bund. Are you two going to the office?"

"He is," said Dubao, "but I've got to do some shopping."

"Is everything still the same at the factory?" asked Jiaorui. "No big changes?"

"Hilton is going back. Now Zhenbao will be the assistant manager."

"Oh, my! That's wonderful!"

Dubao never talked this much when his older brother was present; Zhenbao could tell that Dubao felt it incumbent on him, under the circumstances, to do the talking. Which meant he must know all about their affair.

Dubao got off at the next stop. Zhenbao was silent for a while. He didn't look at Jiaorui. "Well, and how are you?" he asked the empty air.

Jiaorui was silent, but after a pause she said, "Just fine." The same question and same answer as before, but now they had an entirely different meaning.

"This Mr. Zhu—do you love him?"

Jiaorui nodded. When she answered, her words were interrupted by pauses. "Starting with you . . . I learned . . . how to love . . . to really love. Love is good. Even though I have suffered, I still want to love, and so . . ."

Zhenbao rolled up the square collar of her son's sailor outfit. "You're very happy," he said in a low voice.

Jiaorui laughed. "I had to forge ahead somehow. When I ran into something, well, that was it."

"What you run into is always a man," Zhenbao said with a cold smile.

Jiaorui wasn't angry. She tilted her head to one side and thought about it. "True," she said. "When I was young and pretty, I always ran into men. That probably would have happened no matter what I did, once my social life started. But now, there are other things besides men, always other things . . ."

Zhenbao stared at her, unaware that his heart, at that moment, was aching with jealousy.

"And you?" asked Jiaorui. "How are you?"

Zhenbao wanted to sum up his perfectly happy life in a few simple words, but as he was trying to find them, he looked up and saw his face in the small mirror on the bus driver's right. He knew his face was steady and calm, and yet the vibration of the bus made his face vibrate too, a strange, calm, regular vibration, almost as if his face was being gently massaged. All at once, Zhenbao's face really did begin to quiver; in the mirror he saw tears streaming down . . . he didn't know why. Shouldn't she have been the one to weep? It was all wrong, and yet he couldn't stop. She should be weeping, he should be comforting her. But Jiaorui didn't comfort him. She sat silently for a long time. Then she asked, "Is this your stop?"

He got off the bus and went to work as usual. It was Saturday, so they had the afternoon off. He went home at half past twelve. He had a small Western-style house with a big, imposing wall out front, but then all the houses in the area, row after row of them, looked exactly the same: gray cement walls, as smooth, shiny, and rectangular as coffins, with flower-

ing oleanders sticking up over the top. The courtyard inside was small, but it counted as a garden. Everything a home should have, his had. Small white clouds floated in the blue sky above, and on the street a flute vendor was playing the flute—a sharp, soft, sinuous, Oriental tune that twisted and turned in the ear like embroidery, like a picture of a dream in a novel, a trail of white mist coming out from under the bed curtain and unfurling all sorts of images, slowly uncoiling like a lazy snake, till finally the drowsiness is just too great, and even the dream falls asleep.

The house was perfectly quiet when Zhenbao walked in. His seven-year-old daughter, Huiying, was still at school; the maidservant had gone to fetch her. Zhenbao didn't want to wait; he told Yanli to go ahead and put the food on the table. He wolfed it down, as if to fill the emptiness in his heart with food.

After eating, he phoned Dubao to ask him how the shopping had gone. Dubao explained that he'd looked at several pieces of silver but none had been suitable. "I have a pair of silver vases here," said Zhenbao. "Someone gave them to us as wedding gifts. Take them to a shop and have them re-engraved. That should take care of it. You can return the money you've collected. It'll be my contribution." Dubao agreed, and Zhenbao said, "Perhaps you should come and get them now." He was anxious to see Dubao and to find out his reaction to seeing Jiaorui that morning. The whole scene had been so nonsensical—and his own response so absurd—that Zhenbao almost wondered if it had really happened.

Dubao came, and Zhenbao casually brought the conversation round to Jiaorui. Dubao tapped his cigarette like a man of experience: "She's gotten old, really old." Which apparently meant, for a woman, that she was finished.

Zhenbao reviewed the scene that morning: yes, she had grown old. But even this he envied. He looked at his wife. Eight years of marriage and still no trace of experience. She was hollow and spotless. She always would be.

He told Yanli to wrap up the two silver vases on the mantelpiece and give them to Dubao. She scrambled around to find a chair, removed the cushion, stood on the chair, got some newspaper from the top of the

cupboard, went back to the drawer for some string, found a string that was too short, wrapped up the vases and made a complete mess of it, even ripping the paper into pieces. Zhenbao watched the whole thing with growing irritation. All at once he strode over and grabbed the vases from her. He groaned loudly. "When a person's stupid, everything's a trial!"

Yanli's face flushed with resentment, like a slave girl's. But then she smiled and laughed, glancing quickly at Dubao to see if he was laughing too, afraid he might not have caught her husband's joke. She stood to one side with her arms folded while Zhenbao wrapped up the silver vases. Her features were strangely clouded, as if a white membrane had been stretched across her face.

Dubao was getting fidgety. At their house friends and relatives often got fidgety. He wanted to leave. Anxious to make up for the faux pas, Yanli rallied. She pressed him warmly to stay—"If you aren't busy." She fawned and smiled, her eyes narrowing, her nose wrinkling flirtatiously. She often surprised people with such an unexpected intimacy. If Dubao had been a woman, she would have taken his hand in her own moist palm and held on desperately—imposing herself in a way that was sure to prove distasteful.

Dubao said he really must go. At the door, he ran into the old maid-servant bringing Huiying back. Dubao took some gum from his trousers pocket and gave it to the girl. "Say 'Thank you, Uncle,'" Yanli chimed in. Huiying dodged away.

"Ah! So you're embarrassed!" Dubao laughed.

Huiying flipped up her Western-style skirt to hide her face, showing her underwear. "Now you should be really embarrassed!" Yanli cried out.

Huiying grabbed the gum, flipped the skirt over her face again, and ran away laughing.

Zhenbao sat watching his daughter, with her thin, yellow, prancing hands and feet. Before, this child had not existed. He had summoned her out of thin air.

Zhenbao went upstairs to wash his face; downstairs, Yanli turned on the radio to listen to the news. Zhenbao thought it was a good idea for

Yanli to listen to the news—part of a modern woman's education. Perhaps she'd even pick up a phrase or two of Mandarin. He didn't know that Yanli listened to the radio just to hear a human voice.

Zhenbao looked out of the window. The sky was blue and the clouds were white, the oleander was blooming in the courtyard, and the flute was still playing in the street—as sharp and wheedling as the voice of a low-class woman. It wasn't a very good flute. The notes were shrill and hurt his ears.

Here on this lovely spring afternoon, Zhenbao looked around at the world he had made. There was no way to destroy it.

The quiet house was filled with sunlight. Downstairs, a man's confident voice came over the radio, droning on and on.

From the moment Zhenbao got married, he'd been convinced that everyone around him, starting with his mother, should be patting him on the back and offering him encouragement. His mother knew how much he'd sacrificed, but he felt that even those who didn't know all the details owed him respect, owed him a little sympathy in compensation.

As a result, people often did make a point of praising him, though never enough, while Zhenbao devoted himself to doing all sorts of good deeds—things he'd take upon himself, without even being asked. He paid off some debts for Dubao, found him a wife, set him up in a house with his family. His sister was a particular problem, and this made him especially considerate toward unmarried or widowed friends. He got them jobs, money—there was nothing he wouldn't do. He spent a lot of time and effort obtaining a position for his sister at a school in the interior, because he'd heard that the male teachers there were all recent university graduates, every one of them unmarried. But his sister wasn't cut out for hardship; she threw a fit and came running back to Shanghai, not even finishing out her half-year contract. His mother sympathized with her daughter, and criticized Zhenbao for being hasty.

Yanli watched all this from the sidelines. It made her very angry on Zhenbao's behalf, and she complained to others whenever she could. But Yanli rarely saw anyone. Lacking a lively, sociable lady of the house, Zhenbao felt it was better to take people out, even if it did cost more. He never brought people home. But on those rare occasions when a friend

came looking for Zhenbao and found that he wasn't in, Yanli proved an attentive hostess. She'd treat the guest like the closest of friends, freely discussing Zhenbao.

"Zhenbao always gets the short end of the stick—he's so good to people, so sincere, and then he's the one who suffers! Ah—but that's how it is, isn't it, Mr. Zhang? Sincerity doesn't get you anywhere nowadays! Even his own sister and brother are ungrateful, not to mention the friends who come around only when they want something—and they're all like that! I've seen it all, and Zhenbao won't change his ways, not one bit, even though he's the one who suffers, each and every time. A good man has no place in our world today! That's how it is, isn't it, Mr. Zhang?"

The friend would feel that soon he too would be numbered among the ungrateful, and a chill would creep into his heart. None of Zhenbao's friends liked Yanli, even though she was pretty, quiet, and refined, just the wife for someone else, a perfect backdrop for men busily engaged in vigorous, freewheeling conversation.

Yanli had no women friends of her own, so she had no chance to compare her life with others' and find out how low she'd fallen in her own household. Zhenbao didn't encourage her to interact with other married women because he knew that she wasn't up to it. Placed in an unfamiliar situation, she would just reveal all her weaknesses and encourage gossip. He forgave her for telling people he was unappreciated, because a woman's perspective is always limited. Anyway, she was protecting him; she hated to see him exploited. But when she made similar comments to the old maidservant, Zhenbao's temper got the better of him and he intervened. Then there was the time he heard Yanli complaining to eight-year-old Huiying. He didn't say anything about it, but not long after he sent Huiying off to boarding school. The house grew even quieter.

Yanli began to suffer from constipation. She sat in the bathroom for several hours each day. That was the only place where it was all right to do nothing, say nothing, think nothing. The rest of the time she also did nothing, said nothing, and thought nothing, but she always felt a little uneasy about it. Only in the day-lit bathroom could she settle down and

feel rooted. Yanli bent her head and stared at her own snow-white stomach, that stretch of pure gleaming white. Sometimes she stuck it out; sometimes she sucked it in. Her navel also changed its appearance: now it was the eye of a Greek statue—sweet, clean, expressionless—while the next instant it protruded angrily, like the eye of a pagan god, an eye with an evil little smile but adorable even so, with crow's-feet tucked away in the corners.

Zhenbao took Yanli to the doctor and bought her medicine as recommended by newspaper advertisements. Eventually, however, he decided that she wasn't all that concerned—she seemed to want to hang on to her little ailment as if it contributed to her importance. He stopped worrying about it.

One day, he had a business lunch. It was the plum-rain season, and before he'd left the office the rain started. He hailed a rickshaw and went around to his house to fetch his raincoat. On the way he couldn't help remembering that other time, when he was living at Jiaorui's place, when the weather had changed and he'd dashed back in the rain to get his raincoat—that very memorable day. He climbed out of the rickshaw and went in the front door, wrapped in the faint melancholy of his memories, but when he looked he saw that the raincoat wasn't in the closet. His heart thumped hard, and it seemed that events of a decade ago had come to life again. He walked toward the living room, his heart still pounding. He had a strange sense of destiny. His hand was on the doorknob to the living room, he opened it, and Yanli was in the room, along with a tailor who was standing at the end of the sofa. Everything was as usual, and Zhenbao relaxed. Then suddenly he grew tense again. He felt nervous—no doubt because the two other people in the room were nervous too.

"Are you having lunch at home?" Yanli asked.

"No, I came back for my raincoat."

He looked at the tailor's bundle on the chair, not a trace of moisture on it. It had been raining steadily for at least an hour. The tailor wasn't wearing galoshes. The tailor, when Zhenbao looked at him, seemed a little shaken; he went over to his bundle, pulled out a measuring tape, and started to take Yanli's measurements.

Yanli's hand gestured weakly at Zhenbao. She said, "Your raincoat's hanging in the kitchen hallway to dry." She looked as if she meant to push the tailor away and fetch the raincoat herself, but she didn't move. She just stood there while the tailor busied himself about her measurements.

Zhenbao knew that when you touch a woman in front of others after sleeping with her, there's a change in your manner—no mistaking it. He looked at them both with a cold, clear eye. The great white mouth of the rainy day sucked at the window. Outside was nothing but cold disarray; inside everything was sealed off. There was an intense intimacy between those three people enclosed in that single room.

Zhenbao stood high above it all, distantly observing the two inexperienced adulterers. He couldn't understand. How could she choose such a person? Although the tailor was young, his back was already a bit bent. His face was sallow and there were ringworm scars on his scalp. He looked like what he was: a tailor.

Zhenbao went to get his raincoat and put it on, buttoning it up as he hanked back to the living room. The tailor was gone.

"Don't know when I'll be back," Zhenbao said to Yanli. "Don't wait supper."

Yanli approached him deferentially and nodded. She seemed to be upset. Her hands wandered around, finding no place to rest but anxious to be doing something. She flipped on the radio. Time for the Mandarin news broadcast again—the voice of another man filled the room. Zhenbao felt there was no need for him to speak, so he turned and left, still buttoning his coat. He had no idea that his coat had so many buttons.

The door to the living room was wide open, and the candid, straightforward man on the radio went on talking confidently: he was always right. Zhenbao thought: "I've been pretty good to her! I don't love her, but there's nothing I owe her an apology for. I haven't treated her badly. Such a lowly little thing! Probably she knows she's nothing—she wants to find someone even lower than she is if only for comfort's sake. But I've been so good to her, so good!"

Back in the room, Yanli must have felt less than sure of herself: she turned off the radio with a pop. Standing in the entryway, Zhenbao suddenly felt himself choking up. If the man in the radio station, who went

on discoursing so fluently, had sensed that his entire audience had all at once shut him off, he would have known what Zhenbao felt—an abrupt blockage, emptiness petrifying the gut. Zhenbao stood on the front steps of his house, facing the rainy street, until a rickshaw came by looking for customers. He got in without bothering to haggle over the fare and was pulled away.

When he came home that evening, the steps were under a foot of water. In the dark and the wet the house looked very different—appropriately enough, he felt. But when he went indoors the hot stifling smell and the line of yellow lamps leading upstairs were as before: the house was still the house; nothing had changed.

At the front door, he removed his shoes and socks, which were soaked through, gave them to the maidservant, and climbed barefoot to the bedroom upstairs. He reached out to flip the switch and saw that the bathroom light was on. When he looked through the half-opened door, the bathroom resembled a narrow hanging scroll in faded yellow-white. The light made Yanli her own faded yellow color. But never in dynastic history has a painting of a pretty woman taken up such an awkward subject: Yanli was pulling up her pants. She was bent over, about to stand up, and her hair hung down over her face. She had already changed into her flowered white pajama top, which was bunched high up on her chest, half caught under her chin. The pajama pants lay piled around her feet, and her long body wavered over them like a white silkworm. In America, the scene would have made an excellent toilet-paper advertisement, but to Zhenbao's hasty glance it was household filth, like a matted wad of hair on a rainy day—damp and giving off a stagnant, stifling, human scent.

He turned the light on in the bedroom. When Yanli saw that he had returned, she hurriedly asked, "Did you get your feet wet?"

"I'm going to soak them right away," Zhenbao responded.

"I'll be right out," said Yanli. "I'll tell Amah Yu to go heat some water."

"She's doing it now."

Yanli washed her hands and came out, and Amah Yu brought the kettle up. Zhenbao sneezed. "You've caught a cold!" said Amah Yu. "Don't you want to close the door?"

Zhenbao closed the door and was alone in the bathroom, the rain still falling hard, clattering on the windowpanes.

There was some sort of potted plant in the bathtub. It had flowers of a tender yellow, and even though it hadn't been out in the rain, it smelled as if it had been. The foot basin was next to the flowerpot, and Zhenbao sat on the edge of the bathtub, bending over to wash his feet, careful not to splash hot water on the flowers. When he bent his head, he caught a whiff of a light, clean scent. He put one leg over the other knee, carefully wiped each toe dry with a towel, and suddenly was overcome with tenderness for himself. He looked at his own flesh, and it was as if someone else was doing the looking—a lover, full of grief because Zhenbao was throwing himself away for nothing.

He shuffled on some slippers and stood at the window looking out. The rain had already tapered off and was gradually coming to a stop. The street was now a river; mirrored in the waves, the streetlamps were like a string of silver arrowheads that shot by, then disappeared. Vehicles thumped past, and behind each one a brilliant white wake unfurled like a peacock's tail, washing across the reflections of the streetlamps. Slowly the white peacock's tail sent out golden stars, then lengthened and faded away. When the vehicle was gone, the white-gold arrowheads returned, shooting across the turbid yellow river and disappearing, shooting by, then gone.

Pressing his hand against the windowpane, Zhenbao was keenly aware of his own hand, his own breath, deeply grieving. He thought of the bottle of brandy in the cabinet. He got it down, poured himself a full glass, and stood looking out the window as he sipped.

Yanli walked up behind him and said, "That's a good idea—having a glass of brandy to warm your stomach. Otherwise, you'll catch a cold."

The warm brandy went straight to his head; his eyes grew hard and hot. He turned and looked at her with loathing. He hated that kind of tedious, polite small talk, and what he especially hated was this: that she seemed to be peering at him behind his back, trying to find out how much he knew.

In the following two weeks Yanli kept peering. Apparently she felt that he hadn't changed in any way—that he wasn't suspicious of her—

and in time she relaxed and forgot that she'd had something to hide. Zhenbao was befuddled: now it seemed that she didn't have a secret after all. It was like two white doors, tightly shut, flanked by a pair of flickering lamps on a wild plain at night: you pound at them with all your might, absolutely convinced that a murder is taking place inside. But when the doors open to admit you, there's no such thing. There's not even a building. All you can see, under a few stars, is empty mist and tangled weeds. Now that was truly frightening.

Zhenbao started drinking a lot, openly consorting with women outside the house. It was not at all like before, when he retained some scruples. He came home reeking of drink, or he didn't come home at all, but Yanli always had an excuse, saying that he had a lot of new social obligations for his company that he couldn't refuse. She would never admit that it had anything to do with her. She kept on explaining it away to herself, and when his dissipation gradually got to the point where it couldn't be concealed, she explained it away to others too, smiling slightly, loyally covering up for him. Zhenbao was running wild—almost to the point of bringing prostitutes home with him—but everyone still thought of him as a fine upstanding man, a good man.

For a month it rained constantly. One day, the old maidservant said that Zhenbao's woven silk shirt had shrunk in the wash and needed to be let out. Sitting on the bed with his shoes off, Zhenbao casually remarked, "Get the tailor to come and fix it."

"The tailor hasn't come in a long time," said Amah Yu. "I wonder if he's gone back to his hometown."

"Eh?" said Zhenbao, to himself. "Broken off as easily as that? Not a bit of real feeling—how dirty, how petty!"

"Really?" he asked. "Didn't he come to collect his bill at Dragonboat Festival?"

"His apprentice came," said Amah Yu.

This Amah Yu had been with them for three years. She folded up some underpants and put them on the edge of the bed, with a light pat. She didn't look at him, but the smile on her gentle old face was meant to be comforting. Zhenbao was filled with anger.

That afternoon he took a woman out for a good time, and purposely

went around to his house for some money. The woman sat waiting for him in the pedicab. The sky had just cleared and the water on the street had not yet receded; great clumps of parasol trees shone in the yellow river. Across the street, there was a bluish haze on the green trees around the little red houses; damp yellow smoke came out of the chimneys and flew off at a low angle. Zhenbao returned with the money, smacked his umbrella down, and splashed water all over the girl. She cried out sharply. Zhenbao climbed into the pedicab laughing, full of wet, muddy happiness. He looked at the upstairs window. It must have been Yanli standing there, but what he saw was a tea-tray lace doily, yellowing with age, stuck on the bathroom wall—or maybe it was a little white saucer with a tea-stain splotch in the center. Zhenbao smacked his umbrella into the water again. Break it to bits! Break it to bits!

He couldn't smash up the home he'd made, or his wife, or his daughter, but he could smash himself up, the umbrella whacking the water and the cold, rank mud flying into his face. Again he was filled with tender sorrow for himself, a lover's sorrow, but at the same time a strong-willed self stood opposite the lover, pulling and pushing and fighting with her. He had to be smashed to bits! Smash him to bits!

The pedicab drove through the rippling water, and the water splashed the woman's clothes and her leather shoes and leather handbag. She complained, wanting him to pay for the damage. Zhenbao laughed, threw one arm around her, and kept on splashing the water.

After this, even Yanli ran out of excuses. Zhenbao didn't bring back money for the family, his daughter's tuition went unpaid, and the daily groceries were a problem too. At that point, Yanli became a brave little wife. Suddenly, at the age of nearly thirty, she had grown up. She spoke fluently and compellingly, in tearful, eloquent complaints: "How ever can we go on like this? It's enough to kill me—the whole family depends on him! At this rate he'll lose his job at the factory . . . It's as if he's gone mad, he doesn't come home, and when he does he hits people and smashes things up. He wasn't like this before! Oh, Mr. Liu, can you imagine? Can you tell me what I should do? How am I supposed to cope with this?"

All at once Yanli gained self-confidence. She had social status. She

had sympathy. She had friends. One night Zhenbao came back home to find her sitting in the living room talking with Dubao. Of course they were discussing him, and when he appeared, she fell silent. She was dressed all in black, and though the wrinkles on her worried face were visible in the lamplight, she still had an aura of hidden beauty. Zhenbao didn't rush around smashing tables and lamps. He walked in, nodded to Dubao, and said a few words about the weather. He lit a cigarette and sat down casually to discuss current events and the stock market. Finally he said he was tired and would go to bed early. He took his leave of them and headed up the stairs. Yanli simply couldn't understand what was happening—it looked as if she'd been lying. It was all very hard to explain.

After Dubao left, Zhenbao heard Yanli entering the bedroom. Right when she came in the door, he swept the lamp and the hot-water thermos off the little cabinet; they fell to the floor and cracked wide open, smashed to bits. He bent down and picked up the metal base of the lamp, hurling it at her, electrical cord and all. Turning, she fled from the room. Zhenbao felt that she had been completely defeated. He was extremely pleased with himself. He stood there laughing silently, the quiet laughter flowing out of his eyes and spilling over his face like tears.

The old maidservant stood in the doorway gaping, broom and dustpan in hand. Zhenbao turned the light off. She didn't dare enter the room. Zhenbao fell asleep on the bed, slept through to the middle of the night, when mosquito bites woke him. He rose and turned on the light. A pair of Yanli's embroidered slippers were lying in the middle of the floor at cross angles, one a bit ahead, the other a bit behind, like a ghost that was afraid to materialize, walking fearfully, pleadingly toward him. Zhenbao sat on the edge of the bed and stared for a long time. When he lay down again, he sighed. He could feel his old benevolent mood stealing over him bit by bit, wrapping itself around him. Countless worries and duties and mosquitoes buzzed around him, stinging him and sucking at him.

The next day Zhenbao rose and reformed his ways. He made a fresh start and went back to being a good man.

FIREWORKS

RICHARD FORD

Eddie Starling sat at the kitchen table at noon reading through the newspaper. Outside in the street some neighborhood kids were shooting off firecrackers. The Fourth of July was a day away, and every few minutes there was a lot of noisy popping followed by a hiss, then a huge boom loud enough to bring down an airplane. It was giving him the jitters, and he wished some parent would go out and haul the kids inside.

Starling had been out of work six months—one entire selling season and part of the next. He had sold real estate, and had never been off work any length of time in his life. Though he had begun to wonder, after a certain period of not working, if you couldn't simply forget *how* to work, forget the particulars, lose the reasons for it. And once that happened, it could become possible never to hold another job as long as you lived. To become a statistic: the chronically unemployed. The thought worried him.

Outside in the street he heard what sounded like kids' noises again. They were up to something suspicious, and he stood up to look out just when the phone rang.

"What's new on the home front?" Lois's voice said. Lois had gone back to work tending bar near the airport and always tried to call up in good spirits.

"Status quo. Hot." Starling walked to the window, holding the receiver, and peered out. In the middle of the street some kids he'd never seen before were getting ready to blow up a tin can using an enormous firecracker. "Some kids are outside blowing up something."

"Anything good in the paper?"

"Nothing promising."

"Well," Lois said. "Just be patient, hon. I know it's hot. Listen, Eddie, do you remember those priests who were always setting fire to themselves on TV? Exactly when were they? We were trying to remember here. Was it '68 or '72? Nobody could remember to save their life."

"Sixty-eight was Kennedy," Starling said. "They weren't just setting themselves on fire for TV, though. They were in Asia."

"Okay. But when was Vietnam exactly?"

The kids lit the firecracker under the can and went running away down the street, laughing. For a moment Starling stared directly at the can, but just then a young woman came out of the house across the street. As she stepped into her yard the can went *boom*, and the woman leaped back and put her hands into her hair.

"Christ, what was that!" Lois said. "It sounded like a bomb."

"It was those kids."

"The scamps," Lois said. "I guess they're hot, too, though."

The woman was very thin—too thin to be healthy, Starling thought. She was in her twenties and had on dull yellow shorts and no shoes. She walked out into the street and yelled something vicious at the kids, who were far down the street now. Starling knew nothing more about her than he did about anybody else in the neighborhood. The name on the mailbox had been taped over before he and Lois had moved in. A man lived with the woman and worked on his car in the garage late at night.

The woman walked slowly back across her little yard to her house. At the top step she turned and looked at Starling's house. He stared at her, and the woman went inside and closed the door.

"Eddie, take a guess who's here," Lois said.

"Who's where?"

"In the bar. One wild guess."

"Arthur Godfrey," Starling said.

"Arthur Godfrey. That's great," Lois said. "No, it's Louie. He just waltzed in the door. Isn't that amazing?"

Louie Reiner was Lois's previous husband. Starling and Reiner had

been business acquaintances of a sort before Lois came along, and had co-brokered some office property at the tail end of the boom.

Reiner had been in real estate then, along with everybody else. Reiner and Lois had stayed married six weeks, then they had gone over to Reno and gotten an annulment. A year later, Lois married Starling. That had all been in '76, and Lois didn't talk about it or about Reiner anymore. Louie had disappeared somewhere—he'd heard Europe. He didn't feel like he had anything against Louie now, though he wasn't particularly happy he was around.

"Just take a guess what Louie's doing?" Lois said. Water had started to run where Lois was.

"Who knows. Washing dishes. How should I know?"

Lois repeated what Starling said and some people laughed. He heard Louie's voice saying, "Well *excuuuse* me."

"Seriously, Ed. Louie's an extraditer." Lois laughed. Hah.

"What's that mean?" Starling said.

"It means he travels the breadth of the country bringing people back here so they can go to jail. He just brought a man back from Montana who'd done nothing more than pass a forty-seven-dollar bad check, which doesn't seem worth it to me. Louie isn't in uniform, but he's got a gun and a little beeper."

"What's he doing there?" Starling said.

"His girlfriend's coming in at the airport from Florida," Lois said. "He's a lot fatter than he used to be, too, though he wouldn't like me to say that, would you, Louie?" Starling heard Reiner say "*Excuuuse* me" again. "Do you want to talk to him?"

"I'm busy right now."

"Busy doing what, eating lunch? You're not busy."

"I'm fixing dinner," Starling lied.

"Talk to Louie, Eddie."

Starling wanted to hang up. He wished Reiner would go back to wherever he came from.

"*Helloooo dere*," Reiner said.

"Who left your cage open, Reiner?"

"Come on down here and have a drink, Starling, and I'll tell you all about it. I've seen the world since I saw you. Italy, France, the islands. You know what an Italian girl puts behind her ears to make herself more attractive?"

"I don't want to know," Starling said.

"That's not what Lois says." Reiner laughed a horse laugh.

"I'm busy. Some other time, maybe."

"Sure you are," Reiner said. "Listen, Eddie, get off your face and come down here. I'll tell you how we can both retire in six months. Honest to God. This is not real estate."

"I already retired," Starling said. "Didn't Lois tell you?"

"Yeah, she told me a lot of things," Reiner said.

He could hear Lois say, "Please don't be a nerd, Eddie. Who needs nerds?" Some people laughed again.

"I shouldn't even be talking about this on the phone. It's that hot." Reiner's voice fell to a whisper. He was covering the mouthpiece of the receiver, Starling thought. "These are Italian rugs, Starling. I swear to God. From the neck of the sheep, the neck only. You only get tips on things like this in law enforcement."

"I told you. I'm retired. I retired early," Starling said.

"Eddie, am I going to have to come out there and arrest you?"

"Try it," Starling said. "I'll beat the shit out of you, then laugh about it."

He heard Reiner put the phone down and say something he couldn't make out. Then he heard Reiner shout, "Stay on your face then, cluck!"

Lois came on the line again. "Baby, why don't you come down here?" A blender started in the background, and a big cheer went up. "We're all adults. Have a Tanqueray on Louie. He's on all-expenses. There might be something to this. Louie's always got ideas."

"Reiner's just got ideas about you. Not me." He heard Reiner say to Lois to tell him—Starling—to forget it. "Tell Reiner to piss up a rope."

"Try to be nice," Lois said. "Louie's being nice. Eddie—"
Starling hung up.

When he worked, Starling had sold business properties—commercial lots and office buildings. He had studied that in college, and when he got out he was offered a good job. People would always need a place to go to work, was his thinking. He liked the professional environment, the atmosphere of money being made, and for a while he had done very well. He and Lois had rented a nice, sunny apartment in an older part of town by a park. They bought furniture and didn't save money. While Starling worked, Lois kept house, took care of plants and fish and attended a night class for her degree in history. They had no children, and didn't expect any. They liked the size of the town and the stores, knew shopkeepers' names and where the streets led. It was a life they could like, and better than they both could've guessed would come their way.

Then interest rates had gone sky-high, and suddenly no one wanted commercial property. Everything was rent. Starling rented space in malls and in professional buildings and in empty shops downtown where older businesses had moved out and leather stores, health-food and copy shops moved in. It was a holding action, Starling thought, until people wanted to spend again.

Then he had lost his job. One morning, his boss at the agency asked him back to his private office along with a fat woman named Beverley who'd been there longer than Starling had. His boss told them he was closing down and wanted to tell them first because they'd been there the longest, and he wanted them to have a chance for the other jobs. Starling remembered feeling dazed when he heard the bad news, but he remembered thanking the boss, wishing him good luck, then comforting Beverley, who went to pieces in the outer office. He had gone home and told Lois, and they had gone out to dinner at a Greek restaurant that night, and gotten good and drunk.

As it turned out, though, there weren't any other jobs to get. He visited the other agencies and talked to salesmen he knew, but all of his friends were terrified of being laid off themselves and wouldn't say much. After a month, he heard that his boss hadn't closed the agency down, but had simply hired two new people to take his and Beverley's places. When he called to ask about it the boss apologized, then claimed to have an important call on another line.

In six weeks Starling had still not found a job, and when the money ran out and they couldn't pay the rent, he and Lois sublet the apartment to two nurses who worked at a hospital, and got out. Lois found an ad in the *Pennysaver* that said, "No Rent for Responsible Couple—House Sit Opportunity." And they moved in that day.

The house was a ranchette in a tract of small, insignificant houses on fenced-in postage-stamp lots down on the plain of the Sacramento River, out from town. The owner was an Air Force sergeant who had been stationed in Japan, and the house was decorated with Oriental tastes: wind chimes and fat, naked women stitched over silk, a red enamel couch in the living room, rice-paper lanterns on the patio. There was an old pony in the back, from when the owner had been married with kids, and a couple of wrecked cars in the carport. All the people who lived on the street, Starling noticed, were younger than the two of them. More than a few were in the Air Force and fought loud, regular arguments, and came and went at all hours. There was always a door slamming after midnight, then a car starting up and racing away into the night. Starling had never thought he'd find himself living in such a place.

He stacked the dishes, put the grounds in the newspaper and emptied all the wastebaskets into a plastic bag. He intended to take the garbage for a ride. Everybody in the subdivision either drove their garbage to a dump several miles away or toured the convenience stores and shopping malls until they found a dumpster no one was watching. Once a black woman had run out of a convenience store and cursed at him for ditching his garbage in her dumpster, and since then he'd waited till dark. This afternoon, though, he needed to get out of the house, as though with the heat and talking to Reiner there wasn't enough air inside to breathe.

He had the garbage set out the back door when the phone rang again. Sometimes car dealers called during lunch, wanting to talk to the Air Force sergeant, and Starling had learned not to answer until after one, when car salesmen all left for lunch. This time it might be Lois again, wanting him to come by the bar to see Reiner, and he didn't want to answer. Only he didn't want Lois going off somewhere, and he didn't

want Reiner coming over. Reiner would think the house with the pony was a comedy act.

Starling picked up the phone. "All right, what is it?"

An unfamiliar voice said, "Dad? Is that you?"

"No dads here, Reiner," Starling said.

"Dad," the voice said again, "it's Jeff."

A woman's voice came on the line. "I have a collect call to anyone from a Jeff. Will you pay for the call?"

"Wrong number," Starling said. He couldn't be sure it wasn't Reiner still.

"Dad," the voice said. It was a teenager's voice, a worried voice. "We're in awful trouble here, Dad. They've got Margie in jail."

"No, I can't help," Starling said. "I'm sorry. I can't help you."

"This party says you've got the wrong number, Jeff," the operator said.

"I know my own father's voice, don't I? Dad, for God's sake. This is serious. We're in trouble."

"I don't know any Jeffs," Starling said. "It's just the wrong number."

Starling could hear whoever was on the line hit something against the phone very hard, then say, "Shit! This isn't happening, I can't believe this is happening." The voice said something to someone else who was wherever he was. Possibly a policeman.

"It's the wrong number," the operator said. "I'm very sorry."

"Me too," Starling said. "I'm sorry."

"Would you like to try another number now, Jeff?" the operator asked.

"Dad, *please* accept. Please, my God. *Please*."

"Excuse the ring, sir," the operator said, and the line was disconnected.

Starling put down the phone and stared out the window. The three boys who had blown up the tin can were walking past, eyeing his house. They were going for more fireworks. The torn can lay in the street, and the woman across the way was watching them from her picture window, pointing them out to a man in an undershirt who didn't look like the man

who worked on his car at night. He wondered if the woman was married or divorced. If she had children, where were they? He wondered who it was who had called—the sergeant's kids were all too young. He wondered what kind of trouble Jeff was in, and where was he? He should've accepted the charges, said a word of consolation, or given some advice since the kid had seemed at wit's end. He'd been in trouble in his life. He was in trouble now, in fact, but he hadn't been any help.

He drove toward town and cruised the lot at the King's Hat Drive-Inn, took a look in at the Super-Duper, then drove behind a truck stop. The garbage was with him in the hot front seat and already smelled bad despite the plastic. It was at the Super-Duper that the black woman had yelled at him and threatened to turn his garbage over to the police. Starling stopped back at the Super-Duper, parked at the side of the lot by the dumpster and went inside, leaving the garbage in the driver's seat. A different black woman was inside. He bought some breakfast cereal, a bag of frozen macaroni and a bottle of hot sauce, then went back out to the car. Another car had driven in and parked beside his, and the driver, a woman, was sitting in view of the dumpster, waiting for someone who had gone inside. The woman might be another Super-Duper employee, Starling thought, or possibly the wife of someone in the back he hadn't noticed.

He got in his car and drove straight out to a campground beside the Sacramento River, less than a mile from the house. He had come here and picnicked once with Lois, though the campground was empty now, all the loops and tables deserted. He pulled up beside a big green campground dumpster and heaved his garbage in without getting out of the car. Beyond the dumpster, through some eucalyptus trees, he could see the big brown river sliding swiftly by, pieces of yellow foam swirling in and out of the dark eddies. It was a treacherous river, he thought, full of perils. Each year someone drowned, and there were currents running deep beneath the surface. No one in his right mind would think of swimming in it, no matter how hot it got.

As he drove out he passed two motorcycles with Oregon plates, parked at the far end of the campground, and two hippies with long hair

sitting on a rock, smoking. The hippies watched him when he drove by and didn't bother hiding their dope. Two young women were coming out of the bushes nearby, wearing bathing suits, and one of the hippies gave Starling the black power salute and grinned. Starling drove back out to the highway.

The hippies reminded him of San Francisco. His mother, Irma, had lived there with her last husband, Rex, who'd had money. When he was in community college Starling had lived there with them for six months, before moving with his first wife across the bay to Alameda near the airport. They had been hippies of a certain kind themselves then and had smoked dope occasionally. Jan, his first wife, had had an abortion in a student apartment right on the campus. Abortions were not easy to get then, and they'd had to call Honolulu to get a name out in Castroville. They had been married six months, and Starling's mother had had to lend them money she'd gotten from Rex.

When the abortionist came, he brought a little metal box with him, like a fishing-tackle box. They sat in the living room of the student apartment and talked about this and that, and drank beer. The man was named Dr. Carson. He told them he was being prosecuted at that very moment and was losing his license for doing this very thing—performing abortions—but that people needed help. He had three children of his own, he said, and Starling wondered if he ever performed abortions on his own wife. Dr. Carson said it would cost \$400, and he could do it the next night, but needed all cash. Before he left he opened his metal box. There was nothing in it but fishing gear: a Pflueger reel, some monofilament line, several red-and-white Jitterbug lures. They had all three laughed. You couldn't be too cautious, Dr. Carson said. They all liked each other and acted like they could be friends in happier days.

The next night Dr. Carson came with a metal box that looked exactly the same as the one before, green with a silver handle. He went into the bedroom with Jan and closed the door while Starling sat in the living room, watched TV and drank beer. It was Christmastime and Andy Williams was on, singing carols with a man in a bear suit. After a while a loud whirring noise, like an expensive blender, came out of the bedroom. It continued for a while, then stopped, then started. Starling became ner-

vous. Dr. Carson, he knew, was mixing up his little baby, and Jan was feeling excruciating pain but wasn't making noise. Starling felt sick then with fear and guilt and helplessness. And with love. It was the first time he knew he knew what real love was, his love for his wife and for all the things he valued in his life but could so easily lose.

Later, Dr. Carson came out and said everything would be fine. He smiled and shook Starling's hand and called him Ted, which was the phony name Starling had given him. Starling paid him the money in hundreds, and when Dr. Carson drove off, Starling stood out on the tiny balcony and waved. The doctor blinked his headlights, and in the distance Starling could see a small private plane settling down to the airport in the dark, its red taillight blinking like a wishing star.

Starling wondered where the hell Jan was now, or Dr. Carson, fifteen years later. Jan had gotten peritonitis and almost died after that, and when she got well she wasn't interested in being married to Eddie Starling anymore. She seemed very disappointed. Three months later she had gone to Japan, where she'd had a pen pal since high school, someone named Haruki. For a while she wrote Starling letters, then stopped. Maybe, he thought, she had moved back down to L.A. with her mother. He wished his own mother was alive still, and he could call her up. He was thirty-nine years old, though, and he knew it wouldn't help.

Starling drove along the river for a few miles until the wide vegetable and cantaloupe fields opened out, and the horizon extended a long way in the heat to a hazy wind line of Lombardy poplars. High, slat-sided trucks sat stationed against the white skyline, and men were picking in the near fields and beyond in long, dense crews. Mexicans, Starling thought, transients who worked for nothing. It was a depressing thought. There was nothing they could do to help themselves, but it was still depressing, and Starling pulled across the road and turned back toward town.

He drove out toward the airport, along the strip where it was mostly franchises and consignment lots and little shopping plazas, some of which he had once found the tenants for. All along the way, people had put up fireworks stands for the Fourth of July, red-white-and-blue banners fluttering on the hot breeze. Some of these people undoubtedly lived out where he and Lois lived now, in the same subdivision. That would mean

something, he thought, if one day you found yourself looking out at the world going past from inside a fireworks stand. Things would've gotten far out of hand when that time came, there was no arguing it.

He thought about driving past the apartment to see if the nurses who sublet it were keeping up the little yard. The nurses, Jeri and Madeline, were two big dykes with men's haircuts and baggy clothes. They were friendly types, and in the real estate business dykes were considered A-1s—good tenants. They paid their rent, kept quiet, maintained property in good order, and held a firm stake in the status quo. They were like a married couple, was the business reasoning. Thinking about Jeri and Madeline, he drove past the light where their turn was, then just decided to keep driving.

There was nothing to do now, Starling thought, but drive out to the bar. The afternoon shift meant no one came in until Lois was almost ready to leave, and sometimes they could have the bar to themselves. Reiner would be gone by now and it would be cool inside, and he and Lois could have a quiet drink together, toast better cards on the next deal. They had had good times doing nothing but sitting talking.

Lois was leaning over the jukebox across from the bar when Starling came in. Mel, the owner, took afternoons off, and the place was empty. A dark-green bar light shone over everything, and the room was cool.

He was glad to see Lois. She had on tight black slacks and a frilly white top and looked jaunty. Lois was a jaunty woman to begin with, and he was happy he'd come.

He had met Lois in a bar called the AmVets down in Rio Vista. It was before she and Louie Reiner became a twosome, and when he saw her in a bar now it always made him think of things then. That had been a high time, and when they talked about it Lois liked to say, "Some people are just meant to experience the highest moments of their lives in bars."

Starling sat on a bar stool.

"I hope you came down here to dance with your wife," Lois said, still leaning over the jukebox. She punched a selection and turned around, smiling. "I figured you'd waltz in here pretty soon." Lois came by and

patted him on the cheek. "I went ahead and punched in all your favorites."

"Let's have a drink first," Starling said. "I've got an edge that needs a drink."

"Drink first, dance second," Lois said and went behind the bar and got down the bottle of Tanqueray.

"Mel wouldn't mind," Starling said.

"Mary-had-a-little-lamb," Lois said while she poured a glassful. She looked up at Starling and smiled. "It's five o'clock someplace on the planet. Here's to old Mel."

"And some better luck," Starling said, taking a big first drink of gin and letting it trickle down his throat as slowly as he could.

Lois had been drinking already, he was sure, with Reiner. That wasn't the best he could have hoped for, but it could be worse. She and Reiner could be shackled up in a motel, or on their way to Reno or the Bahamas. Reiner was gone, and that was a blessing, and he wasn't going to let Reiner cast a shadow on things.

"Poor old Lou," Lois said and came around the bar with a pink drink she'd poured out of the blender.

"Poor Lou what?" Starling said.

Lois sat down beside him on a bar stool and lit a cigarette. "Oh, his stomach's all shot and he's got an ulcer. He said he worries too much." She blew out the match and stared at it. "You want to hear what he drinks?"

"Who cares what a dope like Reiner drinks out of a glass," Starling said.

Lois looked at him, then stared at the mirror behind the bar. The smoky mirror showed two people sitting at a bar alone. A slow country tune started to play, a tune Starling liked, and he liked the way—with the gin around it—it seemed to ease him away from his own troubles. "So tell me what Reiner drinks," he said.

"Wodka," Lois said matter-of-factly. "That's the way he says it. Wodka. Like Russian. Wodka with coconut milk—a Hawaiian Russian. He say it's for his stomach, which he says is better though it's still a wreck. He's a walking pharmacy. And he's gotten a lot fatter, too, and his eyes

bulge, and he wears a full Cleveland now. I don't know." Lois shook her head and smoked her cigarette. "He's got a cute girlfriend, though, this Jackie, from Del Rio Beach. She looks like Little Bo Peep."

Starling tried to picture Reiner. Louie Reiner had been a large, handsome man at one time, with thick eyebrows and penetrating black eyes. A sharp dresser. He was sorry to hear Reiner was fat and bug-eyed and wore a leisure suit. It was bad luck if that was the way you looked to the world.

"How was it, seeing Louie? Was it nice?" He stared at himself in the smoky mirror. He hadn't gotten fat, thank God.

"No," Lois said and dragged on her cigarette. "*He* was nice. Grown-up and what have you. But *it* wasn't nice. He didn't look healthy, and he still talked the same baloney, which was all before Jackie arrived, naturally."

"All what baloney?"

"You know that stuff, Eddie. Everybody makes *themselves* happy or unhappy. You don't leave one woman for another woman, you do it for yourself. If you can't make it with one, make it with all of them—that baloney he was always full of. Take the tour. Go big casino. That stuff. Reiner stuff."

"Reiner's big casino, all right," Starling said. "I guess he wanted you to go off with him."

"Oh sure. He said he was off to Miami next week to arrest some poor soul. He said I ought to go, and we could stay at the Fontainebleau or the Eden Roc or one of those sharp places."

"What about me?" Starling said. "Did I come? Or did I stay here? What about little Jackie?"

"Louie didn't mention either one of you, isn't that funny? I guess it slipped his mind." Lois smiled and put her arm on Starling's arm. "It's just baloney, Eddie. Trashy talk."

"I wish he was here now," Starling said. "I'd use a beer bottle on him."

"I know it, hon. But you should've heard what this little girlfriend said. It was a riot. She's a real Ripley's."

"She'd need to be," Starling said.

"Really. She said if Louie ran around on her she was going to sleep with a black man. She said she already had one picked out. She really knew how to work Louie. She said Louie had a house full of these cheap Italian carpets, and nobody to sell them to. That was his big deal he needed a partner for, by the way—not a very big market over here, I guess. She said Louie was thinking of selling them in Idaho. Good luck with that, I said. She said—and this would've made you laugh, Eddie, it would've truly—she said it's a doggy-dog world out there. Doggy-dog. She was real cute. When she said that, Louie got down on the floor and barked like a dog. He dropped his pistol out of his whatever-you-call-it, his scabbard, and his beeper"—Lois was laughing—"he was like a big animal down on the floor of the bar."

"I'm sorry I missed it."

"Louie can be funny," Lois said.

"Maybe you should've married him, then."

"I *did* marry him."

"Too bad you didn't stay married to him instead of me. I don't have a beeper."

"I like what you have got, though, sweetheart." She squeezed his arm. "Nobody would love me like you do, you know I think that. Reiner was just my mistake, but I can laugh at him today because I don't have to live with him. You're such a big mamma's boy, you don't want anybody to have any fun."

"I'd like to have a little fun," Starling said. "Let's go where there's some fun."

Lois leaned and kissed him on the cheek. "You smell awfully nice." She smiled at him. "Come on and dance with me, Ed. Justice demands that you dance with me. You have that light step. It's nice when you do."

Lois walked out onto the little dance floor and took Starling's hand. He stood close to her and they danced to the slow music on the jukebox, holding together the way they had when he'd first known her. He felt a little drunk. A buzz improved a thing, he thought, made a good moment out of nothing.

"You're a natural dancer, Eddie," Lois said softly. "Remember us dancing at Powell's on the beach, with everybody watching us?"

"You like having men think about you?" Starling said.

"Oh, sure. I guess." Lois's cheek was against his cheek. "It makes me feel like I'm in a movie, sometimes, you know? Everybody does that, don't they?"

"I never do."

"Don't you ever wonder what your ex thinks about you? Old Jan. That was a long time ago, I guess."

"Bygones are bygones to me," Starling said. "I don't think about it."

"You're such a literal, Eddie. You get lost in the lonely crowd, I think sometimes. That's why I want to be nice and make you happy." She held him close to her so that her hard, flat hips were next to his. "Isn't this nice? It's nice to dance with you."

Starling saw now that the bar was decorated with red, white, and blue crêpe paper—features he'd missed. Little curlicues and ribbons and stars hung from the dark rafters and down off the shaded green bar lights and the beer signs and the framed pictures behind the back bar. This was festive, he thought. Lois had fixed it, it showed her hand. Before long a crowd would be in, the lights would go up and shine out, the music would be turned up loud. It would be a good time. "That's nice," Starling said.

"I just love this," Lois said. Her head was on his shoulder. "I just love this so much."

On the highway toward home, Starling passed the hippies he had seen at the campground. They were heading in now, the women on the rear seats, the men driving fast, leaning as if the wind blew them back.

In town, a big fireworks display staged by a shopping mall was beginning. Catherine wheels and star bursts and blue-and-pink sprays were going off in the twilight. Cars were stopped along the road, and people with children sat on their hoods, drinking beer and watching the sky. It was nearly dark and rain had begun to threaten.

"Everything's moved out to the malls now," Lois said, "including the fireworks." She had been dozing and now she leaned against her door, staring back toward the lights.

"I wouldn't care to work in one," Starling said, driving.

Lois said nothing.

"You know what I was just thinking about?" she said after a while.

"Tell me," Starling said.

"Your mother," Lois said. "Your mother was a sweet old lady, you know that? I liked her very much. I remember she and I would go to the mall and buy her a blouse. Just some blouse she could've bought in Bull-ock's in San Francisco, but she wanted to buy it here to be sweet and special." Lois smiled about it. "Remember when we bought fireworks?"

Starling's mother had liked fireworks. She liked to hear them pop so she could laugh. Starling remembered having fireworks one year in the time since he'd been married to Lois. When was that? he thought. A time lost now.

"Remember she held the little teenies right in her fingers and let them go off? That tickled her so much."

"That was her trick," Eddie said. "Rex taught her that."

"I guess he did," Lois said. "But you know, I don't blame you, really, for being such a mamma's boy, Eddie. Not with *your* mamma—unlike mine, for instance. She's why you're as nice as you are."

"I'm selfish," Starling said. "I always have been. I'm capable of lying, stealing, cheating."

Lois patted him on the shoulder. "You're generous, though, too."

Rain was starting in big drops that looked like snow on the windshield. Lights from their subdivision glowed out under the lowered sky ahead.

"This weird thing happened today," Starling said. "I can't quit thinking about it."

Lois slid over by him. She put her head on his shoulder and her hand inside his thigh. "I knew something had happened, Eddie. You can't hide anything. The truth is just on you."

"There's no truth to *this*," Starling said. "Just the phone rang when I was leaving, and it was this kid, Jeff. He was in some kind of mess. I didn't know who he was, but he thought I was his father. He wanted me to accept charges."

"You didn't, did you?"

Starling looked toward the subdivision. "No. I should have, though.

It's on my mind now that I should've helped him. I'd just finished talking to Reiner."

"He might've been in Rangoon, for Christ's sake," Lois said. "Or Helsinki. You don't know where he was. It could've cost you five hundred dollars, then you couldn't have helped him anyway. You were smart, is what I think."

"It wouldn't matter, though. I could've given him some advice. He said somebody was in jail. It's just on my mind now, it'll go away."

"Get a good job and then accept charges from Istanbul," Lois said and smiled.

"I just wonder who he was," Starling said. "For some reason I thought he was over in Reno—isn't that odd? Just a voice."

"It'd be worse if he *was* in Reno," Lois said. "Are you sorry you don't have one of your own?" Lois looked over at him strangely.

"One what?"

"A son. Or, you know. Didn't you tell me you almost had one? There was something about that, with Jan."

"That was a long time ago," Starling said. "We were idiots."

"Some people claim they make your life hold together better, though," Lois said. "You know?"

"Not if you're broke they don't," Starling said. "All they do is make you sorry."

"Well, we'll just float on through life together, then, how's that?" Lois put her hand high on his leg. "No blues today, hon, okay?"

They were at the little dirt street where the ranchette was, at the far end. A fireworks hut had been built in the front yard of the first small house, a chain of bright yellow bulbs strung across the front. An elderly woman was standing in the hut, her face expressionless. She had on a sweater and was holding a little black poodle. All the fireworks but a few Roman candles had been sold off the shelves.

"I never thought I'd live where people sold fireworks right in their front yards," Lois said and faced front. Starling peered into the lighted hut. The rain was coming down in a slow drizzle, and water shone off the oiled street. He felt the urge to gesture to the woman, but didn't. "You could just about say we lived in a place where you wouldn't want

to live if you could help it. Funny, isn't it? That just happens to you." Lois laughed.

"I guess it's funny," Starling said. "It's true."

"What'd you dream up for dinner, Eddie? I've built up a hunger all of a sudden."

"I forgot about it," Starling said. "There's some macaroni."

"Whatever," Lois said. "It's fine."

Starling pulled into the gravel driveway. He could see the pony standing out in the dark where the fenced weed lot extended to the side of the house. The pony looked like a ghost, its white eyes unmoving in the rain.

"Tell me something," Starling said. "If I ask you something, will you tell me?"

"If there's something to tell," Lois said. "Sometimes there isn't anything, you know. But go ahead."

"What happened with you and Reiner?" he said. "All that Reno stuff. I never asked you about that. But I want to know."

"That's easy," Lois said and smiled at him in the dark car. "I just realized I didn't love Reiner, that's all. Period. I realized I loved you, and I didn't want to be married to somebody I didn't love. I wanted to be married to you. It isn't all that complicated or important." Lois put her arms around his neck and hugged him hard. "Don't be cloudy now, sweet. You've just had some odd luck is all. Things'll get better. You'll get back. Let me make you happy. Let me show you something to be happy, baby doll." Lois slid across the seat against the door and went down into her purse. Starling could hear wind chimes in the rain. "Let me just show you," Lois said.

Starling couldn't see. Lois opened the door out into the drizzle, turned her back to him and struck a match. He could see it brighten. And then there was a sparkling and hissing, and then a brighter one, and Starling smelled the harsh burning and the smell of rain together. Then Lois closed the door and danced out before the car into the rain with the sparklers, waving her arms round in the air, smiling widely and making swirls and patterns and star-falls for him that were brilliant and

illuminated the night and the bright rain and the little dark house behind her and, for a moment, caught the world and stopped it, as though something sudden and perfect had come to earth in a furious glowing for him and for him alone—Eddie Starling—and only he could watch and listen. And only he would be there, waiting, when the light was finally gone.

WE DIDN'T

STUART DYBEK

*We did it in front of the mirror
And in the light. We did it in darkness,
In water, and in the high grass.
—Yehuda Amichai, “We Did It”*

We didn't in the light; we didn't in darkness. We didn't in the fresh-cut summer grass or in the mounds of autumn leaves or on the snow where moonlight threw down our shadows. We didn't in your room on the canopy bed you slept in, the bed you'd slept in as a child, or in the backseat of my father's rusted Rambler, which smelled of the smoked chubs and kielbasa he delivered on weekends from my uncle Vincent's meat market. We didn't in your mother's Buick Eight, where a rosary twined the rearview mirror like a beaded, black snake with silver, cruciform fangs.

At the dead end of our lovers' lane—a side street of abandoned factories—where I perfected the pinch that springs open a bra; behind the lilac bushes in Marquette Park, where you first touched me through my jeans and your nipples, swollen against transparent cotton, seemed the shade of lilacs; in the balcony of the now defunct Clark Theater, where I wiped popcorn salt from my palms and slid them up your thighs and you whispered, “I feel like Doris Day is watching us,” we didn't.

How adept we were at fumbling, how perfectly mistimed our timing, how utterly we confused energy with ecstasy.

Remember that night becalmed by heat, and the two of us, fused by sweat, trembling as if a wind from outer space that only we could feel

was gusting across Oak Street Beach? Entwined in your faded Navajo blanket, we lay soul-kissing until you wept with wanting.

We'd been kissing all day—all summer—kisses tasting of different shades of lip gloss and too many Cokes. The lake had turned hot pink, rose rapture, pearl amethyst with dusk, then washed in night black with a ruff of silver foam. Beyond a momentary horizon, silent bolts of heat lightning throbbed, perhaps setting barns on fire somewhere in Indiana. The beach that had been so crowded was deserted as if there was a curfew. Only the bodies of lovers remained, visible in lightning flashes, scattered like the fallen on a battlefield, a few of them moaning, waiting for the gulls to pick them clean.

On my fingers your slick scent mixed with the coconut musk of the suntan lotion we'd repeatedly smeared over each other's bodies. When your bikini top fell away, my hands caught your breasts, memorizing their delicate weight, my palms cupped as if bringing water to parched lips.

Along the Gold Coast, high-rises began to glow, window added to window, against the dark. In every lighted bedroom, couples home from work were stripping off their business suits, falling to the bed, and doing it. They did it before mirrors and pressed against the glass in streaming shower stalls; they did it against walls and on the furniture in ways that required previously unimagined gymnastics, which they invented on the spot. They did it in honor of man and woman, in honor of beast, in honor of God. They did it because they'd been released, because they were home free, alive, and private, because they couldn't wait any longer, couldn't wait for the appointed hour, for the right time or temperature, couldn't wait for the future, for Messiahs, for peace on earth and justice for all. They did it because of the Bomb, because of pollution, because of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, because extinction might be just a blink away. They did it because it was Friday night. It was Friday night and somewhere delirious music was playing—flutter-tongued flutes, muted trumpets meowing like cats in heat, feverish plucking and twanging, tom-toms, congas, and gongs all pounding the same pulsebeat.

I stripped your bikini bottom down the skinny rails of your legs, and you tugged my swimsuit past my tan. Swimsuits at our ankles, we kicked like swimmers to free our legs, almost expecting a tide to wash over us the way the tide rushes in on Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr in *From Here to Eternity*—a love scene so famous that although neither of us had seen the movie, our bodies assumed the exact position of movie stars on the sand and you whispered to me softly, “I’m afraid of getting pregnant,” and I whispered back, “Don’t worry, I have protection,” then, still kissing you, felt for my discarded cutoffs and the wallet in which for the last several months I had carried a Trojan as if it was a talisman. Still kissing, I tore its flattened, dried-out wrapper, and it sprang through my fingers like a spring from a clock and dropped to the sand between our legs. My hands were shaking. In a panic, I groped for it, found it, tried to dust it off, tried as Burt Lancaster never had to, to slip it on without breaking the mood, felt the grains of sand inside it, a throb of lightning, and the Great Lake behind us became, for all practical purposes, the Pacific, and your skin tasted of salt and to the insistent question that my hips were asking your body answered yes, your thighs opened like wings from my waist as we surfaced panting from a kiss that left you pleading *Oh, Christ yes, a yes* gasped sharply as a cry of pain so that for a moment I thought that we *were* already doing it and that somehow I had missed the instant when I entered you, entered you in the bloodless way in which a young man discards his own virginity, entered you as if passing through a gateway into the rest of my life, into a life as I wanted it to be lived *yes* but Oh then I realized that we were still floundering unconnected in the slick between us and there was sand in the Trojan as we slammed together still feeling for that perfect fit, still in the *Here* groping for an *Eternity* that was only a fine adjustment away, just a millimeter to the left or a fraction of an inch farther south though with all the adjusting the sandy Trojan was slipping off and then it was gone but *yes* you kept repeating although your head was shaking *no-not-quite-almost* and our hearts were going like mad and you said, *Yes. Yes wait . . . Stop!*

“What?” I asked, still futilely thrusting as if I hadn’t quite heard you.

“Oh. God!” You gasped, pushing yourself up. “What’s coming?”

"Gin, what's the matter?" I asked, confused, and then the beam of a spotlight swept over us and I glanced into its blinding eye.

All around us lights were coming, speeding across the sand. Blinking blindness away, I rolled from your body to my knees, feeling utterly defenseless in the way that only nakedness can leave one feeling. Headlights bounded toward us, spotlights crisscrossing, blue dome lights revolving as squad cars converged. I could see other lovers, caught in the beams, fleeing bare-assed through the litter of garbage that daytime hordes had left behind and that night had deceptively concealed. You were crying, clutching the Navajo blanket to your breasts with one hand and clawing for your bikini with the other, and I was trying to calm your terror with reassuring phrases such as "Holy shit! I don't fucking believe this!"

Swerving and fishtailing in the sand, police calls pouring from their radios, the squad cars were on us, and then they were by us while we struggled to pull on our clothes.

They braked at the water's edge, and cops slammed out, brandishing huge flashlights, their beams deflecting over the dark water. Beyond the darting of those beams, the far-off throbs of lightning seemed faint by comparison.

"Over there, goddamn it!" one of them hollered, and two cops sloshed out into the shallow water without even pausing to kick off their shoes, huffing aloud for breath, their leather cartridge belts creaking against their bellies.

"Grab the sonofabitch! It ain't gonna bite!" one of them yelled, then they came sloshing back to shore with a body slung between them.

It was a woman—young, naked, her body limp and bluish beneath the play of flashlight beams. They set her on the sand just past the ring of drying, washed-up alewives. Her face was almost totally concealed by her hair. Her hair was brown and tangled in a way that even wind or sleep can't tangle hair, tangled as if it had absorbed the ripples of water—thick strands, slimy looking like dead seaweed.

"She's been in there awhile, that's for sure," a cop with a beer belly said to a younger, crew-cut cop, who had knelt beside the body and removed his hat as if he might be considering the kiss of life.

The crew-cut officer brushed the hair away from her face, and the flashlight beams settled there. Her eyes were closed. A bruise or a birthmark stained the side of one eye. Her features appeared swollen, her lower lip protruding as if she was pouting.

An ambulance siren echoed across the sand, its revolving red light rapidly approaching.

"Might as well take their sweet-ass time," the beer-bellied cop said.

We had joined the circle of police surrounding the drowned woman almost without realizing that we had. You were back in your bikini, robed in the Navajo blanket, and I had slipped on my cutoffs, my underwear dangling out of a back pocket.

Their flashlight beams explored her body, causing its whiteness to gleam. Her breasts were floppy; her nipples looked shriveled. Her belly appeared inflated by gallons of water. For a moment, a beam focused on her mound of pubic hair, which was overlapped by the swell of her belly, and then moved almost shyly away down her legs, and the cops all glanced at us—at you, especially—above their lights, and you hugged your blanket closer as if they might confiscate it as evidence or to use as a shroud.

When the ambulance pulled up, one of the black attendants immediately put a stethoscope to the drowned woman's swollen belly and announced, "Drowned the baby, too."

Without saying anything, we turned from the group, as unconsciously as we'd joined them, and walked off across the sand, stopping only long enough at the spot where we had lain together like lovers, in order to stuff the rest of our gear into a beach bag, to gather our shoes, and for me to find my wallet and kick sand over the forlorn, deflated Trojan that you pretended not to notice. I was grateful for that.

Behind us, the police were snapping photos, flashbulbs throbbing like lightning flashes, and the lightning itself, still distant but moving in closer, rumbling audibly now, driving a lake wind before it so that gusts of sand tingled against the metal sides of the ambulance.

Squinting, we walked toward the lighted windows of the Gold Coast, while the shadows of gapers attracted by the whirling emergency lights hurried past us toward the shore.

"What happened? What's going on?" they asked without waiting

for an answer, and we didn't offer one, just continued walking silently in the dark.

It was only later that we talked about it, and once we began talking about the drowned woman it seemed we couldn't stop.

"She was pregnant," you said. "I mean, I don't want to sound morbid, but I can't help thinking how the whole time we were, we almost—you know—there was this poor, dead woman and her unborn child washing in and out behind us."

"It's not like we could have done anything for her even if we had known she was there."

"But what if we *had* found her? What if after we had—you know," you said, your eyes glancing away from mine and your voice tailing into a whisper, "what if after we did it, we went for a night swim and found her in the water?"

"But, Gin, we didn't," I tried to reason, though it was no more a matter of reason than anything else between us had ever been.

It began to seem as if each time we went somewhere to make out—on the back porch of your half-deaf, whiskey Italian grandmother, who sat in the front of the apartment cackling at *I Love Lucy* reruns; or in your girlfriend Tina's basement rec room when her parents were away on bowling league nights and Tina was upstairs with her current crush, Brad; or way off in the burbs, at the Giant Twin Drive-In during the weekend they called Elvis Fest—the drowned woman was with us.

We would kiss, your mouth would open, and when your tongue flicked repeatedly after mine, I would unbutton the first button of your blouse, revealing the beauty spot at the base of your throat, which matched a smaller spot I loved above a corner of your lips, and then the second button, which opened on a delicate gold cross—which I had always tried to regard as merely a fashion statement—dangling above the cleft of your breasts. The third button exposed the lacy swell of your bra, and I would slide my hand over the patterned mesh, feeling for the firmness of your nipple rising to my fingertip, but you would pull slightly away, and behind your rapid breath your kiss would grow distant, and I would

kiss harder, trying to lure you back from wherever you had gone, and finally, holding you as if only consoling a friend, I'd ask, "What are you thinking?" although of course I knew.

"I don't want to think about her but I can't help it. I mean, it seems like some kind of weird omen or something, you know?"

"No, I don't know," I said. "It was just a coincidence."

"Maybe if she'd been farther away down the beach, but she was so close to us. A good wave could have washed her up right beside us."

"Great, then we could have had a *ménage à trois*."

"Gross! I don't believe you just said that! Just because you said it in French doesn't make it less disgusting."

"You're driving me to it. Come on, Gin, I'm sorry," I said. "I was just making a dumb joke to get a little different perspective on things."

"What's so goddamn funny about a woman who drowned herself and her baby?"

"We don't even know for sure she did."

"Yeah, right, it was just an accident. Like she just happened to be going for a walk pregnant and naked, and she fell in."

"She could have been on a sailboat or something. Accidents happen; so do murders."

"Oh, like murder makes it less horrible? Don't think that hasn't occurred to me. Maybe the bastard who knocked her up killed her, huh?"

"How should I know? You're the one who says you don't want to talk about it and then gets obsessed with all kinds of theories and scenarios. Why are we arguing about a woman we don't even know, who doesn't have the slightest thing to do with us?"

"I *do* know about her," you said. "I dream about her."

"You dream about her?" I repeated, surprised. "Dreams you remember?"

"Sometimes they wake me up. In one I'm at my *nonna's* cottage in Michigan, swimming for a raft that keeps drifting farther away, until I'm too tired to turn back. Then I notice there's a naked person sunning on the raft and start yelling, 'Help!' and she looks up and offers me a

hand, but I'm too afraid to take it even though I'm drowning because it's her."

"God! Gin, that's creepy."

"I dreamed you and I are at the beach and you bring us a couple hot dogs but forget the mustard, so you have to go all the way back to the stand for it."

"Hot dogs, no mustard—a little too Freudian, isn't it?"

"Honest to God, I dreamed it. You go back for mustard and I'm wondering why you're gone so long, then a woman screams that a kid has drowned and everyone stampedes for the water. I'm swept in by the mob and forced under, and I think, This is it, I'm going to drown, but I'm able to hold my breath longer than could ever be possible. It feels like a flying dream—flying under water—and then I see this baby down there flying, too, and realize it's the kid everyone thinks has drowned, but he's no more drowned than I am. He looks like Cupid or one of those baby angels that cluster around the face of God."

"Pretty weird. What do you think all the symbols mean?—hot dogs, water, drowning . . ."

"It means the baby who drowned inside her that night was a love child—a boy—and his soul was released there to wander through the water."

"You don't really believe that?"

We argued about the interpretation of dreams, about whether dreams are symbolic or psychic, prophetic or just plain nonsense, until you said, "Look, Dr. Freud, you can believe what you want about your dreams, but keep your nose out of mine, okay?"

We argued about the drowned woman, about whether her death was a suicide or a murder, about whether her appearance that night was an omen or a coincidence which, you argued, is what an omen is anyway: a coincidence that means something. By the end of summer, even if we were no longer arguing about the woman, we had acquired the habit of arguing about everything else. What was better: dogs or cats, rock or jazz, Cubs or Sox, tacos or egg rolls, right or left, night or day?—we could argue about anything.

It no longer required arguing or necking to summon the drowned woman; everywhere we went she surfaced by her own volition: at Rocky's Italian Beef, at Lindo Mexico, at the House of Dong, our favorite Chinese restaurant, a place we still frequented because when we'd first started seeing each other they had let us sit and talk until late over tiny cups of jasmine tea and broken fortune cookies. We would always kid about going there. "Are you in the mood for Dong tonight?" I'd whisper conspiratorially. It was a dopey joke, meant for you to roll your eyes at its repeated dopiness. Back then, in winter, if one of us ordered the garlic shrimp we would both be sure to eat them so that later our mouths tasted the same when we kissed.

Even when she wasn't mentioned, she was there with her drowned body—so dumpy next to yours—and her sad breasts, with their wrinkled nipples and sour milk—so saggy beside yours, which were still budding—with her swollen belly and her pubic bush colorless in the glare of electric light, with her tangled, slimy hair and her pouting, placid face—so lifeless beside yours—and her skin a pallid white, lightning-flash white, flashbulb white, a whiteness that couldn't be duplicated in daylight—how I'd come to hate that pallor, so cold beside the flush of your skin.

There wasn't a particular night when we finally broke up, just as there wasn't a particular night when we began going together, but it was a night in fall when I guessed that it was over. We were parked in the Rambler at the dead end of the street of factories that had been our lovers' lane, listening to a drizzle of rain and dry leaves sprinkle the hood. As always, rain revitalized the smells of smoked fish and kielbasa in the upholstery. The radio was on too low to hear, the windshield wipers swished at intervals as if we were driving, and the windows were steamed as if we'd been making out. But we'd been arguing, as usual, this time about a woman poet who had committed suicide, whose work you were reading. We were sitting, no longer talking or touching, and I remember thinking that I didn't want to argue with you anymore. I didn't want to sit like this in hurt silence; I wanted to talk excitedly all night as we once had. I wanted to find some way that wasn't corny sounding to tell you how much fun I'd had in your company, how much knowing you had

meant to me, and how I had suddenly realized that I'd been so intent on becoming lovers that I'd overlooked how close we'd been as friends. I wanted you to know that. I wanted you to like me again.

"It's sad," I started to say, meaning that I was sorry we had reached the point of silence, but before I could continue you challenged the statement.

"What makes you so sure it's sad?"

"What do you mean, what makes me so sure?" I asked, confused by your question.

You looked at me as if what was sad was that I would never understand. "For all either one of us knows," you said, "death could have been her triumph!"

Maybe when it really ended was the night I felt we had just reached the beginning, that one time on the beach in the summer when our bodies rammed so desperately together that for a moment I thought we did it, and maybe in our hearts we did, although for me, then, doing it in one's heart didn't quite count. If it did, I supposed we'd all be Casanovas.

We rode home together on the El train that night, and I felt sick and defeated in a way I was embarrassed to mention. Our mute reflections emerged like negative exposures on the dark, greasy window of the train. Lightning branched over the city, and when the train entered the subway tunnel, the lights inside flickered as if the power was disrupted, though the train continued rocketing beneath the Loop.

When the train emerged again we were on the South Side of the city and it was pouring, a deluge as if the sky had opened to drown the innocent and guilty alike. We hurried from the El station to your house, holding the Navajo blanket over our heads until, soaked, it collapsed. In the dripping doorway of your apartment building, we said good night. You were shivering. Your bikini top showed through the thin blouse plastered to your skin. I swept the wet hair away from your face and kissed you lightly on the lips, then you turned and went inside. I stepped into the rain, and you came back out, calling after me.

"What?" I asked, feeling a surge of gladness to be summoned back into the doorway with you.

“Want an umbrella?”

I didn't. The downpour was letting up. It felt better to walk back to the station feeling the rain rinse the sand out of my hair, off my legs, until the only places where I could still feel its grit were in the crotch of my cutoffs and each squish of my shoes. A block down the street, I passed a pair of jockey shorts lying in a puddle and realized they were mine, dropped from my back pocket as we ran to your house. I left them behind, wondering if you'd see them and recognize them the next day.

By the time I had climbed the stairs back to the El platform, the rain had stopped. Your scent still hadn't washed from my fingers. The station—the entire city it seemed—dripped and steamed. The summer sound of crickets and nighthawks echoed from the drenched neighborhood. Alone, I could admit how sick I felt. For you, it was a night that would haunt your dreams. For me, it was another night when I waited, swollen and aching, for what I had secretly nicknamed the Blue Ball Express.

Literally lovesick, groaning inwardly with each lurch of the train and worried that I was damaged for good, I peered out at the passing yellow-lit stations, where lonely men stood posted before giant advertisements, pictures of glamorous models defaced by graffiti—the same old scrawled insults and pleas: FUCK YOU, EAT ME. At this late hour the world seemed given over to men without women, men waiting in abject patience for something indeterminate, the way I waited for our next times. I avoided their eyes so that they wouldn't see the pity in mine, pity for them because I'd just been with you, your scent was still on my hands, and there seemed to be so much future ahead.

For me it was another night like that, and by the time I reached my stop I knew I would be feeling better, recovered enough to walk the dark street home making up poems of longing that I never wrote down. I was the D. H. Lawrence of not doing it, the voice of all the would-be lovers who ached and squirmed. From our contortions in doorways, on stairwells, and in the bucket seats of cars we could have composed a Kama Sutra of interrupted bliss. It must have been that night when I recalled all the other times of walking home after seeing you, so that it seemed as if I was falling into step behind a parade of my former selves—myself

walking home on the night we first kissed, myself on the night when I unbuttoned your blouse and kissed your breasts, myself on the night when I lifted your skirt above your thighs and dropped to my knees—each succeeding self another step closer to that irrevocable moment for which our lives seemed poised.

But we didn't, not in the moonlight, or by the phosphorescent lanterns of lightning bugs in your back yard, not beneath the constellations we couldn't see, let alone decipher, or in the dark glow that replaced the real darkness of night, a darkness already stolen from us, not with the skyline rising behind us while a city gradually decayed, not in the heat of summer while a Cold War raged, despite the freedom of youth and the license of first love—because of fate, karma, luck, what does it matter?—we made not doing it a wonder, and yet we didn't, we didn't, we never did.

SOMETHING THAT NEEDS NOTHING

MIRANDA JULY

In an ideal world, we would have been orphans. We felt like orphans and we felt deserving of the pity that orphans get, but embarrassingly enough, we had parents. I even had two. They would never let me go, so I didn't say goodbye; I packed a tiny bag and left a note. On the way to Pip's house, I cashed my graduation checks. Then I sat on her porch and pretended I was twelve or fifteen or even sixteen. At all these ages, I had dreamed of today; I had even imagined sitting here, waiting for Pip for the last time. She had the opposite problem: her mom *would* let her go. Her mom had gigantic swollen legs that were a symptom of something much worse, and she was heavily medicated with marijuana at all times.

We're going now, Mom.

Where?

To Portland.

Can you do one thing for me first? Can you bring that magazine over here?

We were anxious to begin our life as people who had no people. And it was easy to find an apartment because we had no standards; we were just amazed that it was *our* door, *our* rotting carpet, *our* cockroach infestation. We decorated with paper streamers and Chinese lanterns and we shared the ancient bed that came with the studio. This was tremendously thrilling for one of us. One of us had always been in love with the other. One of us lived in a perpetual state of longing. But we'd met when we were children and seemed destined to sleep like children, or like an old couple who had met before the sexual revolution and were too shy to learn the new way.

We were excited about getting jobs; we hardly went anywhere without filling out an application. But once we were hired—as furniture sanders—we could not believe this was really what people did all day. Everything we had thought of as *The World* was actually the result of someone’s job. Each line on the sidewalk, each saltine. Everyone had rotting carpet and a door to pay for. Aghast, we quit. There had to be a more dignified way to live. We needed time to consider ourselves, to come up with a theory about who we were and set it to music.

With this goal in mind, Pip came up with a new plan. We went at it with determination; three weeks in a row we wrote and rewrote and resubmitted our ad to the local paper. Finally, the *Portland Weekly* accepted it; it no longer sounded like blatant prostitution, and yet, to the right reader, it could have meant nothing else. We were targeting wealthy women who loved women. Did such a thing exist? We would also accept a woman of average means who had saved up her money.

The ad ran for a month, and our voice mailbox overflowed with interest. Every day we parsed through the hundreds of men to find that one special lady who would pay our rent. She was slow to come. She perhaps did not even read this section of the free weekly. We became agitated. We knew this was the only way we could make money without compromising ourselves. Could we pay Mr. Hilderbrand, the landlord, in food stamps? We could not. Was he interested in this old camera that Pip’s grandmother had loaned her? He was not. He wanted to be paid in the traditional way. Pip grimly began to troll through the messages for a gentle man. I watched her boyish face as she listened and realized that she was terrified. I thought of her small bottom that was so like a pastry and the warm world of complications between her legs. Let him be a withered man, I prayed. A man who really just wanted to see us jump around in our underwear. Suddenly, Pip grinned and wrote down a name. Leanne.

The bus dropped us off at the top of the gravel driveway that Leanne had described on the phone. We had told her our names were Astrid and Tallulah, and we hoped “Leanne” was a pseudonym, too. We wanted her to be wearing a smoking jacket or a boa. We hoped she was familiar with

the work of Anaïs Nin. We hoped that she was not the way she sounded on the phone. Not poor, not old, not willing to pay for the company of anyone who would drive all the way out to Nehalem, population 210.

Pip and I walked down the gravel path toward a small brown house. There was bad food being cooked, we could smell it already. And now a woman stepped onto the porch, she was frowning. Her age was hard to determine from our vantage point, a point in our lives when we could not bring older bodies into focus. She was perhaps the age of my mother's older sister. And, like Aunt Lynn, she wore leggings, royal-blue leggings, and an oversized button-down shirt with some kind of appliqué on it. My mind ballooned with nervous fear. I looked at Pip and for a split second I felt as though she was nobody special in the larger scheme of my life. She was just some girl who had tied me to her leg to help her sink when she jumped off the bridge. Then I blinked and was in love with her again.

She waves and we wave. We wave until we are close enough to say hi and then we say hi. Now we are close enough to hug, but we don't. She says, Come in, and inside, it is dark, with no children. Of course there are no children. Pip asks for the money right away, which is something we decided on beforehand. It is terrible to have to ask for anything ever. We wish we were something that needed nothing, like paint. But even paint needs repainting. Leanne tells us we are younger than she expected and to sit down. We sit on an old vinyl couch and she leaves the room. It is a terrible room, with magazines piled everywhere and furniture that could have come from a motel. We don't look at each other or anything that is reflective. I stare at my own knees.

For a long time we don't know where she is, and then, slowly, I can feel that she is standing right behind us. I realize this just before she pulls her fingernails through my hair. I didn't think she was the sexual type, but now I see that I don't know anything. It has begun, and every second we are closer to the end. I say to myself that long nails equal wealth; the idea of wealth always calms me down. I pretend I smell perfume. What if we all used expensive shampoo. What if we were kidding all the time and cared about nothing. My head relaxes, and I do the exercise where you imagine you are turning into honey. My mind slows down to a rate

that would not be considered functional for any other job. I am alive only one out of every four seconds, I register only fifteen minutes out of the hour. I see she is standing before us in a slip and it is not really clean and I die. I see that Pip is taking off her shoes and I die. I see that I am squeezing a nipple and I die.

On the long ride home, neither of us said anything. We were kites flying in opposite directions attached to strings held by one hand. The money we had just made was also in that hand. Pip stopped to get a bag of chips on the way home, and now we had \$1.99 less than our rent. It seemed obvious now that we should have charged more. Pip put the money in an envelope and wrote *Mr. Hilderbrand* on it. Then we stood there, apart, bruised and smelling like Leanne. We turned away from each other and set about tightening all the tiny ropes of our misery. I ran a bath. Just before I stepped in the tub, I heard the front door close and froze midstep; she was gone. Sometimes she did this. In the moments when other couples would fight or come together, she left me. With one foot in the bath, I stood waiting for her to return. I waited an unreasonably long time, long enough to realize that she wouldn't be back tonight. But what if I waited it out, what if I stood here naked until she returned? And then, just as she walked in the front door, I could finish the gesture, squatting in the then-cold water. I had done strange things like this before. I had hidden under cars for hours, waiting to be found; I had written the same word seven thousand times attempting to alchemize time. I studied my position in the bathtub. The foot in the water was already wrinkly. How would I feel when night fell? And when she came home, how long would it take her to look in the bathroom? Would she understand that time had stopped while she was gone? And even if she did realize that I had done this impossible feat for her, what then? She was never thankful or sympathetic. I washed quickly, with exaggerated motions that warded off paralysis.

I paced around our tiny room. It didn't even occur to me to go outside; I had no idea how to navigate the city without her. There was only one thing I couldn't do when she was with me, so after a while, I lay down on the couch and did this. I closed my eyes. In all the well-worn memories, we were between the ages of six and eight. We were under the

covers on her mom's foldout sofa, or on the top bunk of my bunk bed, or in a tent in her backyard. Every location was potent in its own way. No matter where we were, it began when Pip whispered, Let's mate. She scooted on top of me; we clamped our arms around each other's backs. We rubbed ourselves against each other's small hip bones, trying to achieve friction. When we did it right, the feeling came on like a head rush of the whole body.

But just before I got there, I noticed a clicking noise in the air. It was distractingly present, quietly insistent. I looked up. Above my head, our five Chinese paper lanterns were slightly rocking of their own accord. As I reached toward them, I suddenly realized why, but I was too late to stop myself. I shook a lantern, and from the hole in the bottom, cockroaches came pouring out. They were crawling even as they fell. They were planning the conquest of wherever they landed even before they touched down. And when they hit the ground, they didn't die, they didn't even think of dying. They ran.

When Pip finally came home, we agreed that the Leanne job was not worth the money. But a few days later, we saw Nastassja Kinski in the movie *Paris, Texas*. She was wearing a long red sweater and working in a peep show. I thought it looked like a pretty easy job, as long as Harry Dean Stanton didn't show up, but Pip didn't agree.

No way. I'm not gonna do that.

I could do it without you.

This made her so angry that she did the dishes. We never did this unless we were trying to be grand and self-destructive. I stood in the doorway and tried to maintain my end of our silence while watching her scratch at calcified noodles. In truth, I had not yet learned how to hate anyone but my parents. I was actually just standing there in love. I was not even really standing; if she had walked away suddenly, I would have fallen.

I won't do it, never mind.

You sound disappointed.

I'm not.

It's okay; I know you want them to look at you.

Who?

Men.

No, I don't.

If you do that, then I can't be with you anymore.

This was, in a way, the most romantic thing she had ever said to me. It implied that we were living together not because we had grown up together and were the only people we knew, but because of something else. Because we both didn't want men to look at me. I told her I would never work in a peep show, and she stopped doing the dishes, which meant she meant she was okay again. But I wasn't okay. In the last ten years, we had touched only three times.

1. When she was eleven, her uncle tried to molest her. When she told me about it, I cried and she hit me on the chin and I curled up in a ball for forty minutes until she uncurled me. I kept my eyes shut as she pulled my knees away from my chest and I could feel her looking at my body and I knew that if I kept my eyes closed it would happen and it did. She slid her hand under my tights and felt around until she had located the thing she knew on herself. Then she shook her finger in a violent, animal way that quickly gave me the old rush. When it was over, she told me not to tell anyone and I didn't know if she meant this, with me, or about her uncle.

2. When we were fourteen we got drunk for the first time, and for about nine minutes, everything seemed possible and we kissed. This encounter seemed promisingly normal, and in the following days I waited for more kissing, perhaps even some kind of exchange of rings or locket. But nothing was exchanged. We each kept our own things.

3. In our last year of high school, I momentarily had one other friend. She was an ordinary girl, her name was Tammy, she liked the Smiths. There was no way I could ever be in love with her because she was just as pathetic as me. Every day she told me everything she was thinking, and I guessed that this was what most girls did together. I wanted to talk about myself, too, badly, but it was hard to know where to begin. She was always so far ahead of me, in the minutiae of poems she had written

in reference to dreams she had dreamed. So I just hung out, in a loose imitation of Pip. Pip did not think much of Tammy, but she was mildly intrigued by the normalcy of the friendship.

What do you guys do?

Nothing. Listen to tapes and stuff.

That's it?

Last weekend we made peanut-butter cookies.

Oh. That sounds fun.

Are you being sarcastic?

No, it does.

So she came along the next time I went over to Tammy's house. This made me a little nervous because Tammy had these parents who were always around. Traditionally, parents did not know what to make of Pip, who looked much more like a boy than a girl, and somehow made mothers feel flirtatious and fathers feel strangely threatened. But Tammy's parents were watching a movie and just waved absently behind their heads when we came in. As predicted, we listened to tapes. Pip asked if we were going to make peanut-butter cookies, but Tammy said she didn't have the right stuff. Then she threw herself down on the bed and asked us if we were girlfriends or what? An appalling emptiness filled the room. I stared out the window and repeated the word "window" in my head, I was ready to *window window window* indefinitely, but suddenly, Pip answered.

Yeah.

Cool. I have a gay cousin.

Tammy told us that her room was a safe space and we didn't have to pretend, and then she showed us a neon pink sticker that her cousin had sent her. It said **FUCK YOUR GENDER**. We all looked at the sticker in silence, absorbing its two meanings—at *least* two, probably even more. Tammy seemed to be waiting for something, as if Pip and I would obediently fall upon each other the moment we read the sticker's bold command. I knew we were a disappointment, meekly sitting on the bed. Pip must have felt this, too, because she abruptly threw her arm over my shoulder. This had never happened before, so understandably, I froze. And then very gradually recalibrated my body into a casual attitude. Pip

just blinked when I sighed and flopped my hand on her thigh. Tammy watched all of this and even gave a slight nod of approval before shifting her attention back to the music. We listened to the Smiths, the Velvet Underground, and the Sugarcubes. Pip and I did not move from our position. After an hour and twenty minutes, my back ached and my numb blue hand felt unaffiliated with the rest of my body. I politely excused myself.

In the powdery warmth of the bathroom I felt euphoric. Being alone suddenly felt wild. I locked the door and made a series of involuntary, baroque gestures in the mirror. I waved maniacally at myself and contorted my face into hideous, unlovable expressions. I washed my hands as if they were children, cradling one and then the other. I was experiencing a paroxysm of selfhood. The scientific name for this spasm is the Last Hurrah. The feeling was quickly spent. I dried my hands on a tiny blue towel and walked back to the bedroom.

I knew it the moment before I saw it. I knew I would find them together on the bed like this, I knew I would be stunned, I knew they would spring apart and wipe their mouths. Pip would not look me in the eye. I would never talk to Tammy again. I knew we would all graduate from high school, I knew that Pip and I would live together as planned. And I knew she did not want me in that way. She never would. Other girls, any girl, but not me.

Now that we had paid the rent, we felt entitled to mention the cockroach situation to the landlord. He said he would send someone over but that we shouldn't get our hopes up.

Why not?

Well, it's not just your apartment; the whole building's infested.

Maybe you should have them do the whole building, then.

It wouldn't do any good; they'd just come over from other buildings.

It's the whole block?

It's the whole world.

I told him never mind then and got off the phone quickly, before he could hear Pip hammering. We were making some renovations; specifi-

cally, we were building a basement. Our apartment was tiny, but the ceilings were tall, and there was a tantalizing amount of unused space above our heads. Pip thought lofts were for hippies, so even though our studio was on the second floor, she had sketched out a design that would allow us to live on a low-ceilinged main floor, and then, when feeling morose, descend a ladder to the basement. We would leave the heavy things down there, like the refrigerator and bathtub, but everything else would come upstairs. We could both picture the basement perfectly in our heads. It had a damp, mineral smell. Warmth and seams of light seeped through the ceiling. Up there was home. Dinner waited for us up there.

One of the many great reasons for building a basement was our access to free wood. Pip had met a girl whose father owned Berryman's Lumber and Supply. Kate Berryman. She was a year younger than us and went to the private high school by Pip's grandma's house. I had never met her, but I felt glad that we were using her. We practiced a very loose, sporadic form of class warfare that sanctioned every kind of thievery. There was no person, no business, no library, hospital, or park that had not stolen from us, be it psychically or historically, and thus we were forever trying to regain what was ours. Kate probably thought she was on our side of the restitution when she struggled to pull large pieces of plywood out of the back of her parents' station wagon. She left them in the alley behind our building, honking three times as she drove away. At her signal, we strolled out of the building, pretending to take a walk, sometimes even stopping to buy a soda, before arbitrarily, on a whim, deciding to amble down the alley. We hauled it upstairs, feeling fairly certain we had hoodwinked everyone. We were always getting away with something, which implied that someone was always watching us, which meant we were not alone in this world.

Each morning Pip made a list of what we needed to do that day. At the top of the list was usually *go to bank*, where they had free coffee. The next items were often vague—*find out about food stamps, library card?*—but the list still gave me a cozy feeling. I liked to watch her write it, knowing that someone was steering the day. At night we discussed how we would decorate the basement, but during the day our progress

was slow. Mostly, what we had was a lot of pieces of wood; they leaned against the walls and lay across the couch like untrained dogs.

We were trying to nail a post into the linoleum kitchen floor when Pip decided we needed a certain kind of bracket.

Are you sure?

Yeah. I'll call Kate and she'll bring it.

Isn't she in school?

It's okay.

Pip made the call and then went to take a shower. I continued hammering long nails through the post and into the floor. The post became secure. It was a satisfying feeling. It wouldn't withstand any kind of weight, but it stood on its own. It was almost as tall as me, and I could not help naming it. It looked like a Gwen.

The buzzer rang, and Pip ran damply to the door. It was Kate. I looked up at her from where I was sitting on the kitchen floor. She was wearing a school uniform. She was not holding the brackets. Maybe she had hidden them up her skirt.

Where are the brackets? I asked.

With panic in her eyes, Kate looked at Pip. Pip took her hand, turned to me, and said, We have to tell you something.

I suddenly felt chilled. My ears felt so cold that I had to press my hands against them. But I quickly realized this made me look as if I were covering them to avoid listening, like the monkey who hears no evil. So I rubbed my palms together and asked, Are your ears cold? Pip didn't respond, but Kate shook her head.

Okay, go ahead.

Kate and I are going to live together at her parents' house.

Why?

What do you mean?

Well, I'm sure Kate's dad doesn't want you living in his house after you stole all that stuff from him.

I'm going to work at Berryman's Lumber to pay him back. I might even make enough money to get a car.

I thought about this. I imagined Pip driving a car, a Model T, wearing goggles and a scarf that blew behind her in the wind.

Can I work at Berryman's Lumber, too?

Pip was suddenly angry. Come on!

What? I can't? Just say I can't if I can't.

You are purposely not getting it!

What?

She raised Kate's hand, clasped in her own, and shook it in the air.

Suddenly my ears were hot, they were boiling, and I had to fan my hands at either side of my head to cool them down. This was too much for Pip; she grabbed her backpack and marched out of the apartment with Kate following.

I could not let her leave the building. I ran down the hall and threw myself on her. She shook me off; I locked my arms around her knees. I was sobbing and wailing, but not like a cartoon of someone sobbing and wailing—this was really happening. If she left, I would become mute, like those children who have witnessed horrible atrocities. No one would understand me but those children. Pip was prying my fingers off her shins. Kate knelt to help her, and I was repulsed by the touch of her pudding-like skin, I wanted to puncture it, I lunged at her chest. Pip took this moment to scuttle down the stairs, and somehow Kate was behind her. I was holding Kate's cardigan. I ran after them, watched them hurry into Kate's car. Before they pulled away, I shut my eyes and hurled myself onto the sidewalk. I lay there. This was my last hope—that Pip would take pity on me. I heard their car idling. I listened to the traffic and the sound of pedestrians walking carefully around me. I could almost hear Kate and Pip arguing in the car, Pip wanting to get out and help me, Kate urging them to leave. I pressed my cheek against the pavement in prayer. High heels clicked toward me and stopped; an elderly woman's voice asked if I was okay. I whispered that I was fine and silently begged her to move on. But the woman was persistent, so finally I opened my eyes to tell her to go. Kate's car was gone.

I pulled the phone into the bed and slept for three days. At intervals I would open my eyes long enough to remember and then I'd drop back into unconsciousness. In dreams I knew I was tunneling toward her—if I could only dig deep enough, I would find her. The tunnels narrowed as

I crawled through them, until they became impossibly knotted strands of hair that I could only tear at.

On the afternoon of the third day, the phone rang. I pulled it up from the loamy depths of the bed. I wanted her to know, from the moment she heard my voice, that I was dying. I delivered a salutation so craven, so wretched, that it fell through language like pebbles. Hello.

It was Mr. Hilderbrand, the landlord. In some bizarre, alternative, science-fiction reality, the rent was due. It was just one month ago that we had lifted Leanne's dirty slip. I hung up the phone and looked around the room. My post was still standing in the kitchen, tactfully silent. A dangerously tall table-like structure wobbled in the middle of the room. It was the first square foot of the upstairs. I crawled underneath it and imagined Pip and Kate eating dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Berryman. It was the kind of scenario Pip had often described. We could not walk past a fancy house without her presuming its owners would want her to live with them if only they knew she was available. She saw herself as a charming street urchin, a pet for wealthy mothers. It was a scam. There was nothing in the world that was not a con, suddenly I understood this. Nothing really mattered, and nothing could be lost.

I went to the bathroom and threw handfuls of water on my face, and it was easy. In fact, I could do anything. I took off the jeans and T-shirt I had been sleeping in. Naked, I crouched on the floor and sliced the legs off my pants with a box cutter. I put them on and they were itty-bitty. Itty-bitty teeny-tiny. I sawed through the T-shirt, leaving IF YOU LOVE JAZZ on the floor. HONK barely covered my small breasts, but hey. Hey, I was leaving the apartment. I was walking down the hall, and there was a small basket of old apples in front of the neighbor's door with a sign that said, FOR MY NEIGHBORS PLEASE TAKE ONE. And hey, I was starving. I took an apple and the door swung open. I had never really seen this neighbor, but now I could see that she was a junkie. An old junkie. And she was wearing a sweater that I knew she had found in the hallway. It was Kate's cardigan. She told me to take another one, and then she asked for a hug. I hugged her hard with an apple in each hand. Last week I would have been afraid to touch her, but now I knew that I could do anything.

I had no money for the bus, so I walked. It was an incredible distance. A horse would get tired galloping there. When birds flew there, it was called migration. But it wasn't difficult, it just took time. It was a new experience to walk across the city in tiny shorts and a half-shirt that said HONK. People honked without even seeing the shirt. I often felt that I would be shot in the back with an arrow or gun, but this didn't happen. The world wasn't safer than I had thought; on the contrary, it was so dangerous that my practically naked self fit right in, like a car crash, it happened every day.

The place I was walking to was in a strip mall, between a pet store and a check-cashing place. I asked the man at the counter if they were hiring, and he gave me a form to fill out on a clipboard. When I handed it back, he stared at it without moving his eyes, which made me think maybe he couldn't read. He said I could start tonight if I wanted to come back at nine. I said, Great. He said his name was Allen, I said my name was Gwen.

I hung out in the strip mall for three hours. The pet store was closed, but I could see the rabbits through the window. I pressed my fingers against the glass, and an ancient lop-ear hopped toward me wearily. It looked at me with one eye and then the other. Its nose quivered, and for a moment I felt that it recognized me. It knew me from before, like an old teacher or a friend of my parents. The rabbit's eyes darted across my clothes and sniffed my wild, sad urgency and guessed that I was up to no good. Then I stood up, brushed off my knees, and walked into Mr. Peeps Adult Video Store and More.

The "and More" part was in the back. Allen left me there with a woman named Christy. She was sitting in a green plastic patio chair and wearing a pink OshKosh overall dress. Looking at the sturdy gold overall fasteners, I wondered if everything familiar was actually part of a secret sexual underworld. She showed me into the booth and began packing dildos and bottles and strings of beads into a sporty Adidas bag. Adidas. Her tools were laid out on an old flowery towel, and I knew that if I smelled the towel, it would smell like my grandmother. Gramma. Christy wrapped the towel around a small empty jelly jar.

What's that for?

Pee.

Even pee was in on this. She showed me the price list and the slot that money would come through. She raised her hand through the air as she described how the curtain would roll up. She cleaned a telephone receiver with Windex and paper towel and told me to never leave it sticky. Then, with hasty efficiency, she pulled her long, thin hair into a pony-tail, swung the Adidas bag over her shoulder, and left.

The store felt very quiet, like a library. I sat on the green plastic chair and adjusted my shirt and shorts. The fluorescent lights droned with a timeless constancy. I looked up at them and imagined that they, not the stars, had hung over the long creation of civilization. They had droned over ice ages and Neanderthals, and now they droned over me. I stood up and walked into my booth. I didn't have anything to lay out on a towel; I didn't even have a towel. All I had was the key to the apartment. If I didn't make any money tonight, I would be walking all the way back there. At night. In this outfit. I was in a unique situation where I needed to give a Live Fantasy Show in order to protect my personal safety.

I practiced taking the phone off the hook. I did it five times, quicker and quicker, as if this were the skill I would be paid for. I thought about the words that I would have to say into it. I had never said any of these words except as swear words. I tried to think of them as seductive. I tried to say them seductively into the receiver, but they came out in a swallowed whisper. What if I couldn't say them? How awkward would that be? The man would ask for his money back, and I wouldn't get to take the bus. In a panic, I said all the dirty words I knew in one long curse: *Cock-sucking ball-licking bitch whore cunt pussy-licking asshole fucker*. I hung up the phone. At least I could say them.

I sat in the plastic chair for more than three hours. During this time, two different men came into the store. They both peeked at me over the racks of videos, but neither of them walked to the back. After the second man left, Allen yelled out from behind the counter.

That's the second one you've let go by!

What?

You've gotta be more aggressive! Can't just sit on your ass back there!

Got it!

Twenty minutes later, a man in a black sweatshirt came in. He peered over a rack of magazines at me, and I rose to my feet and walked toward him. His sweatshirt had a picture of a galaxy on it with an arrow pointing to a tiny dot and the words *YOU ARE HERE*. The man looked up at me and pretended to be surprised. I imagined him instinctively pulling off his hat in the presence of a lady, but he wasn't wearing a hat.

Are you interested in a live fantasy show, sir?

Yeah. Okay.

He followed me to the back of the store. We parted for a moment and reunited inside the booth with the curtained glass between us. I heard a Velcro wallet ripping open, twenty dollars fell lightly into the locked plastic box, and the curtain rose. He already had his penis out and the phone in one hand. I lifted the receiver. But as I had feared, I was mute. I stood paralyzed, as if on a rock over a cold lake. I was never good at jumping in, letting go of one element and embracing another. I could stand there all day, letting the other kids go in front of me forever. He was pumping it up and down and it was a strange sight, not something you see every day; in fact, I had never seen this before. He said something into the phone, but I didn't catch it. Despite how close we were, the reception was not very good.

Excuse me?

Can you take off your clothes?

Oh. Okay.

From the start, one is trained not to take off your clothes in front of complete strangers. Keeping one's clothes on is actually the number one rule for civilization. Even a duck or a bear looks civilized when clothed. I pulled down my jean shorts and lifted my shirt over my head. I stood there naked, like a bear or a duck. The man looked at me with grim concentration, my pale breasts, the puff of hair between my legs, back and forth between these poles. He checked occasionally to make sure I was looking at him. I diligently stared at his penis and hoped that this was enough, but after a few seconds, he asked me if I liked what I saw. Again I was on the rock, kids splashed below me yelling *Jump!* But I knew jumping was like dying, I would have to let go of everything. I considered what I had. She

hadn't called, she wouldn't call, I was alone, and I was here—not even in some abstract sense, not here on earth or in the universe, but really *here*, standing naked before this man. I pushed my hand between my legs and said: Your big hard cock is making me so horny.

At five A.M. I was gliding through the night on a bus. The bus was just a formality, though—actually I was flying, in the air, and I was taller than most people, I was nine or twelve feet tall, and I could fly, I could jump over cars, I could say “cock” ravenously, gently, coyly, demandingly, I could fly. And I had \$325 in my pocket. Standing with one foot in the bathtub until she returned wasn't just a way to stop time, it was also a ritual to bring her back. I would be Gwen until she came home.

I bought a lime-green negligee, a dildo that I devirginized myself with, and a chestnut-colored wig in a bobbed style called Élan. I hated my job, but I liked that I could do it. I had once believed in a precious inner self, but now I didn't. I had thought that I was fragile, but I wasn't. It was like suddenly being good at sports. I didn't care about football, but it was pretty amazing to be in the NFL. I told long, involved stories that revolved around my own perpetually wet pussy, I spread open every part of my body, I told customers I missed them, and these customers became regulars, and these regulars became stalkers. I learned to stay inside until the moment before my bus came, and then dash past anyone who was lurking in the parking lot, waving and yelling, Come see me on Thursday!

And I missed her terribly.

One evening the bus was late and a customer followed me out to the curb. He stood beside me at the bus stop and I ignored him and then he started spitting. First he spit on the pavement, then more generally in the air. I felt tiny wet specks blow onto my face and I pressed my lips together and stepped backward. He, too, stepped back, and continued to fill the air with his scattershot. His harassment relied on a logic so foreign that I felt disoriented, I couldn't gauge whether it was terrifying or silly, and it was this feeling that told me to go back inside. I walked and then ran, slamming the door behind me. But Mr. Peeps was not exactly a safe haven, and I couldn't stay there forever. I asked Allen to go outside and see if the customer was still there. He was. Couldn't Allen tell him

to leave? Allen felt he could not because a) he wasn't breaking the law, and b) he was a good customer. Allen thought I should call a friend or a cab to pick me up.

I had been waiting for this moment, and I marveled at how organically it had arisen. I usually imagined poisoning myself or getting hit by a car. Someone official, a cop or a nurse, would ask if there was anyone I wanted them to call. I would gasp her name. She works at Berryman's Lumber and Supply, I would say. This situation was not as dire, but it involved safety, and more important, it wasn't my idea to call her. I had been ordered, almost commanded, by a superior, Allen.

I called Berryman's Lumber quickly, almost distractedly, modeling myself after the kind of person who would have a question about replacement saw blades. But the moment the line began ringing, my senses dilated, winnowing out everything that was not the ring or the sound of my own heart.

Berryman's Lumber and Supply, how can I help you?

I'm trying to reach Pip Greeley?

Just a sec.

Just a sec. Just two months. Just a lifetime. Just a sec.

Hello?

It's me.

Oh. Hi.

This wouldn't do. This Oh. Hi. I couldn't be the person who elicited a response like this. I straightened my wig. I smiled into the air the way I smiled when customers unbuckled their belts, and I made my eyes laugh as if everything were some version of a good time. I began again.

Hey, I'm in a bind here and wonder if you could help me out?

Yeah? What?

I'm working at this place, Mr. Peeps? And there's this really creepy guy hanging around. Do you have a car?

She was silent for a moment. I could almost hear the name Mr. Peeps vibrating in her head. It described a man with eyes the size of clocks. She had devoted her whole life to avoiding Mr. Peeps, and now here I was, cavorting with him. I was either repulsive and foolish, or I was something else. Something surprising. I held my breath.

She said she guessed she could borrow a van, and could I wait twenty minutes until she got off work? I said I probably could.

We didn't talk in the van, and I didn't look at her, but I could feel her looking at me many times with bewilderment. I usually changed my clothes and took off my wig before I went home, but I had been right not to do this tonight. I looked out the window for other passengers in love with their drivers, but we were well disguised, we pretended boredom and prayed for traffic. Just as her former home came into view, she made a sudden left turn and asked if I wanted to see where she lived now.

You mean Kate's?

No, that didn't work out. I'm living in this guy I work with's basement.

Sure.

The basement was what is called "unfinished." It was dirt, with a few boards thrown here and there, islands that supported a bed and some milk crates. She waved a flashlight around and said, It's only seventy-five dollars a month.

Really.

Yeah, all this room! It's over fifteen hundred square feet. I can do anything I want with it.

She walked me between the beams, describing her plans. A toilet flushed upstairs, and I could almost see her coworker walking above us. He paused, a couch creaked, a TV was turned on. It was the news. She slipped the flashlight into a hanging loop of string, and a dim spotlight fell on her pillow. I stretched out on the bed and yawned. She stared at the length of me.

You can stay here if you want, I mean if you're tired.

I might just nap.

I have some cleaning up to do.

You clean up, I'll nap.

I listened to her sweeping. She swept closer and closer, she swept all around the edges of the mattress. Then she lay down the broom and climbed into bed with me. We lay there, perfectly still, for a long time. Finally, the man upstairs coughed, which set off a wave of kinetic

energy. Pip adjusted her shoulders so that the outermost edge of her T-shirt grazed my arm; I recrossed my legs, carelessly letting my ankle fall against her shin. Five more seconds passed, like heavy bass-drum beats, the three of us were motionless. Then he shifted on the couch and we instantly turned to each other, each mouth fell upon the other, our hands grabbed urgently, even painfully. It seemed necessary to be brutal at first, to mine anger and concede nothing. But once we had wrestled deep into the night and turned out the flashlight, I was surprised by her gentle attentions.

So this was what it was like not to be me. This was who Pip was. Because, make no mistake, I kept my wig on the whole time. I believed it made all of this possible, and I think I was right. The wig and the fact that I did not cry even though I wanted desperately to cry, to tell her how miserable I had been, to squeeze her and make her promise to never leave again. I wanted her to beg me to quit my job and then I wanted to quit my job.

But she didn't beg, and in fact, Mr. Peeps was essential. Each night she picked me up in the Berryman Lumber van, took me under the house, and made love to me. And each morning I went home and took off my wig. I scratched my sweaty scalp and let my head breathe for two hours before getting on the bus to go to work. I lived like this for eight beautiful days. On the ninth day, Pip suggested we go out to breakfast before I went to work.

I wish I could, but I have to go home and get ready.

You look great.

But I have to wash my hair.

Your hair looks great.

I touched my wig and laughed, but she didn't smile.

Really, it looks great.

Our eyes locked, and an unfriendly feeling passed between us. Of course it was a wig—I knew she knew this—but she was suddenly determined to call my bluff. I imagined that we were dueling, delicate foils raised high.

Okay then, let's have breakfast.

I can drop you off at Mr. Peeps after.

Fine. Thank you.

Everyone knows that if you paint a human being entirely with house paint he will live, as long as you don't paint the bottom of his feet. It takes only a little thing like this to kill a person. I had worn the wig for almost thirty hours straight, and as I stripped and jiggled and moaned, I began to feel warm, overly warm. By midday, sweat was running down the sides of my face, but the men just kept coming, it was a day of incredible profits. Allen even patted me on the back as I left, saying, Good work, champ. Pip was waiting in the van, but the walk across the parking lot felt long and strange. I thought I recognized a customer crouching by his car, but no, it was just a normal man huddled over something in a cage. He murmured, That's right, we're going to take you home.

Pip put me right to bed and even borrowed a thermometer from her coworker upstairs. But she did not suggest I take off my wig, and in my fever I understood what this meant. I saw her in the clearing with a pistol and I knew without even looking that my hands were empty. But I could win by pretending to have a pistol. If I said bang and let her shoot me, I would win. If I died this way, as Gwen, would the rest of me still go on living? And what was the rest of me? I fell asleep with this question and tunneled through the night ripping at the knotted strands until the wig came off. I didn't put it on in the morning, and Pip didn't ask how I was feeling; she could see I was fine. She didn't offer to drive me to work, and we both knew she wouldn't be there to pick me up.

I sat in the green plastic chair under the fluorescent lights. It was an extraordinarily slow day. It seemed that all the men in the world were too busy to masturbate. I imagined them out there doing virtuous things, solving crimes and teaching their children how to do cartwheels. It was the last hour of my eight-hour shift, and I had not given a single show. It was almost eerie. I watched the clock and door and began to place bets between them. If no customers came for me in the next fifteen minutes, I would yell Allen's name. Fifteen minutes passed.

Allen!

What.

Nothing.

There were only twenty minutes left now. If no one came in the next

twelve minutes, I would yell the word “I,” as in me, myself, and. After seven minutes, the door dinged and a man came in. He bought a video and left.

I!

What?

Nothing.

It was the final eight. If no customers came in, I would yell the word “quit.” As in no more, enough, I’m going home. I stared at the door. It threatened to open with each breath I took, with each passing minute. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight.

THE MAGIC BARREL

BERNARD MALAMUD

Not long ago there lived in uptown New York, in a small, almost meager room, though crowded with books, Leo Finkle, a rabbinical student in the Yeshivah University. Finkle, after six years of study, was to be ordained in June and had been advised by an acquaintance that he might find it easier to win himself a congregation if he were married. Since he had no present prospects of marriage, after two tormented days of turning it over in his mind, he called in Pinye Salzman, a marriage broker whose two-line advertisement he had read in the *Forward*.

The matchmaker appeared one night out of the dark fourth-floor hallway of the graystone rooming house where Finkle lived, grasping a black, strapped portfolio that had been worn thin with use. Salzman, who had been long in the business, was of slight but dignified build, wearing an old hat, and an overcoat too short and tight for him. He smelled frankly of fish, which he loved to eat, and although he was missing a few teeth, his presence was not displeasing, because of an amiable manner curiously contrasted with mournful eyes. His voice, his lips, his wisp of beard, his bony fingers were animated, but give him a moment of repose and his mild blue eyes revealed a depth of sadness, a characteristic that put Leo a little at ease although the situation, for him, was inherently tense.

He at once informed Salzman why he had asked him to come, explaining that his home was in Cleveland, and that but for his parents, who had married comparatively late in life, he was alone in the world. He had for six years devoted himself almost entirely to his studies, as a result of which, understandably, he had found himself without time for a social life and the company of young women. Therefore he thought it

the better part of trial and error—of embarrassing fumbling—to call in an experienced person to advise him on these matters. He remarked in passing that the function of the marriage broker was ancient and honorable, highly approved in the Jewish community, because it made practical the necessary without hindering joy. Moreover, his own parents had been brought together by a matchmaker. They had made, if not a financially profitable marriage—since neither had possessed any worldly goods to speak of—at least a successful one in the sense of their everlasting devotion to each other. Salzman listened in embarrassed surprise, sensing a sort of apology. Later, however, he experienced a glow of pride in his work, an emotion that had left him years ago, and he heartily approved of Finkle.

The two went to their business. Leo had led Salzman to the only clear place in the room, a table near a window that overlooked the lamp-lit city. He seated himself at the matchmaker's side but facing him, attempting by an act of will to suppress the unpleasant tickle in his throat. Salzman eagerly unstrapped his portfolio and removed a loose rubber band from a thin packet of much-handled cards. As he flipped through them, a gesture and sound that physically hurt Leo, the student pretended not to see and gazed steadfastly out the window. Although it was still February, winter was on its last legs, signs of which he had for the first time in years begun to notice. He now observed the round white moon, moving high in the sky through a cloud menagerie, and watched with half-open mouth as it penetrated a huge hen, and dropped out of her like an egg laying itself. Salzman, though pretending through eyeglasses he had just slipped on, to be engaged in scanning the writing on the cards, stole occasional glances at the young man's distinguished face, noting with pleasure the long, severe scholar's nose, brown eyes heavy with learning, sensitive yet ascetic lips, and a certain, almost hollow quality of the dark cheeks. He gazed around at shelves upon shelves of books and let out a soft, contented sigh.

When Leo's eyes fell upon the cards, he counted six spread out in Salzman's hand.

"So few?" he asked in disappointment.

"You wouldn't believe me how much cards I got in my office," Salz-

man replied. "The drawers are already filled to the top, so I keep them now in a barrel, but is every girl good for a new rabbi?"

Leo blushed at this, regretting all he had revealed of himself in a curriculum vitae he had sent to Salzman. He had thought it best to acquaint him with his strict standards and specifications, but in having done so, felt he had told the marriage broker more than was absolutely necessary.

He hesitantly inquired, "Do you keep photographs of your clients on file?"

"First comes family, amount of dowry, also what kind promises," Salzman replied, unbuttoning his tight coat and settling himself in the chair. "After comes pictures, rabbi."

"Call me Mr. Finkle. I'm not yet a rabbi."

Salzman said he would, but instead called him doctor, which he changed to rabbi when Leo was not listening too attentively.

Salzman adjusted his horn-rimmed spectacles, gently cleared his throat and read in an eager voice the contents of the top card:

"Sophie P. Twenty-four years. Widow one year. No children. Educated high school and two years college. Father promises eight thousand dollars. Has wonderful wholesale business. Also real estate. On the mother's side comes teachers, also one actor. Well known on Second Avenue."

Leo gazed up in surprise. "Did you say a widow?"

"A widow don't mean spoiled, rabbi. She lived with her husband maybe four months. He was a sick boy she made a mistake to marry him."

"Marrying a widow has never entered my mind."

"This is because you have no experience. A widow, especially if she is young and healthy like this girl, is a wonderful person to marry. She will be thankful to you the rest of her life. Believe me, if I was looking now for a bride, I would marry a widow."

Leo reflected, then shook his head.

Salzman hunched his shoulders in an almost imperceptible gesture of disappointment. He placed the card down on the wooden table and began to read another:

"Lily H. High school teacher. Regular. Not a substitute. Has savings

and new Dodge car. Lived in Paris one year. Father is successful dentist thirty-five years. Interested in professional man. Well Americanized family. Wonderful opportunity."

"I knew her personally," said Salzman. "I wish you could see this girl. She is a doll. Also very intelligent. All day you could talk to her about books and theater and what not. She also knows current events."

"I don't believe you mentioned her age?"

"Her age?" Salzman said, raising his brows. "Her age is thirty-two years."

Leo said after a while, "I'm afraid that seems a little too old."

Salzman let out a laugh. "So how old are you, rabbi?"

"Twenty-seven."

"So what is the difference, tell me, between twenty-seven and thirty-two? My own wife is seven years older than me. So what did I suffer?—Nothing. If Rothschild's daughter wants to marry you, would you say on account her age, no?"

"Yes," Leo said dryly.

Salzman shook off the no in the yes. "Five years don't mean a thing. I give you my word that when you will live with her for one week you will forget her age. What does it mean five years—that she lived more and knows more than somebody who is younger? On this girl, God bless her, years are not wasted. Each one that it comes makes better the bargain."

"What subject does she teach in high school?"

"Languages. If you heard the way she speaks French, you will think it is music. I am in the business twenty-five years, and I recommend her with my whole heart. Believe me, I know what I'm talking, rabbi."

"What's on the next card?" Leo said abruptly.

Salzman reluctantly turned up the third card:

"Ruth K. Nineteen years. Honor student. Father offers thirteen thousand cash to the right bridegroom. He is a medical doctor. Stomach specialist with marvelous practice. Brother-in-law owns own garment business. Particular people."

Salzman looked as if he had read his trump card.

"Did you say nineteen?" Leo asked with interest.

"On the dot."

"Is she attractive?" He blushed. "Pretty?"

Salzman kissed his finger tips. "A little doll. On this I give you my word. Let me call the father tonight and you will see what means pretty."

But Leo was troubled. "You're sure she's that young?"

"This I am positive. The father will show you the birth certificate."

"Are you positive there isn't something wrong with her?" Leo insisted.

"Who says there is wrong?"

"I don't understand why an American girl her age should go to a marriage broker."

A smile spread over Salzman's face.

"So for the same reason you went, she comes."

Leo flushed. "I am pressed for time."

Salzman, realizing he had been tactless, quickly explained. "The father came, not her. He wants she should have the best, so he looks around himself. When we will locate the right boy he will introduce him and encourage. This makes a better marriage than if a young girl without experience takes for herself. I don't have to tell you this."

"But don't you think this young girl believes in love?" Leo spoke uneasily.

Salzman was about to guffaw but caught himself and said soberly, "Love comes with the right person, not before."

Leo parted dry lips but did not speak. Noticing that Salzman had snatched a glance at the next card, he cleverly asked, "How is her health?"

"Perfect," Salzman said, breathing with difficulty. "Of course, she is a little lame on her right foot from an auto accident that it happened to her when she was twelve years, but nobody notices on account she is so brilliant and also beautiful."

Leo got up heavily and went to the window. He felt curiously bitter and upbraided himself for having called in the marriage broker. Finally, he shook his head.

"Why not?" Salzman persisted, the pitch of his voice rising.

"Because I detest stomach specialists."

"So what do you care what is his business? After you marry her do you need him? Who says he must come every Friday night in your house?"

Ashamed of the way the talk was going, Leo dismissed Salzman, who went home with heavy, melancholy eyes.

Though he had felt only relief at the marriage broker's departure, Leo was in low spirits the next day. He explained it as arising from Salzman's failure to produce a suitable bride for him. He did not care for his type of clientele. But when Leo found himself hesitating whether to seek out another matchmaker, one more polished than Pinye, he wondered if it could be—his protestations to the contrary, and although he honored his father and mother—that he did not, in essence, care for the matchmaking institution? This thought he quickly put out of mind yet found himself still upset. All day he ran around in the woods—missed an important appointment, forgot to give out his laundry, walked out of a Broadway cafeteria without paying and had to run back with the ticket in his hand; had even not recognized his landlady in the street when she passed with a friend and courteously called out, "A good evening to you, Doctor Finkle." By nightfall, however, he had regained sufficient calm to sink his nose into a book and there found peace from his thoughts.

Almost at once there came a knock on the door. Before Leo could say enter, Salzman, commercial cupid, was standing in the room. His face was gray and meager, his expression hungry, and he looked as if he would expire on his feet. Yet the marriage broker managed, by some trick of the muscles, to display a broad smile.

"So good evening. I am invited?"

Leo nodded, disturbed to see him again, yet unwilling to ask the man to leave.

Beaming still, Salzman laid his portfolio on the table. "Rabbi, I got for you tonight good news."

"I've asked you not to call me rabbi. I'm still a student."

"Your worries are finished. I have for you a first-class bride."

"Leave me in peace concerning this subject." Leo pretended lack of interest.

"The world will dance at your wedding."

"Please, Mr. Salzman, no more."

"But first must come back my strength," Salzman said weakly. He fumbled with the portfolio straps and took out of the leather case an oily paper bag, from which he extracted a hard, seeded roll and a small, smoked white fish. With a quick motion of his hand he stripped the fish out of its skin and began ravenously to chew. "All day in a rush," he muttered.

Leo watched him eat.

"A sliced tomato you have maybe?" Salzman hesitantly inquired.

"No."

The marriage broker shut his eyes and ate. When he had finished he carefully cleaned up the crumbs and rolled up the remains of the fish, in the paper bag. His spectacled eyes roamed the room until he discovered, amid some piles of books, a one-burner gas stove. Lifting his hat he humbly asked, "A glass tea you got, rabbi?"

Conscience-stricken, Leo rose and brewed the tea. He served it with a chunk of lemon and two cubes of lump sugar, delighting Salzman.

After he had drunk his tea, Salzman's strength and good spirits were restored.

"So tell me, rabbi," he said amiably, "you considered some more the three clients I mentioned yesterday?"

"There was no need to consider."

"Why not?"

"None of them suits me."

"What then suits you?"

Leo let it pass because he could give only a confused answer.

Without waiting for a reply, Salzman asked, "You remember this girl I talked to you—the high school teacher?"

"Age thirty-two?"

But, surprisingly, Salzman's face lit in a smile. "Age twenty-nine."

Leo shot him a look. "Reduced from thirty-two?"

"A mistake," Salzman avowed. "I talked today with the dentist. He took me to his safety deposit box and showed me the birth certificate. She was twenty-nine years last August. They made her a party in the

mountains where she went for her vacation. When her father spoke to me the first time I forgot to write the age and I told you thirty-two, but now I remember this was a different client, a widow."

"The same one you told me about? I thought she was twenty-four?"

"A different. Am I responsible that the world is filled with widows?"

"No, but I'm not interested in them, nor for that matter, in school teachers."

Salzman pulled his clasped hands to his breast. Looking at the ceiling he devoutly exclaimed, "Yiddishe kinder, what can I say to somebody that he is not interested in high school teachers? So what then you are interested?"

Leo flushed but controlled himself.

"In what else will you be interested," Salzman went on, "if you not interested in this fine girl that she speaks four languages and has personally in the bank ten thousand dollars? Also her father guarantees further twelve thousand. Also she has a new car, wonderful clothes, talks on all subjects, and she will give you a first-class home and children. How near do we come in our life to paradise?"

"If she's so wonderful, why wasn't she married ten years ago?"

"Why?" said Salzman with a heavy laugh. "—Why? Because she is *partikiler*. This is why. She wants the *best*."

Leo was silent, amused at how he had entangled himself. But Salzman had aroused his interest in Lily H., and he began seriously to consider calling on her. When the marriage broker observed how intently Leo's mind was at work on the facts he had supplied, he felt certain they would soon come to an agreement.

Late Saturday afternoon, conscious of Salzman, Leo Finkle walked with Lily Hirschorn along Riverside Drive. He walked briskly and erectly, wearing with distinction the black fedora he had that morning taken with trepidation out of the dusty hat box on his closet shelf, and the heavy black Saturday coat he had thoroughly whisked clean. Leo also owned a walking stick, a present from a distant relative, but quickly put temptation aside and did not use it. Lily, petite and not unpretty, had on something signifying the approach of spring. She was *au courant*, ani-

matedly, with all sorts of subjects, and he weighed her words and found her surprisingly sound—score another for Salzman, whom he uneasily sensed to be somewhere around, hiding perhaps high in a tree along the street, flashing the lady signals with a pocket mirror; or perhaps a cloven-hoofed Pan, piping nuptial ditties as he danced his invisible way before them, strewing wild buds on the walk and purple grapes in their path, symbolizing fruit of a union, though there was of course still none.

Lily startled Leo by remarking, “I was thinking of Mr. Salzman, a curious figure, wouldn’t you say?”

Not certain what to answer, he nodded.

She bravely went on, blushing, “I for one am grateful for his introducing us. Aren’t you?”

He courteously replied, “I am.”

“I mean,” she said with a little laugh—and it was all in good taste, or at least gave the effect of being not in bad—“do you mind that we came together so?”

He was not displeased with her honesty, recognizing that she meant to set the relationship aright, and understanding that it took a certain amount of experience in life, and courage, to want to do it quite that way. One had to have some sort of past to make that kind of beginning.

He said that he did not mind. Salzman’s function was traditional and honorable—valuable for what it might achieve, which, he pointed out, was frequently nothing.

Lily agreed with a sigh. They walked on for a while and she said after a long silence, again with a nervous laugh, “Would you mind if I asked you something a little bit personal? Frankly, I find the subject fascinating.” Although Leo shrugged, she went on half embarrassedly, “How was it that you came to your calling? I mean was it a sudden passionate inspiration?”

Leo, after a time, slowly replied, “I was always interested in the Law.”

“You saw revealed in it the presence of the Highest?”

He nodded and changed the subject. “I understand that you spent a little time in Paris, Miss Hirschorn?”

“Oh, did Mr. Salzman tell you, Rabbi Finkle?” Leo winced but she

went on, "It was ages ago and almost forgotten. I remember I had to return for my sister's wedding."

And Lily would not be put off. "When," she asked in a trembly voice, "did you become enamored of God?"

He stared at her. Then it came to him that she was talking not about Leo Finkle, but of a total stranger, some mystical figure, perhaps even passionate prophet that Salzman had dreamed up for her—no relation to the living or dead. Leo trembled with rage and weakness. The trickster had obviously sold her a bill of goods, just as he had him, who'd expected to become acquainted with a young lady of twenty-nine, only to behold, the moment he laid eyes upon her strained and anxious face, a woman past thirty-five and aging rapidly. Only his self control had kept him this long in her presence.

"I am not," he said gravely, "a talented religious person," and in seeking words to go on, found himself possessed by shame and fear. "I think," he said in a strained manner, "that I came to God not because I loved Him, but because I did not."

This confession he spoke harshly because its unexpectedness shook him.

Lily wilted. Leo saw a profusion of loaves of bread go flying like ducks high over his head, not unlike the winged loaves by which he had counted himself to sleep last night. Mercifully, then, it snowed, which he would not put past Salzman's machinations.

He was infuriated with the marriage broker and swore he would throw him out of the room the minute he reappeared. But Salzman did not come that night, and when Leo's anger had subsided, an unaccountable despair grew in its place. At first he thought this was caused by his disappointment in Lily, but before long it became evident that he had involved himself with Salzman without a true knowledge of his own intent. He gradually realized—with an emptiness that seized him with six hands—that he had called in the broker to find him a bride because he was incapable of doing it himself. This terrifying insight he had derived as a result of his meeting and conversation with Lily Hirschorn.

Her probing questions had somehow irritated him into revealing—to himself more than her—the true nature of his relationship to God, and from that it had come upon him, with shocking force, that apart from his parents, he had never loved anyone. Or perhaps it went the other way, that he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man. It seemed to Leo that his whole life stood starkly revealed and he saw himself for the first time as he truly was—unloved and loveless. This bitter but somehow not fully unexpected revelation brought him to a point of panic, controlled only by extraordinary effort. He covered his face with his hands and cried.

The week that followed was the worst of his life. He did not eat and lost weight. His beard darkened and grew ragged. He stopped attending seminars and almost never opened a book. He seriously considered leaving the Yeshivah, although he was deeply troubled at the thought of the loss of all his years of study—saw them like pages torn from a book, strewn over the city—and at the devastating effect of this decision upon his parents. But he had lived without knowledge of himself, and never in the Five Books and all the Commentaries—*mea culpa*—had the truth been revealed to him. He did not know where to turn, and in all this desolating loneliness there was no *to whom*, although he often thought of Lily but not once could bring himself to go downstairs and make the call. He became touchy and irritable, especially with his landlady, who asked him all manner of personal questions; on the other hand, sensing his own disagreeableness, he waylaid her on the stairs and apologized abjectly, until mortified, she ran from him. Out of this, however, he drew the consolation that he was a Jew and that a Jew suffered. But gradually, as the long and terrible week drew to a close, he regained his composure and some idea of purpose in life: to go on as planned. Although he was imperfect, the ideal was not. As for his quest of a bride, the thought of continuing afflicted him with anxiety and heartburn, yet perhaps with this new knowledge of himself he would be more successful than in the past. Perhaps love would now come to him and a bride to that love. And for this sanctified seeking who needed a Salzman?

The marriage broker, a skeleton with haunted eyes, returned that

very night. He looked, withal, the picture of frustrated expectancy—as if he had steadfastly waited the week at Miss Lily Hirschorn's side for a telephone call that never came.

Casually coughing, Salzman came immediately to the point: "So how did you like her?"

Leo's anger rose and he could not refrain from chiding the matchmaker: "Why did you lie to me, Salzman?"

Salzman's pale face went dead white, the world had snowed on him.

"Did you not state that she was twenty-nine?" Leo insisted.

"I give you my word—"

"She was thirty-five, if a day. *At least* thirty-five."

"Of this don't be too sure. Her father told me—"

"Never mind. The worst of it was that you lied to her."

"How did I lie to her, tell me?"

"You told her things about me that weren't true. You made me out to be more, consequently less than I am. She had in mind a totally different person, a sort of semi-mystical Wonder Rabbi."

"All I said, you was a religious man."

"I can imagine."

Salzman sighed. "This is my weakness that I have," he confessed. "My wife says to me I shouldn't be a salesman, but when I have two fine people that they would be wonderful to be married, I am so happy that I talk too much." He smiled wanly. "This is why Salzman is a poor man."

Leo's anger left him. "Well, Salzman, I'm afraid that's all."

The marriage broker fastened hungry eyes on him.

"You don't want any more a bride?"

"I do," said Leo, "but I have decided to seek her in a different way. I am no longer interested in an arranged marriage. To be frank, I now admit the necessity of premarital love. That is, I want to be in love with the one I marry."

"Love?" said Salzman, astounded. After a moment he remarked, "For us, our love is our life, not for the ladies. In the ghetto they—"

"I know, I know," said Leo. "I've thought of it often. Love, I have said to myself, should be a by-product of living and worship rather than

its own end. Yet for myself I find it necessary to establish the level of my need and fulfill it."

Salzman shrugged but answered, "Listen, rabbi, if you want love, this I can find for you also. I have such beautiful clients that you will love them the minute your eyes will see them."

Leo smiled unhappily. "I'm afraid you don't understand."

But Salzman hastily unstrapped his portfolio and withdrew a manila packet from it.

"Pictures," he said, quickly laying the envelope on the table.

Leo called after him to take the pictures away, but as if on the wings of the wind, Salzman had disappeared.

March came. Leo had returned to his regular routine. Although he felt not quite himself yet—lacked energy—he was making plans for a more active social life. Of course it would cost something, but he was an expert in cutting corners; and when there were no corners left he would make circles rounder. All the while Salzman's pictures had lain on the table, gathering dust. Occasionally as Leo sat studying, or enjoying a cup of tea, his eyes fell on the manila envelope, but he never opened it.

The days went by and no social life to speak of developed with a member of the opposite sex—it was difficult, given the circumstances of his situation. One morning Leo toiled up the stairs to his room and stared out the window at the city. Although the day was bright his view of it was dark. For some time he watched the people in the street below hurrying along and then turned with a heavy heart to his little room. On the table was the packet. With a sudden relentless gesture he tore it open. For a half-hour he stood by the table in a state of excitement, examining the photographs of the ladies Salzman had included. Finally, with a deep sigh he put them down. There were six, of varying degrees of attractiveness, but look at them long enough and they all became Lily Hirschorn: all past their prime, all starved behind bright smiles, not a true personality in the lot. Life, despite their frantic yooohoos, had passed them by; they were pictures in a brief case that stank of fish. After a while, however, as Leo attempted to return the photographs into the envelope, he found in it another, a snapshot of the type taken by a machine for a quarter. He gazed at it a moment and let out a cry.

Her face deeply moved him. Why, he could at first not say. It gave him the impression of youth—spring flowers, yet age—a sense of having been used to the bone, wasted; this came from the eyes, which were hauntingly familiar, yet absolutely strange. He had a vivid impression that he had met her before, but try as he might he could not place her although he could almost recall her name, as if he had read it in her own handwriting. No, this couldn't be; he would have remembered her. It was not, he affirmed, that she had an extraordinary beauty—no, though her face was attractive enough; it was that *something* about her moved him. Feature for feature, even some of the ladies of the photographs could do better; but she leaped forth to his heart—had *lived*, or wanted to—more than just wanted, perhaps regretted how she had lived—had somehow deeply suffered: it could be seen in the depths of those reluctant eyes, and from the way the light enclosed and shone from her, and within her, opening realms of possibility: this was her own. Her he desired. His head ached and eyes narrowed with the intensity of his gazing, then as if an obscure fog had blown up in the mind, he experienced fear of her and was aware that he had received an impression, somehow, of evil. He shuddered, saying softly, it is thus with us all. Leo brewed some tea in a small pot and sat sipping it without sugar, to calm himself. But before he had finished drinking, again with excitement he examined the face and found it good: good for Leo Finkle. Only such a one could understand him and help him seek whatever he was seeking. She might, perhaps, love him. How she had happened to be among the discards in Salzman's barrel he could never guess, but he knew he must urgently go find her.

Leo rushed downstairs, grabbed up the Bronx telephone book, and searched for Salzman's home address. He was not listed, nor was his office. Neither was he in the Manhattan book. But Leo remembered having written down the address on a slip of paper after he had read Salzman's advertisement in the "personals" column of the *Forward*. He ran up to his room and tore through his papers, without luck. It was exasperating. Just when he needed the matchmaker he was nowhere to be found. Fortunately Leo remembered to look in his wallet. There on a card he found his name written and a Bronx address. No phone number was listed, the reason—Leo now recalled—he had originally commu-

notated with Salzman by letter. He got on his coat, put a hat on over his skull cap and hurried to the subway station. All the way to the far end of the Bronx he sat on the edge of his seat. He was more than once tempted to take out the picture and see if the girl's face was as he remembered it, but he refrained, allowing the snapshot to remain in his inside coat pocket, content to have her so close. When the train pulled into the station he was waiting at the door and bolted out. He quickly located the street Salzman had advertised.

The building he sought was less than a block from the subway, but it was not an office building, nor even a loft, nor a store in which one could rent office space. It was a very old tenement house. Leo found Salzman's name in pencil on a soiled tag under the bell and climbed three dark flights to his apartment. When he knocked, the door was opened by a thin, asthmatic, gray-haired woman, in felt slippers.

"Yes?" she said, expecting nothing. She listened without listening. He could have sworn he had seen her, too, before but knew it was an illusion.

"Salzman—does he live here? Pinye Salzman," he said, "the match-maker?"

She stared at him a long minute. "Of course."

He felt embarrassed. "Is he in?"

"No." Her mouth, though left open, offered nothing more.

"The matter is urgent. Can you tell me where his office is?"

"In the air." She pointed upward.

"You mean he has no office?" Leo asked.

"In his socks."

He peered into the apartment. It was sunless and dingy, one large room divided by a half-open curtain, beyond which he could see a sagging metal bed. The near side of a room was crowded with rickety chairs, old bureaus, a three-legged table, racks of cooking utensils, and all the apparatus of a kitchen. But there was no sign of Salzman or his magic barrel, probably also a figment of the imagination. An odor of frying fish made Leo weak to the knees.

"Where is he?" he insisted. "I've got to see your husband."

At length she answered, "So who knows where he is? Every time he

thinks a new thought he runs to a different place. Go home, he will find you."

"Tell him Leo Finkle."

She gave no sign she had heard.

He walked downstairs, depressed.

But Salzman, breathless, stood waiting at his door.

Leo was astounded and overjoyed. "How did you get here before me?"

"I rushed."

"Come inside."

They entered. Leo fixed tea, and a sardine sandwich for Salzman. As they were drinking he reached behind him for the packet of pictures and handed them to the marriage broker.

Salzman put down his glass and said expectantly, "You found somebody you like?"

"Not among these."

The marriage broker turned away.

"Here is the one I want." Leo held forth the snapshot.

Salzman slipped on his glasses and took the picture into his trembling hand. He turned ghastly and let out a groan.

"What's the matter?" cried Leo.

"Excuse me. Was an accident this picture. She isn't for you."

Salzman frantically shoved the manila packet into his portfolio. He thrust the snapshot into his pocket and fled down the stairs.

Leo, after momentary paralysis, gave chase and cornered the marriage broker in the vestibule. The landlady made hysterical outcries but neither of them listened.

"Give me back the picture, Salzman."

"No." The pain in his eyes was terrible.

"Tell me who she is then."

"This I can't tell you. Excuse me."

He made to depart, but Leo, forgetting himself, seized the match-maker by his tight coat and shook him frenziedly.

"Please," sighed Salzman. "*Please.*"

Leo ashamedly let him go. "Tell me who she is," he begged. "It's very important for me to know."

"She is not for you. She is a wild one—wild, without shame. This is not a bride for a rabbi."

"What do you mean wild?"

"Like an animal. Like a dog. For her to be poor was a sin. This is why to me she is dead now."

"In God's name, what do you mean?"

"Her I can't introduce to you," Salzman cried.

"Why are you so excited?"

"Why, he asks," Salzman said, bursting into tears. "This is my baby, my Stella, she should burn in hell."

Leo hurried up to bed and hid under the covers. Under the covers he thought his life through. Although he soon fell asleep he could not sleep her out of his mind. He woke, beating his breast. Though he prayed to be rid of her, his prayers went unanswered. Through days of torment he endlessly struggled not to love her; fearing success, he escaped it. He then concluded to convert her to goodness, himself to God. The idea alternately nauseated and exalted him.

He perhaps did not know that he had come to a final decision until he encountered Salzman in a Broadway cafeteria. He was sitting alone at a rear table, sucking the bony remains of a fish. The marriage broker appeared haggard, and transparent to the point of vanishing.

Salzman looked up at first without recognizing him. Leo had grown a pointed beard and his eyes were weighted with wisdom.

"Salzman," he said, "love has at last come to my heart."

"Who can love from a picture?" mocked the marriage broker.

"It is not impossible."

"If you can love her, then you can love anybody. Let me show you some new clients that they just sent me their photographs. One is a little doll."

"Just her I want," Leo murmured.

"Don't be a fool, doctor. Don't bother with her."

"Put me in touch with her, Salzman," Leo said humbly. "Perhaps I can be of service."

Salzman had stopped eating and Leo understood with emotion that it was now arranged.

Leaving the cafeteria, he was, however, afflicted by a tormenting suspicion that Salzman had planned it all to happen this way.

Leo was informed by letter that she would meet him on a certain corner, and she was there one spring night, waiting under a street lamp. He appeared, carrying a small bouquet of violets and rosebuds. Stella stood by the lamp post, smoking. She wore white with red shoes, which fitted his expectations, although in a troubled moment he had imagined the dress red, and only the shoes white. She waited uneasily and shyly. From afar he saw that her eyes—clearly her father's—were filled with desperate innocence. He pictured, in her, his own redemption. Violins and lit candles revolved in the sky. Leo ran forward with flowers outthrust.

Around the corner, Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead.

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT
WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE

RAYMOND CARVER

My friend Mel McGinnis was talking. Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, and sometimes that gives him the right.

The four of us were sitting around his kitchen table drinking gin. Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink. There were Mel and me and his second wife, Teresa—Terri, we called her—and my wife, Laura. We lived in Albuquerque then. But we were all from somewhere else.

There was an ice bucket on the table. The gin and the tonic water kept going around, and we somehow got on the subject of love. Mel thought real love was nothing less than spiritual love. He said he'd spent five years in a seminary before quitting to go to medical school. He said he still looked back on those years in the seminary as the most important years in his life.

Terri said the man she lived with before she lived with Mel loved her so much he tried to kill her. Then Terri said, "He beat me up one night. He dragged me around the living room by my ankles. He kept saying, 'I love you, I love you, you bitch.' He went on dragging me around the living room. My head kept knocking on things." Terri looked around the table. "What do you do with love like that?"

She was a bone-thin woman with a pretty face, dark eyes, and brown hair that hung down her back. She liked necklaces made of turquoise, and long pendant earrings.

"My God, don't be silly. That's not love, and you know it," Mel said. "I don't know what you'd call it, but I sure know you wouldn't call it love."

"Say what you want to, but I know it was," Terri said. "It may sound crazy to you, but it's true just the same. People are different, Mel. Sure, sometimes he may have acted crazy. Okay. But he loved me. In his own way maybe, but he loved me. There was love there, Mel. Don't say there wasn't."

Mel let out his breath. He held his glass and turned to Laura and me. "The man threatened to kill me," Mel said. He finished his drink and reached for the gin bottle. "Terri's a romantic. Terri's of the kick-me-so-I'll-know-you-love-me school. Terri, hon, don't look that way." Mel reached across the table and touched Terri's cheek with his fingers. He grinned at her.

"Now he wants to make up," Terri said.

"Make up what?" Mel said. "What is there to make up? I know what I know. That's all."

"How'd we get started on this subject, anyway?" Terri said. She raised her glass and drank from it. "Mel always has love on his mind," she said. "Don't you, honey?" She smiled, and I thought that was the last of it.

"I just wouldn't call Ed's behavior love. That's all I'm saying, honey," Mel said. "What about you guys?" Mel said to Laura and me. "Does that sound like love to you?"

"I'm the wrong person to ask," I said. "I didn't even know the man. I've only heard his name mentioned in passing. I wouldn't know. You'd have to know the particulars. But I think what you're saying is that love is an absolute."

Mel said, "The kind of love I'm talking about is. The kind of love I'm talking about, you don't try to kill people."

Laura said, "I don't know anything about Ed, or anything about the situation. But who can judge anyone else's situation?"

I touched the back of Laura's hand. She gave me a quick smile. I picked up Laura's hand. It was warm, the nails polished, perfectly manicured. I encircled the broad wrist with my fingers, and I held her.

"When I left, he drank rat poison," Terri said. She clasped her arms with her hands. "They took him to the hospital in Santa Fe. That's where we

lived then, about ten miles out. They saved his life. But his gums went crazy from it. I mean they pulled away from his teeth. After that, his teeth stood out like fangs. My God," Terri said. She waited a minute, then let go of her arms and picked up her glass.

"What people won't do!" Laura said.

"He's out of the action now," Mel said. "He's dead."

Mel handed me the saucer of limes. I took a section, squeezed it over my drink, and stirred the ice cubes with my finger.

"It gets worse," Terri said. "He shot himself in the mouth. But he bungled that too. Poor Ed," she said. Terri shook her head.

"Poor Ed nothing," Mel said. "He was dangerous."

Mel was forty-five years old. He was tall and rangy with curly soft hair. His face and arms were brown from the tennis he played. When he was sober, his gestures, all his movements, were precise, very careful.

"He did love me though, Mel. Grant me that," Terri said. "That's all I'm asking. He didn't love me the way you love me. I'm not saying that. But he loved me. You can grant me that, can't you?"

"What do you mean, he bungled it?" I said.

Laura leaned forward with her glass. She put her elbows on the table and held her glass in both hands. She glanced from Mel to Terri and waited with a look of bewilderment on her open face, as if amazed that such things happened to people you were friendly with.

"How'd he bungle it when he killed himself?" I said.

"I'll tell you what happened," Mel said. "He took this twenty-two pistol he'd bought to threaten Terri and me with. Oh, I'm serious, the man was always threatening. You should have seen the way we lived in those days. Like fugitives. I even bought a gun myself. Can you believe it? A guy like me? But I did. I bought one for self-defense and carried it in the glove compartment. Sometimes I'd have to leave the apartment in the middle of the night. To go to the hospital, you know? Terri and I weren't married then, and my first wife had the house and kids, the dog, everything, and Terri and I were living in this apartment here. Sometimes, as I say, I'd get a call in the middle of the night and have to go in to the hospital at two or three in the morning. It'd be dark out there in the parking lot, and I'd break into a sweat before I could even get to

my car. I never knew if he was going to come up out of the shrubbery or from behind a car and start shooting. I mean, the man was crazy. He was capable of wiring a bomb, anything. He used to call my service at all hours and say he needed to talk to the doctor, and when I'd return the call, he'd say, 'Son of a bitch, your days are numbered.' Little things like that. It was scary, I'm telling you."

"I still feel sorry for him," Terri said.

"It sounds like a nightmare," Laura said. "But what exactly happened after he shot himself?"

Laura is a legal secretary. We'd met in a professional capacity. Before we knew it, it was a courtship. She's thirty-five, three years younger than I am. In addition to being in love, we like each other and enjoy one another's company. She's easy to be with.

"What happened?" Laura said.

Mel said, "He shot himself in the mouth in his room. Someone heard the shot and told the manager. They came in with a passkey, saw what had happened, and called an ambulance. I happened to be there when they brought him in, alive but past recall. The man lived for three days. His head swelled up to twice the size of a normal head. I'd never seen anything like it, and I hope I never do again. Terri wanted to go in and sit with him when she found out about it. We had a fight over it. I didn't think she should see him like that. I didn't think she should see him, and I still don't."

"Who won the fight?" Laura said.

"I was in the room with him when he died," Terri said. "He never came up out of it. But I sat with him. He didn't have anyone else."

"He was dangerous," Mel said. "If you call that love, you can have it."

"It was love," Terri said. "Sure, it's abnormal in most people's eyes. But he was willing to die for it. He did die for it."

"I sure as hell wouldn't call it love," Mel said. "I mean, no one knows what he did it for. I've seen a lot of suicides, and I couldn't say anyone ever knew what they did it for."

Mel put his hands behind his neck and tilted his chair back. "I'm

not interested in that kind of love," he said. "If that's love, you can have it."

Terri said, "We were afraid. Mel even made a will out and wrote to his brother in California who used to be a Green Beret. Mel told him who to look for if something happened to him."

Terri drank from her glass. She said, "But Mel's right—we lived like fugitives. We were afraid. Mel was, weren't you, honey? I even called the police at one point, but they were no help. They said they couldn't do anything until Ed actually did something. Isn't that a laugh?" Terri said.

She poured the last of the gin into her glass and waggled the bottle. Mel got up from the table and went to the cupboard. He took down another bottle.

"Well, Nick and I know what love is," Laura said. "For us, I mean," Laura said. She bumped my knee with her knee. "You're supposed to say something now," Laura said, and turned her smile on me.

For an answer, I took Laura's hand and raised it to my lips. I made a big production out of kissing her hand. Everyone was amused.

"We're lucky," I said.

"You guys," Terri said. "Stop that now. You're making me sick. You're still on the honeymoon, for God's sake. You're still gaga, for crying out loud. Just wait. How long have you been together now? How long has it been? A year? Longer than a year?"

"Going on a year and a half," Laura said, flushed and smiling.

"Oh, now," Terri said. "Wait awhile."

She held her drink and gazed at Laura.

"I'm only kidding," Terri said.

Mel opened the gin and went around the table with the bottle.

"Here, you guys," he said. "Let's have a toast. I want to propose a toast. A toast to love. To true love," Mel said.

We touched glasses.

"To love," we said.

Outside in the backyard, one of the dogs began to bark. The leaves of the aspen that leaned past the window ticked against the glass. The after-

noon sun was like a presence in this room, the spacious light of ease and generosity. We could have been anywhere, somewhere enchanted. We raised our glasses again and grinned at each other like children who had agreed on something forbidden.

"I'll tell you what real love is," Mel said. "I mean, I'll give you a good example. And then you can draw your own conclusions." He poured more gin into his glass. He added an ice cube and a sliver of lime. We waited and sipped our drinks. Laura and I touched knees again. I put a hand on her warm thigh and left it there.

"What do any of us really know about love?" Mel said. "It seems to me we're just beginners at love. We say we love each other and we do, I don't doubt it. I love Terri and Terri loves me, and you guys love each other too. You know the kind of love I'm talking about now. Physical love, that impulse that drives you to someone special, as well as love of the other person's being, his or her essence, as it were. Carnal love and, well, call it sentimental love, the day-to-day caring about the other person. But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too. But I did, I know I did. So I suppose I am like Terri in that regard. Terri and Ed." He thought about it and then he went on. "There was a time when I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself. But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you explain that? What happened to that love? What happened to it, is what I'd like to know. I wish someone could tell me. Then there's Ed. Okay, we're back to Ed. He loves Terri so much he tries to kill her and he winds up killing himself." Mel stopped talking and swallowed from his glass. "You guys have been together eighteen months and you love each other. It shows all over you. You glow with it. But you both loved other people before you met each other. You've both been married before, just like us. And you probably loved other people before that too, even. Terri and I have been together five years, been married for four. And the terrible thing, the terrible thing is, but the good thing too, the saving grace, you might say, is that if something happened to one of us—excuse me for saying this—but if something happened to one of us tomorrow, I think the other one, the other person, would grieve for a while, you know, but then the surviving party would go out and love again, have someone

else soon enough. All this, all of this love we're talking about, it would just be a memory. Maybe not even a memory. Am I wrong? Am I way off base? Because I want you to set me straight if you think I'm wrong. I want to know. I mean, I don't know anything, and I'm the first one to admit it."

"Mel, for God's sake," Terri said. She reached out and took hold of his wrist. "Are you getting drunk? Honey? Are you drunk?"

"Honey, I'm just talking," Mel said. "All right? I don't have to be drunk to say what I think. I mean, we're all just talking, right?" Mel said. He fixed his eyes on her.

"Sweetie, I'm not criticizing," Terri said.

She picked up her glass.

"I'm not on call today," Mel said. "Let me remind you of that. I am not on call," he said.

"Mel, we love you," Laura said.

Mel looked at Laura. He looked at her as if he could not place her, as if she was not the woman she was.

"Love you too, Laura," Mel said. "And you, Nick, love you too. You know something?" Mel said. "You guys are our pals," Mel said.

He picked up his glass.

Mel said, "I was going to tell you about something. I mean, I was going to prove a point. You see, this happened a few months ago, but it's still going on right now, and it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk about love."

"Come on now," Terri said. "Don't talk like you're drunk if you're not drunk."

"Just shut up for once in your life," Mel said very quietly. "Will you do me a favor and do that for a minute? So as I was saying, there's this old couple who had this car wreck out on the interstate. A kid hit them and they were all torn to shit and nobody was giving them much chance to pull through."

Terri looked at us and then back at Mel. She seemed anxious, or maybe that's too strong a word.

Mel was handing the bottle around the table.

"I was on call that night," Mel said. "It was May or maybe it was June. Terri and I had just sat down to dinner when the hospital called. There'd been this thing out on the interstate. Drunk kid, teenager, plowed his dad's pickup into this camper with this old couple in it. They were up in their mid-seventies, that couple. The kid—eighteen, nineteen, something—he was DOA. Taken the steering wheel through his sternum. The old couple, they were alive, you understand. I mean, just barely. But they had everything. Multiple fractures, internal injuries, hemorrhaging, contusions, lacerations, the works, and they each of them had themselves concussions. They were in a bad way, believe me. And, of course, their age was two strikes against them. I'd say she was worse off than he was. Ruptured spleen along with everything else. Both kneecaps broken. But they'd been wearing their seatbelts and, God knows, that's what saved them for the time being."

"Folks, this is an advertisement for the National Safety Council," Terri said. "This is your spokesman, Dr. Melvin R. McGinnis, talking." Terri laughed. "Mel," she said, "sometimes you're just too much. But I love you, hon," she said.

"Honey, I love you," Mel said.

He leaned across the table. Terri met him halfway. They kissed.

"Terri's right," Mel said as he settled himself again. "Get those seatbelts on. But seriously, they were in some shape, those oldsters. By the time I got down there, the kid was dead, as I said. He was off in a corner, laid out on a gurney. I took one look at the old couple and told the ER nurse to get me a neurologist and an orthopedic man and a couple of surgeons down there right away."

He drank from his glass. "I'll try to keep this short," he said. "So we took the two of them up to the OR and worked like fuck on them most of the night. They had these incredible reserves, those two. You see that once in a while. So we did everything that could be done, and toward morning we're giving them a fifty-fifty chance, maybe less than that for her. So here they are, still alive the next morning. So, okay, we move them into the ICU, which is where they both kept plugging away at it for two weeks, hitting it better and better on all the scopes. So we transfer them out to their own room."

Mel stopped talking. "Here," he said, "let's drink this cheapo gin the hell up. Then we're going to dinner, right? Terri and I know a new place. That's where we'll go, to this new place we know about. But we're not going until we finish up this cut-rate, lousy gin."

Terri said, "We haven't actually eaten there yet. But it looks good. From the outside, you know."

"I like food," Mel said. "If I had it to do all over again, I'd be a chef, you know? Right, Terri?" Mel said.

He laughed. He fingered the ice in his glass.

"Terri knows," he said. "Terri can tell you. But let me say this. If I could come back again in a different life, a different time and all, you know what? I'd like to come back as a knight. You were pretty safe wearing all that armor. It was all right being a knight until gunpowder and muskets and pistols came along."

"Mel would like to ride a horse and carry a lance," Terri said.

"Carry a woman's scarf with you everywhere," Laura said.

"Or just a woman," Mel said.

"Shame on you," Laura said.

Terri said, "Suppose you came back as a serf. The serfs didn't have it so good in those days," Terri said.

"The serfs never had it good," Mel said. "But I guess even the knights were vessels to someone. Isn't that the way it worked? But then everyone is always a vessel to someone. Isn't that right? Terri? But what I liked about knights, besides their ladies, was that they had that suit of armor, you know, and they couldn't get hurt very easy. No cars in those days, you know? No drunk teenagers to tear into your ass."

"Vassals," Terri said.

"What?" Mel said.

"Vassals," Terri said. "They were called vassals, not vessels."

"Vassals, vessels," Mel said, "what the fuck's the difference? You knew what I meant anyway. All right," Mel said. "So I'm not educated. I learned my stuff. I'm a heart surgeon, sure, but I'm just a mechanic. I go in and I fuck around and I fix things. Shit," Mel said.

"Modesty doesn't become you," Terri said.

"He's just a humble sawbones," I said. "But sometimes they suffocated in all that armor, Mel. They'd even have heart attacks if it got too hot and they were too tired and worn out. I read somewhere that they'd fall off their horses and not be able to get up because they were too tired to stand with all that armor on them. They got trampled by their own horses sometimes."

"That's terrible," Mel said. "That's a terrible thing, Nicky. I guess they'd just lay there and wait until somebody came along and made a shish kebab out of them."

"Some other vessel," Terri said.

"That's right," Mel said. "Some vassal would come along and spear the bastard in the name of love. Or whatever the fuck it was they fought over in those days."

"Same things we fight over these days," Terri said.

Laura said, "Nothing's changed."

The color was still high in Laura's cheeks. Her eyes were bright. She brought her glass to her lips.

Mel poured himself another drink. He looked at the label closely as if studying a long row of numbers. Then he slowly put the bottle down on the table and slowly reached for the tonic water.

"What about the old couple?" Laura said. "You didn't finish that story you started."

Laura was having a hard time lighting her cigarette. Her matches kept going out.

The sunshine inside the room was different now, changing, getting thinner. But the leaves outside the window were still shimmering, and I stared at the pattern they made on the panes and on the Formica counter. They weren't the same patterns, of course.

"What about the old couple?" I said.

"Older but wiser," Terri said.

Mel stared at her.

Terri said, "Go on with your story, hon. I was only kidding. Then what happened?"

"Terri, sometimes," Mel said.

"Please, Mel," Terri said. "Don't always be so serious, sweetie. Can't you take a joke?"

"Where's the joke?" Mel said.

He held his glass and gazed steadily at his wife.

"What happened?" Laura said.

Mel fastened his eyes on Laura. He said, "Laura, if I didn't have Terri and if I didn't love her so much, and if Nick wasn't my best friend, I'd fall in love with you. I'd carry you off, honey," he said.

"Tell your story," Terri said. "Then we'll go to that new place, okay?"

"Okay," Mel said. "Where was I?" he said. He stared at the table and then he began again.

"I dropped in to see each of them every day, sometimes twice a day if I was up doing other calls anyway. Casts and bandages, head to foot, the both of them. You know, you've seen it in the movies. That's just the way they looked, just like in the movies. Little eye-holes and nose-holes and mouth-holes. And she had to have her legs slung up on top of it. Well, the husband was very depressed for the longest while. Even after he found out that his wife was going to pull through, he was still very depressed. Not about the accident, though. I mean, the accident was one thing, but it wasn't everything. I'd get up to his mouth-hole, you know, and he'd say no, it wasn't the accident exactly but it was because he couldn't see her through his eye-holes. He said that was what was making him feel so bad. Can you imagine? I'm telling you, the man's heart was breaking because he couldn't turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife."

Mel looked around the table and shook his head at what he was going to say.

"I mean, it was killing the old fart just because he couldn't *look* at the fucking woman."

We all looked at Mel.

"Do you see what I'm saying?" he said.

Maybe we were a little drunk by then. I know it was hard keeping things in focus. The light was draining out of the room, going back through

the window where it had come from. Yet nobody made a move to get up from the table to turn on the overhead light.

"Listen," Mel said. "Let's finish this fucking gin. There's about enough left here for one shooter all around. Then let's go eat. Let's go to the new place."

"He's depressed," Terri said. "Mel, why don't you take a pill?"

Mel shook his head. "I've taken everything there is."

"We all need a pill now and then," I said.

"Some people are born needing them," Terri said.

She was using her finger to rub at something on the table. Then she stopped rubbing.

"I think I want to call my kids," Mel said. "Is that all right with everybody? I'll call my kids," he said.

Terri said, "What if Marjorie answers the phone? You guys, you've heard us on the subject of Marjorie? Honey, you know you don't want to talk to Marjorie. It'll make you feel even worse."

"I don't want to talk to Marjorie," Mel said. "But I want to talk to my kids."

"There isn't a day goes by that Mel doesn't say he wishes she'd get married again. Or else die," Terri said. "For one thing," Terri said, "she's bankrupting us. Mel says it's just to spite him that she won't get married again. She has a boyfriend who lives with her and the kids, so Mel is supporting the boyfriend too."

"She's allergic to bees," Mel said. "If I'm not praying she'll get married again, I'm praying she'll get herself stung to death by a swarm of fucking bees."

"Shame on you," Laura said.

"Bzzzzzzz," Mel said, turning his fingers into bees and buzzing them at Terri's throat. Then he let his hands drop all the way to his sides.

"She's vicious," Mel said. "Sometimes I think I'll go up there dressed like a beekeeper. You know, that hat that's like a helmet with the plate that comes down over your face, the big gloves, and the padded coat? I'll knock on the door and let loose a hive of bees in the house. But first I'd make sure the kids were out, of course."

He crossed one leg over the other. It seemed to take him a lot of time

to do it. Then he put both feet on the floor and leaned forward, elbows on the table, his chin cupped in his hands.

"Maybe I won't call the kids, after all. Maybe it isn't such a hot idea. Maybe we'll just go eat. How does that sound?"

"Sounds fine to me," I said. "Eat or not eat. Or keep drinking. I could head right on out into the sunset."

"What does that mean, honey?" Laura said.

"It just means what I said," I said. "It means I could just keep going. That's all it means."

"I could eat something myself," Laura said. "I don't think I've ever been so hungry in my life. Is there something to nibble on?"

"I'll put out some cheese and crackers," Terri said.

But Terri just sat there. She did not get up to get anything.

Mel turned his glass over. He spilled it out on the table.

"Gin's gone," Mel said.

Terri said, "Now what?"

I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark.

INNOCENCE

HAROLD BRODKEY

I. ORRA AT HARVARD

Orra Perkins was a senior. Her looks were like a force that struck you. Truly, people on first meeting her often involuntarily lifted their arms as if about to fend off the brightness of the apparition. She was a somewhat scrawny, tuliplike girl of middling height. To see her in sunlight was to see Marxism die. I'm not the only one who said that. It was because seeing someone in actuality who had such a high immediate worth meant you had to decide whether such personal distinction had a right to exist or if she belonged to the state and ought to be shadowed in, reduced in scale, made lesser, laughed at.

Also, it was the case that you had to be rich and famous to set your hands on her; she could not fail to be a trophy, and the question was whether the trophy had to be awarded on economic and political grounds or whether chance could enter in.

I was a senior, too, and ironic. I had no money. I was without lineage. It seemed to me Orra was proof that life was a terrifying phenomenon of surface immediacy. She made any idea I had of psychological normalcy or of justice absurd since normalcy was not as admirable or as desirable as Orra; or rather she was normalcy and everything else was a falling off, a falling below; and justice was inconceivable if she, or someone equivalent to her if there was an equivalent once you had seen her, would not sleep with you. I used to create general hilarity in my room by shouting her name at my friends and then breaking up into laughter,

gasping out, "God, we're so small-time." It was grim that she existed and I had not had her. One could still prefer a more ordinary girl but not for simple reasons.

A great many people avoided her, ran away from her. She was, in part, more knowing than the rest of us because the experiences offered her had been so extreme, and she had been so extreme in response—scenes in Harvard Square with an English marquess, slapping a son of a billionaire so hard he fell over backwards at a party in Lowell House, her saying then and subsequently, "I never sleep with anyone who has a fat ass." Extreme in the humiliations endured and meted out, in the crassness of the publicity, of her life defined as those adventures, extreme in the dangers survived or not entirely survived, the cheapness undergone so that she was on a kind of frightening eminence, an eminence of her experiences and of her being different from everyone else. She'd dealt in intrigues, major and minor, in the dramas of political families, in passions, deceptions, folly on a large, expensive scale, promises, violence, the genuine pain of defeat when defeat is to some extent the result of your qualities and not of your defects, and she knew the rottenness of victories that hadn't been final. She was crass and impaired by beauty. She was like a giant bird, she was as odd as an ostrich walking around the Yard, in her absurd gorgeousness, she was so different from us in kind, so capable of a different sort of progress through the yielding medium of the air, through the strange rooms of our minutes on this earth, through the gloomy circumstances of our lives in those years.

People said it was worth it to do this or that just in order to see her—seeing her offered some kind of encouragement, was some kind of testimony that life was interesting. But not many people cared as much about knowing her. Most people preferred to keep their distance. I don't know what her having made herself into what she was had done for her. She could have been ordinary if she'd wished.

She had unnoticeable hair, a far from arresting forehead, and extraordinary eyes, deep-set, longing, hopeful, angrily bored behind smooth, heavy lids that fluttered when she was interested and when she was not interested at all. She had a great desire not to trouble or be troubled by supernumeraries and strangers. She has a proud, too large nose that

gives her a noble, stubborn dog's look. Her mouth has a disconcertingly lovely set to it—it is more immediately expressive than her eyes and it shows her implacability: it is the implacability of her knowledge of life in her. People always stared at her. Some giggled nervously. *Do you like me, Orra? Do you like me at all?* They stared at the great hands of the Aztec priest opening them to feelings and to awe, exposing their hearts, the dread cautiousness of their lives. They stared at the incredible symmetries of her sometimes anguishedly passionate face, the erratic pain for her in being beautiful that showed on it, the occasional plunging gaiety she felt because she was beautiful. I like beautiful people. The symmetries of her face were often thwarted by her attempts at expressiveness—beauty was a stone she struggled free of. A ludicrous beauty. A cruel clown of a girl. Sometimes her face was absolutely impassive as if masked in dullness and she was trying to move among us incognito. I was aware that each of her downfalls made her more possible for me. I never doubted that she was privately a pedestrian shitting-peeing person. Whenever I had a chance to observe her for any length of time, in a classroom for instance, I would think, *I understand her*. Whenever I approached her, she responded up to a point and then even as I stood talking to her I would fade as a personage, as a sexual presence, as someone present and important to her, into greater and greater invisibility. That was when she was a freshman, a sophomore, and a junior. When we were seniors, by then I'd learned how to avoid being invisible even to Orra. Orra was, I realized, hardly more than a terrific college girl, much vaunted, no more than that yet. But my God, my God, in one's eyes, in one's thoughts, she strode like a *Nike*, she entered like a blast of light, the thought of her was as vast as a desert. Sometimes in an early winter twilight in the Yard, I would see her in her coat, unbuttoned even in cold weather as if she burned slightly always, see her move clumsily along a walk looking like a scrawny field-hockey player, a great athlete of a girl half-stumbling, uncoordinated off the playing field, yet with reserves of strength, do you know? and her face, as she walked along, might twitch like a dog's when the dog is asleep, twitching with whatever dialogue or adventure or daydream she was having in her head. Or she might in the early darkness stride along, cold-faced, haughty, angry, all the worst

refusals one would ever receive bound up in one ridiculously beautiful girl. One always said, "I wonder what will become of her." Her ignoring me marked me as a sexual nonentity. She was proof of a level of sexual adventure I had not yet with my best efforts reached: that level existed because Orra existed.

What is it worth to be in love in this way?

II. ORRA WITH ME

I distrust summaries, any kind of gliding through time, any too great a claim that one is in control of what one recounts; I think someone who claims to understand but who is obviously calm, someone who claims to write with emotion recollected in tranquility, is a fool and a liar. To understand is to tremble. To recollect is to reenter and be riven. An acrobat after spinning through the air in a mockery of flight stands erect on his perch and mockingly takes his bow as if what he is being applauded for was easy for him and cost him nothing, although meanwhile he is covered with sweat and his smile is edged with a relief chilling to think about; he is indulging in a show-business style; he is pretending to be superhuman. I am bored with that and with where it has brought us. I admire the authority of being on one's knees in front of the event.

In the last spring of our being undergraduates, I finally got her. We had agreed to meet in my room, to get a little drunk cheaply before going out to dinner. I left the door unlatched; and I lay naked on my bed under a sheet. When she knocked on the door, I said, "Come in," and she did. She began to chatter right away, to complain that I was still in bed; she seemed to think I'd been taking a nap and had forgotten to wake up in time to get ready for her arrival. I said, "I'm naked, Orra, under this sheet. I've been waiting for you. I haven't been asleep."

Her face went empty. She said, "Damn you—why couldn't you wait?" But even while she was saying that, she was taking off her blouse.

I was amazed that she was so docile; and then I saw that it was maybe partly that she didn't want to risk saying no to me—she didn't want me

to be hurt and difficult, she didn't want me to explode; she had a kind of hope of making me happy so that I'd then appreciate her and be happy with her and let her know me: I'm putting it badly. But her not being able to say no protected me from having so great a fear of sexual failure that I would not have been able to be worried about her pleasure, or to be concerned about her in bed. She was very amateurish and uninformed in bed, which touched me. It was really sort of poor sex; she didn't come or even feel much that I could see. Afterward, lying beside her, I thought of her eight or ten or fifteen lovers being afraid of her, afraid to tell her anything about sex in case they might be wrong. I had an image of them protecting their own egos, holding their arms around their egos and not letting her near them. It seemed a kindness embedded in the event that she was, in quite an obvious way, with a little critical interpretation, a virgin. And impaired, or crippled by having been beautiful, just as I'd thought. I said to myself that it was a matter of course that I might be deluding myself. But what I did for the rest of that night—we stayed up all night; we talked, we quarreled for a while, we confessed various things, we argued about sex, we fucked again (the second one was a little better)—I treated her with the justice with which I'd treat a boy my age, a young man, and with a rather exact or measured patience and tolerance, as if she were a paraplegic and had spent her life in a wheelchair and was tired of sentiment. I showed her no sentiment at all. I figured she'd been asphyxiated by the sentiments and sentimentality of people impressed by her looks. She was beautiful and frightened and empty and shy and alone and wounded and invulnerable (like a cripple: what more can you do to a cripple?). She was Caesar and ruler of the known world and not Caesar and no one as well.

It was a fairly complicated, partly witty thing to do. It meant I could not respond to her beauty but had to ignore it. She was a curious sort of girl; she had a great deal of isolation in her, isolation as a woman. It meant that when she said something on the order of "You're very defensive," I had to be a debater, her equal, take her seriously, and say, "How do you mean that?" and then talk about it, and alternately deliver a blow ("You can't judge defensiveness, you have the silly irresponsibility of women, the silly disconnectedness: I *have* to be defensive") and defer

to her: "You have a point: you think very clearly. All right, I'll adopt that as a premise." Of course, much of what we said was incoherent and nonsensical on examination, but we worked out in conversation what we meant or thought we meant. I didn't react to her in an emotional way. She wasn't really a girl, not really quite human: how could she be? She was a position, a specific glory, a trophy, our local upper-middle-class pseudo-Cleopatra. Or not pseudo. I couldn't revel in my luck or be unselfconsciously vain. I could not strut horizontally or loll as if on clouds, a demigod with a goddess, although it was clear we were deeply fortunate, in spite of everything: the poor sex, the differences in attitude which were all we seemed to share, the tensions and the blundering. If I enjoyed her more than she enjoyed me, if I lost consciousness of her even for a moment, she would be closed into her isolation again. I couldn't love her and have her, too. I could love her and have her if I didn't show love or the symptoms of having had her. It was like lying in a very lordly way, opening her to the possibility of feeling by making her comfortable inside the calm lies of my behavior, my inscribing the minutes with false messages. It was like meeting a requirement in Greek myth, like not looking back at Eurydice. The night crept on, swept on, late minutes, powdered with darkness, in the middle of a sleeping city, spring crawling like a plague of green snakes, bits of warmth in the air, at 4 a.m. smells of leaves when the stink of automobiles died down. Dawn came, so pink, so pastel, so silly: We were talking about the possibility of innate grammatical structures; I said it was an unlikely notion, that Jews really were God-haunted (the idea had been broached by a Jew), and the great difficulty was to invent a just God, that if God appeared at a moment of time or relied on prophets, there had to be degrees in the possibility of knowing Him so that He was by definition unjust; the only just God would be one who consisted of what had always been known by everyone; and that you could always identify a basically Messianic, a hugely religious, fraudulent thinker by how much he tried to anchor his doctrine to having always been true, to being innate even in savage man, whereas an honest thinker, a nonliar, was caught in the grip of the truth of process and change and the profound absence of justice except as an invention, an attempt by the will to live with someone, or with many

others without consuming them. At that moment Orra said, "I think we're falling in love."

I figured I had kept her from being too depressed after fucking—it's hard for a girl with any force in her and any brains to accept the whole thing of fucking, of being fucked without trying to turn it on its end, so that she does some fucking, or some fucking up; I mean, the mere power of arousing the man so he wants to fuck isn't enough: she wants him to be willing to die in order to fuck. There's a kind of strain or intensity women are bred for, as beasts, for childbearing when childbearing might kill them, and child rearing when the child might die at any moment: it's in women to live under that danger, with that risk, that close to tragedy, with that constant taut or casual courage. They need death and nobility near. To be fucked when there's no drama inherent in it, when you're not going to rise to a level of nobility and courage forever denied the male, is to be cut off from what is inherently female, bestially speaking. I wanted to be halfway decent company for her. I don't know that it was natural to me. I am psychologically, profoundly, a transient. A form of trash. I am incapable of any continuing loyalty and silence; I am an informer. But I did all right with her. It was dawn, as I said. We stood naked by the window, silently watching the light change. Finally, she said, "Are you hungry? Do you want breakfast?"

"Sure. Let's get dressed and go—"

She cut me off; she said with a funny kind of firmness, "No! Let me go and get us something to eat."

"Orra, don't wait on me. Why are you doing this? Don't be like this."

But she was in a terrible hurry to be in love. After those few hours, after that short a time.

She said, "I'm not as smart as you, Wiley. Let me wait on you. Then things will be even."

"Things are even, Orra."

"No. I'm boring and stale. You just think I'm not because you're in love with me. Let me go."

I blinked. After a while, I said, "All right."

She dressed and went out and came back. While we ate, she was

silent; I said things, but she had no comment to make; she ate very little; she folded her hands and smiled mildly like some nineteenth-century portrait of a handsome young mother. Every time I looked at her, when she saw I was looking at her, she changed the expression on her face to one of absolute and undeviating welcome to me and to anything I might say.

So, it had begun.

III. ORRA

She hadn't come. She said she had never come with anyone at any time. She said it didn't matter.

After our first time, she complained, "You went twitch, twitch, twitch—just like a grasshopper." So she had wanted to have more pleasure than she'd had. But after the second fuck and after the dawn, she never complained again—unless I tried to make her come, and then she complained of that. She showed during sex no dislike for any of my sexual mannerisms or for the rhythms and postures I fell into when I fucked. But I was not pleased or satisfied; it bothered me that she didn't come. I was not pleased or satisfied on my own account, either. I thought the reason for that was she attracted me more than she could satisfy me, maybe more than fucking could ever satisfy me, that the more you cared, the more undertow there was, so that the sexual thing drowned—I mean, the sharpest sensations, and yet the dullest, are when you masturbate—but when you're vilely attached to somebody, there are noises, distractions that drown out the sensations of fucking. For a long time, her wanting to fuck, her getting undressed, and the soft horizontal bobble of her breasts as she lay there, and the soft wavering, the kind of sinewlessness of her legs and lower body, with which she more or less showed me she was ready—that was more moving, was more immensely important to me than any mere ejaculation later, any putt-putt-putt in her darkness, any hurling of future generations into the clenched universe, the strict mitten inside her: I clung to her and grunted and anchored myself to the most temporary imaginable relief of the

desire I felt for her; I would be hungry again and anxious to fuck again in another twenty minutes; it was pitiable, this sexual disarray. It seemed to me that in the vast spaces of the excitement of being welcomed by each other, we could only sightlessly and at best half organize our bodies. But so what? We would probably die in these underground caverns; a part of our lives would die; a certain innocence and hope would never survive this: we were too open, too clumsy, and we were the wrong people: so what did a fuck matter? I didn't mind if the sex was always a little rasping, something of a failure, if it was just preparation for more sex in half an hour, if coming was just more foreplay. If this was all that was in store for us, fine. But I thought she was getting gypped in that she felt so much about me, she was dependent, and she was generous, and she didn't come when we fucked.

She said she had never come, not once in her life, and that she didn't need to. And that I mustn't think about whether she came or not. "I'm a sexual tigress," she explained, "and I like to screw but I'm too sexual to come: I haven't that kind of daintiness. I'm not selfish *that way*."

I could see that she had prowled around in a sense and searched out men and asked them to be lovers as she had me rather than wait for them or plot to capture their attention in some subtle way; and in bed she was sexually eager and a bit more forward and less afraid than most girls; but only in an upper-middle-class frame of reference was she a *sexual tigress*.

It seemed to me—my whole self was focused on this—that her not coming said something about what we had, that her not coming was an undeniable fact, a measure of the limits of what we had. I did not think we should think we were great lovers when we weren't.

Orra said we were, that I had no idea how lousy the sex was other people had. I told her that hadn't been my experience. We were, it seemed to me, two twenty-one-year-olds, overeducated, irrevocably shy beneath our glaze of sexual determination and of sexual appetite, and psychologically somewhat slashed up and only capable of being partly useful to each other. We weren't the king and queen of Cockandcuntedom yet.

Orra said coming was a minor part of sex for a woman and was a demeaning measure of sexuality. She said it was imposed as a measure by people who knew nothing about sex and judged women childishly.

It seemed to me she was turning a factual thing, coming, into a public-relations thing. But girls were under fearful public pressures in these matters.

When she spoke about them, these matters, she had a little, superior in puckered look, a don't-make-me-make-mincemeat-of-you-in-argument look—I thought of it as her Orra-as-Orra look, Orra alone, Orra-without-Wiley, without me, Orra isolated and depressed, a terrific girl, an Orra who hated cowing men.

She referred to novels, to novels by women writers, to specific scenes and remarks about sex and coming for women, but I'd read some of those books, out of curiosity, and none of them were literature, and the heroines in them invariably were innocent in every relation; but very strong and very knowing and with terrifically good judgment; and the men they loved were described in such a way that they appeared to be examples of the woman's sexual reach, or of her intellectual value, rather than sexual companions or sexual objects; the women had sex generously with men who apparently bored them physically; I had thought the books and their writers and characters sexually naive.

Very few women, it seemed to me, had much grasp of physical reality. Still, very strange things were often true, and a man's notion of orgasm was necessarily specialized.

When I did anything in bed to excite her, with an eye to making her come, she asked me not to, and that irritated the hell out of me. But no matter what she said, it must have been bad for her after six years of fucking around not to get to a climax. It had to be that it was a run on her neural patience. How strong could she be?

I thought about how women coming were at such a pitch of uncontrol they might prefer a dumb, careless lover, someone very unlike me: I had often played at being a strong, silent dunce. Some girls became fawning and doglike after they came, even toward dunces. Others jumped up and became immediately tough, proud of themselves as if the coming was *all* to their credit, and I ought to be flattered. God, it was a peculiar world. Brainy girls tended to control their comes, doling out one to a fuck, just like a man; and often they would try to keep that one under control, they would limit it to a single nozzle-contracted squirt

of excitement. Even that sometimes racked and emptied them and made them curiously weak and brittle and embarrassed and delicate and lazy. Or they would act bold and say, "God, I needed that."

I wondered how Orra would look, in what way she would do it, a girl like that going off, how she'd hold herself, her eyes, how she'd act toward me when it was over.

To get her to talk about sex at all, I argued that analyzing something destroyed it, of course, but leaves rotted on the ground and prepared the way for what would grow next. So she talked.

She said I was wrong in what I told her I saw and that there was no difference in her between mental and physical excitement, that it wasn't true her mind was excited quickly and her body slowly, if at all. I couldn't be certain I was right, but when I referred to a moment when there had seemed to be deep physical feeling in her, she sometimes agreed that had been a good moment in her terms; but sometimes she said, no, it had only been a little irritating then, like a peculiarly unpleasant tickle. In spite of her liking my mind, she gave me no authority for what I knew—I mean, when it turned out I was right. She kept the authority for her reactions in her own hands. Her self-abnegation was her own doing. I liked that: some people just give you themselves, and it is too much to keep in your hands: your abilities aren't good enough. I decided to stick with what I observed and to think her somewhat mistaken and not to talk to her about sex anymore.

I watched her in bed; her body was doubting, grudging, tardy, intolerant—and intolerably hungry—I thought. In her pride and self-consciousness and ignorance she hated all that in herself. She preferred to think of herself as quick, to have pleasure as she willed rather than as she actually had it, to have it on her own volition, to her own prescription, and almost out of politeness, so it seemed to me, to give herself to me, to give me pleasure, to ignore herself, to be a nice girl because she was in love. She insisted on that but that was too sentimental, and she also insisted on, she persuaded herself, she passed herself off as dashing.

In a way, sexually, she was a compulsive liar.

I set myself to remove every iota of misconception I had about Orra

in bed, any romanticism, any pleasurable hope. It seemed to me what had happened to her with other boys was that she was distrustful to start with and they had overrated her, and they'd been overwrought and off balance and uneasy about her judgment of them, and they'd taken their pleasure and run.

And then she had in her determination to have sex become more and more of a sexual fool. (I was all kinds of fool: I didn't mind her being a sexual fool.) The first time I'd gone to bed with her, she'd screamed and thrown herself around, a good two or three feet to one side or another, as she thought a sexual tigress would, I supposed. I'd argued with her afterward that no one was that excited, especially without coming; she said she had come, sort of. She said she was too sexual for most men. She said her reactions weren't fake but represented a real sexuality, a real truth. That proud, stubborn, stupid girl.

But I told her that if she and a man were in sexual congress, and she heaved herself around and threw herself a large number of inches to either the left or the right or even straight up, the man was going to be startled; and if there was no regular pattern or predictability, it was easy to lose an erection; that if she threw herself to the side, there was a good chance she would interrupt the congress entirely unless the man was very quick and scrambled after her, and scrambling after her was not likely to be sexual for him: it would be more like playing tag. The man would have to fuck while in a state of siege; not knowing what she'd do next, he'd fuck and hurry to get it over and to get out.

Orra had said on that first occasion, "That sounds reasonable. No one ever explained that to me before, no one ever made it clear. I'll try it your way for a while."

After that, she had been mostly shy and honest, and honestly lecherous in bed but helpless to excite herself or to do more to me than she did just by being there and welcoming me. As if her hands were webbed and her mind was glued, as if I didn't deserve more, or as if she was such a novice and so shy she could not begin to do anything *sexual*. I did not understand: I'd always found that anyone who *wanted* to give pleasure could: it didn't take skill, just the desire to please and a kind of, I don't know, a sightless ability to feel one's way to some extent in the lightless

maze of pleasure. But upper-middle-class girls might be more fearful of tying men to them by bands of excessive pleasure; such girls were careful and shy.

I set myself for her being rude and difficult although she hadn't been rude and difficult to me for a long time, but those traits were in her like a shadow, giving her the dimensionality that made her valuable to me, that gave point to her kindness toward me. She had the sloppiest and most uncertain and silliest and yet bravest and most generous ego of anyone I'd ever known; and her manners were the most stupid imaginable alternation between the distinguished, the sensitive, the intelligent, with a rueful, firm, almost snotty delicacy and kindness and protectiveness toward you, and the really selfish and bruising. The important thing was to prevent her from responding falsely, as if in a movie, or in some imitation of the movies she'd seen and the books she'd read—she had a curious faith in movies and in books; she admired anything that made her feel and that did not require responsibility from her, because then she produced happiness like silk for herself and others. She liked really obscure philosophers, like Hegel, where she could admire the thought but where the thought didn't demand anything from her. Still, she was a realist, and she would probably learn what I knew and would surpass me. She had great possibilities. But she was also merely a good-looking, pseudorich girl, a paranoid, a Perkins. On the other hand, she was a fairly marvelous girl a lot of the time, brave, eye-shattering, who could split my heart open with one slightly shaky approving-of-me brainy romantic heroine's smile. The romantic splendor of her face. So far in her life she had disappointed everyone. I had to keep all this in mind, I figured. She was fantastically alive and eerily dead at the same time. I wanted for my various reasons to raise her from the dead.

IV. ORRA: THE SAME WORLD, A DIFFERENT TIME SCALE

One afternoon, things went well for us. We went for a walk, the air was plangent, there was the amazed and polite pleasure we had sometimes

merely at being together. Orra adjusted her pace now and then to mine; and I kept mine adjusted to her most of the time. When we looked at each other, there would be small, soft puffs of feeling as of toy explosions or sparrows bathing in the dust. Her willed softness, her inner seriousness or earnestness, her strength, her beauty, muted and careful now in her anxiety not to lose me yet, made the pleasure of being with her noble, contrapuntal, and difficult in that one had to live up to it and understand it and protect it, against my clumsiness and Orra's falsity, kind as that falsity was; or the day would become simply an exploitation of a strong girl who would see through that sooner or later and avenge it. But things went well; and inside that careless and careful goodness, we went home; we screwed; I came—to get my excitement out of the way; she didn't know I was doing that; she was stupendously polite; taut; and very admiring. "How pretty you are," she said. Her eyes were blurred with half-tears. I'd screwed without any fripperies, coolly, in order to leave in us a large residue of sexual restlessness but with the burr of immediate physical restlessness in me removed: I still wanted her; I always wanted Orra; and the coming had been dull; but my body was not very assertive, was more like a glove for my mind, for my will, for my love for her, for my wanting to make her feel more.

She was slightly tearful, as I said, and gentle, and she held me in her arms after I came, and I said something like "Don't relax. I want to come again," and she partly laughed, partly sighed, and was flattered, and said, "Again? That's nice." We had a terrific closeness, almost like a man and a secretary—I was free and powerful, and she was devoted: there was little chance Orra would ever be a secretary—she'd been offered executive jobs already for when she finished college—but to play at being a secretary who had no life of her own was a romantic thing for Orra. I felt some apprehension, as before a game of tennis that I wanted to win, or as before stealing something off a counter in a store: there was a dragging enervation, a fear and silence, and there was a lifting, a preparation, a willed and then unwilling, self-contained fixity of purpose; it was a settled thing; it would happen.

After about ten minutes or so, perhaps it was twenty, I moved in her: I should say that while I'd rested, I'd stayed in her (and she'd held on to

me). As I'd expected—and with satisfaction and pride that everything was working, my endowments were cooperating—I felt my prick come up; it came up at once with comic promptness, but it was sore—Jesus, was it sore. It, its head, ached like hell, with a dry, burning, reddish pain.

The pain made me chary and prevented me from being excited except in an abstract way; my mind was clear; I was idly smiling as I began, moving very slowly, just barely moving, sore of pressing on her inside her, moving around, lollygagging around, feeling out the reaches in there, arranging the space inside her, as if to put the inner soft-oiled shadows in her in order; or like stretching out your hand in the dark and pressing a curve of a blanket into familiarity or to locate yourself when you're half asleep, when your eyes are closed. In fact, I did close my eyes and listened carefully to her breathing, concentrating on her but trying not to let her see I was doing that because it would make her self-conscious.

Her reaction was so minimal that I lost faith in fucking for getting her started, and I thought I'd better go down on her; I pulled out of her, which wasn't too smart, but I wasn't thinking all that consequentially; she'd told me on other occasions she didn't like "all that foreign la-di-da," that it didn't excite her, but I'd always thought it was only that she was ashamed of not coming and that made being gone down on hard for her. I started in on it; she protested; and I pooh-poohed her objections and did it anyway; I was raw with nerves, with stifled amusement because of the lying and the tension, so much of it. I remarked to her that I was going down on her for my own pleasure; I was jolted by touching her with my tongue there when I was so raw-nerved, but I hid that. It seemed to me physical unhappiness and readiness were apparent in her skin—my lips and tongue carried the currents of a jagged unhappiness and readiness in her into me; echoes of her stiffness and dissatisfaction sounded in my mouth, my head, my feet; my entire tired body was a stethoscope. I was entirely a stethoscope; I listened to her with my *bones*; the glimmers of excitement in her traveled to my *spine*; I felt her grinding sexual haltedness, like a car's broken starter motor grinding away in her, in my *stomach*, in my *knees*. Every part of me listened

to her; every goddamned twinge of muscular contraction she had that I noticed or that she should have had because I was licking her clitoris and she didn't have, every testimony of excitement or of no-excitement in her, I listened for so hard it was amazing it didn't drive her out of bed with self-consciousness; but she probably couldn't tell what I was doing, since I was out of her line of sight, was down in the shadows, in the basement of her field of vision, in the basement with her sexual feelings where they lay, strewn about.

When she said, "No . . . No, Wiley . . . Please don't. No . . ." and wiggled, although it wasn't the usual pointless protest that some girls might make—it was real, she wanted me to stop—I didn't listen because I could feel she responded to my tongue more than she had to the fucking a moment before. I could feel beads sliding and whispering and being strung together rustlingly in her; the disorder, the scattered or strewn sexual bits, to a very small extent were being put in order. She shuddered. With discomfort. She produced, was subjected to, her erratic responses. And she made odd, small cries, protests mostly, uttered little exclamations that mysteriously were protests although they were not protests, too, cries that somehow suggested the ground of protest kept changing for her.

I tried to string a number of those cries together, to cause them to occur in a mounting sequence. It was a peculiar attempt: it seemed we moved, I moved with her, on dark water, between two lines of buoys, dark on one side, there was nothingness there, and on the other, lights, red and green, the lights of the body advancing on sexual heat, the signs of it anyway, nipples like scored pebbles, legs lightly thrashing, little *ohs*; nothing important, a body thing; you go on: you proceed.

When we strayed too far, there was nothingness, or only a distant flicker, only the faintest guidance. Sometimes we were surrounded by the lights of her responses, widely spaced, bobbing unevenly, on some darkness, some ignorance we both had, Orra and I, of what were the responses of her body. To the physical things I did and to the atmosphere of the way I did them, to the authority, the argument I made that this was sexual for her, that the way I touched her and concentrated on her, on that partly dream-laden dark water or underwater thing, she responded;

she rested on that, rolled heavily on that. Everything I did was speech, was hieroglyphics, pictures on her nerves; it was what masculine authority was for, was what bravery and a firm manner and musculature were supposed to indicate that a man could bring to bed. Or skill at dancing; or musicianliness; or a sad knowingness. Licking her, holding her belly, stroking her belly pretty much with unthoughtout movements—sometimes just moving my fingers closer together and spreading them again to show my pleasure, to show how rewarded I felt, not touching her breasts or doing anything so intensely that it would make her suspect me of being out to make her come—I did those things but it seemed like I left her alone and was private with my own pleasures. She felt unobserved with her sensations, she had them without responsibility, she clutched at them as something round and slippery in the water, and she would fall off them, occasionally gasping at the loss of her balance, the loss of her self-possession, too.

I'd flick, idly almost, at her little spaghetti-ending with my tongue, then twice more idly, then three or four or five times in sequence, then settle down to rub it or bounce it between lip and tongue in a steadily more earnest way until my head, my consciousness, my lips and tongue were buried in the dark of an ascending and concentrated rhythm, in the way a stoned dancer lets a movement catch him and wrap him around and become all of him, become his voyage and not a collection of repetitions at all.

Then some boring stringy thing, a sinew at the base of my tongue, would begin to ache, and I'd break off that movement, and sleepily lick her, or if the tongue was too uncomfortable, I'd worry her clit, I'd nuzzle it with my pursed lips until the muscles that held my lips pursed grew tired in their turn; and I'd go back and flick at her tiny clitoris with my tongue, and go on as before, until the darkness came; she sensed the darkness, the privacy for her, and she seemed like someone in a hallway, unobserved, moving her arms, letting her mind stroke itself, taking a step in that dark.

But whatever she felt was brief and halting; and when she seemed to halt or to be dead or jagged, I authoritatively, gesturally accepted that as part of what was pleasurable to me and did not let it stand as hint or fore-

taste of failure; I produced sighs of pleasure, even gasps, not all of them false, warm nuzzlings, and caresses that indicated I was rewarded—I produced rewarded strokings; I made elements of sexual pleasure out of moments that were unsexual and that could be taken as the collapse of sexuality.

And she couldn't contradict me because she thought I was working on my own coming, and she loved me and meant to be cooperative.

What I did took nerve because it gave her a tremendous ultimate power to laugh at me, although what the courtship up until now had been for was to show that she was not an enemy, that she could control the hysteria of fear or jealousy in her or the cold judgments in her of me that would lead her to say or do things that would make me hate or fear her; what was at stake included the risk that I would look foolish in my own eyes—and might then attack her for failing to come—and then she would be unable to resist the inward conviction that I was a fool. Any attempted act confers vulnerability on you, but an act devoted to her pleasure represented doubled vulnerability since only she could judge it; and I was safe only if I was immune or insensitive to her; but if I was immune or insensitive I could not hope to help her come; by making myself vulnerable to her, I was in a way being a sissy or a creep because Orra wasn't organized or trained or prepared to accept responsibility for how I felt about myself: she was a woman who wanted to be left alone; she was paranoid about the inroads on her life men in their egos tried to make: there was dangerous masochism, dangerous hubris, dangerous hopefulness, and a form of love in my doing what I did: I nuzzled nakedly at the crotch of the sexual tigress; any weakness in her ego or her judgment and she would lash out at *me*; and the line was very frail between what I was doing as love and as intrusion, exploitation, and stupid boastfulness. There was no way for me even to begin to imagine the mental pain—or the physical pain—for her if I should fail and, to add to that, if I should withdraw from her emotionally, too, because of my failure and hers and our pain. Or merely because the failure might make me so uncomfortable I couldn't go on unless she nursed my ego, and she couldn't nurse my ego, she didn't know how to do it, and probably was inhibited about doing it.

Sometimes my hands, my fingers, not just the tops, but all of their inside surface and the palms, held her thighs, or cupped her little belly, or my fingers moved around the lips, the labia or whatever, or even poked a little into her, or with the nails or tips lightly nudged her clitoris, always within a fictional frame of my absolute sexual pleasure, of my admiration for this sex, of there being no danger in it for us. No tongues or brains handy to speak unkindly, I meant. My God, I felt exposed and noble. This was a great effort to make for her.

Perhaps that only indicates the extent of my selfishness. I didn't mind being feminized except for the feeling that Orra would not ever understand what I was doing but would ascribe it to the power of my or our sexuality. I minded being this self-conscious and so conscious of her; I was separated from my own sexuality, from any real sexuality; a poor sexual experience, even one based on love, would diminish the ease of my virility with her at least for a while; and she wouldn't understand. Maybe she would become much subtler and shrewder sexually and know how to handle me, but that wasn't likely. And if I apologized or complained or explained in that problematic future why I was sexually a little slow or reluctant with her, she would then blame my having tried to give her orgasm, she would insist I must not be bored again, so I would in that problematic future, if I wanted her to come, have to lie and say I was having more excitement than I felt, and that, too, might diminish my pleasure. I would be deprived even of the chance for honesty: I would be further feminized in that regard. I thought all this while I went down on her. I didn't put it in words but thought in great misty blocks of something known or sensed. I felt an inner weariness I kept working in spite of. This ignoring myself gave me an odd, starved feeling, a mixture of agony and helplessness. I didn't want to feel like that. I suddenly wondered why in the theory of relativity the speed of light is given as a constant: was that more Jewish absolutism? Surely in a universe as changeable and as odd as this one, the speed of light, considering the variety of experiences, must vary; there must be a place where one could see a beam of light struggle to move. I felt silly and selfish; it couldn't be avoided that I felt like that—I mean, it couldn't be avoided by *me*.

Whatever she did when I licked her, if she moved at all, if a muscle

twitched in her thigh, a muscle twitched in mine, my body imitated hers as if to measure what she felt or perhaps for no reason but only because the sympathy was so intense. The same things happened to each of us but in amazingly different contexts, as if we stood at opposite ends of the room and reached out to touch each other and to receive identical messages which then diverged as they entered two such widely separated sensibilities and two such divergent and incomplete ecstasies. The movie we watched was of her discovering how her sexual responses worked: we were seated far apart. My tongue pushed at her erasure, her wronged and heretofore hardly existent sexual powers. I stirred her with varieties of kisses far from her face. A strange river moved slowly, bearing us along, reeds hid the banks, willows braided and unbraided themselves, moaned and whispered, raveled and faintly clicked. Orra groaned, sighed, shuddered, shuddered harshly or liquidly; sometimes she jumped when I changed the pressure or posture of my hands on her or when I rested for a second and then resumed. Her body jumped and contracted interestingly but not at any length or in any pattern that I could understand. My mind grew tired. There is a limit to invention, to mine anyway: I saw myself (stupidly) as a Roman trireme, my tongue as the prow, *bronze*, pushing at her; she was the Mediterranean. Tiers of slaves—my God, the helplessness of them—pulled oars, long stalks that metaphorically and rhythmically bloomed with flowing clusters of short-lived lilies at the water's surface. The pompous and out-of-proportion boat, all of me hunched over Orra's small sea—not actually hunched: what I was was lying flat; the foot of the bed was at my waist or near there, my legs were out, my feet were propped distantly on the floor, all of me was concentrated on the soft, shivery, furry delicacies of Orra's twat—the pompous boat advanced lickingly, leaving a trickling, gurgling wake of half-response, the ebbing of my will and activity into that fluster subsiding into the dark water of this girl's passivity, taut storminess, and self-ignorance.

The whitish bubbling, the splash of her discontinuous physical response: those waves, ah, that wake rose, curled outward, bubbled, and fell. Rose, curled outward, bubbled, and fell. The white fell of a naiad. In the vast spreading darkness and silence of the sea. There was nothing

but that wake. The darkness of my senses when the rhythm absorbed me (so that I vanished from my awareness, so that I was blotted up and was a stain, a squid hidden, stroking Orra) made it twilight or night for me; and my listening for her pleasure, for our track on that markless ocean, gave me the sense that where we were was in a lit-up, great, ill-defined oval of night air and sea and opalescent fog, rainbowed where the lights from the portholes of an immense ship were altered prismatically by droplets of mist—as in some 1930s movie, as in some dream. Often I was out of breath; I saw spots, colors, ocean depths. And her protests, her doubts! My God, her doubts! Her *No, don't, Wileys* and her *I don't want to do thises* and her *Wiley, don'ts* and *Wiley, I can't come—don't do this—I don't like thises*. Mostly I ignored her. Sometimes I silenced her by leaning my cheek on her belly and watching my hand stroke her belly and saying to her in a sex-thickened voice, “Orra, I like this—this is for me.”

Then I went down on her again with unexpectedly vivid, real pleasure, as if merely thinking about my own pleasure excited and refreshed me, and there was yet more pleasure, when she—reassured or strengthened by my putative selfishness, by the conviction that this was all for me, that nothing was expected of her—cried out. Then a second later she *grunted*. Her whole body rippled. Jesus, I loved it when she reacted to me. It was like causing an entire continent to convulse, Asia, South America. I felt huge and tireless.

In her excitement, she threw herself into the air, but my hands happened to be on her belly; and I fastened her down, I held that part of her comparatively still, with her twat fastened to my mouth, and I licked her while she was in midheave; and she yelled; I kept my mouth there as if I were drinking from her; I stayed like that until her upper body fell back on the bed and bounced, she made the whole bed bounce; then my head bounced away from her; but I still held her down with my hands; and I fastened myself, my mouth, on her twat again; and she yelled in a deep voice, “*Wiley, what are you doing!*”

Her voice was deep, as if her impulses at that moment were masculine, not out of neurosis but in generosity, in an attempt to improve on the sickliness she accused women of; she wanted to meet me halfway,

to share; to share my masculinity: she thought men were beautiful. She cried out, "*I don't want you to do things to me! I want you to have a good fuck!*"

Her voice was deep and despairing, maybe with the despair that goes with surges of sexuality, but then maybe she thought I would make her pay for this. I said, "Orra, I like this stuff, this stuff is what gets me excited." She resisted, just barely, for some infinitesimal fragment of a second, and then her body began to vibrate; it twittered as if in it were the strings of a musical instrument set jangling; she said foolishly—but sweetly—"Wiley, I'm embarrassed, Wiley, this embarrasses *me*. . . . Please stop. . . . No . . . No . . . No . . . Oh . . . Oh . . . Oh . . . I'm very sexual, I'm too sexual to have orgasms, Wiley, stop, please. . . . Oh . . . Oh . . . Oh . . ." And then a deeper shudder ran through her; she gasped; then there was a silence; then she gasped again; she cried out in an extraordinary voice, "I FEEL SOMETHING!" The hair stood up on the back of my neck; I couldn't stop; I hurried on; I heard a dim moaning come from her. What had she felt before? I licked hurriedly. How unpleasant for her, how unreal and twitchy had the feelings been that I'd given her? In what way was this different? I wondered if there was in her a sudden swarming along her nerves, a warm conviction of the reality of sexual pleasure. She heaved like a whale—no: not so much as that. But it was as if half an ocean rolled off her young flanks; some element of darkness vanished from the room; some slight color of physical happiness tintured her body and its thin coating of sweat; I felt it all through me; she rolled on the surface of a pale blue, a pink and blue sea; she was dark and gleaming, and immense and wet. And warm.

She cried, "*Wiley, I feel a lot!*"

God, she was happy.

I said, "Why not?" I wanted to lower the drama quotient; I thought the excess of drama was a mistake, would overburden her. But also I wanted her to defer to me, I wanted authority over her body now, I wanted to make her come.

But she didn't get any more excited than that: she was rigid, almost boardlike after a few seconds. I licked at her thing as best I could but the sea was dry; the board collapsed. I faked it that I was very excited;

actually I was so caught up in being sure of myself, I didn't know what I really felt. I thought, as if I were much younger than I was, Boy, if this doesn't work, is my name mud. Then to build up the risk, out of sheer hellish braggadocio, instead of just acting out that I was confident—and in sex, everything unsaid that is portrayed in gestures instead is twice as powerful—when she said, because the feeling was less for her now, the feeling she liked having gone away, “Wiley, I can't—this is silly—” I said, “Shut up, Orra, I know what I'm doing. . . .” But I didn't know.

And I didn't like that tone for sexual interplay either, except as a joke, or as role playing, because pure authority involves pure submission, and people don't survive pure submission except by being slavishly, possessively, vindictively in love; when they are in love like that, they can *give* you nothing but rebellion and submission, bitchiness and submission; it's a general rottenness: you get no part of them out of bed that has any value; and in bed, you get a grudging submission, because what the slave requires is your total attention, or she starts paying you back; I suppose the model is childhood, that slavery. Anyway, I don't like it. But I played at it then, with Orra, as a gamble.

Everything was a gamble. I didn't know what I was doing; I figured it out as I went along; and how much time did I have for figuring things out just then? I felt strained as at poker or roulette, sweaty and a little stupid, placing bets—with my tongue—and waiting to see what the wheel did, risking my money when no one forced me to, hoping things would go my way, and I wouldn't turn out to have been stupid when this was over.

Also, there were sudden fugitive convulsions of lust now, in sympathy with her larger but scattered responses, a sort of immediate and automatic sexuality—I was at the disposal, inwardly, of the sexuality in her and could not help myself, could not hold it back and avoid the disappointments, and physical impatience, the impatience in my skin and prick, of the huge desire that unmistakably accompanies love, of a primitive longing for what seemed her happiness, for closeness to her as to something I had studied and was studying and had found more and more of value in—what was of value was the way she valued me, a deep and no doubt limited (but in the sexual moment it seemed illimitable)

permissiveness toward me, a risk she took, an allowance she made as if she'd let me damage her and use her badly.

Partly what kept me going was stubbornness because I'd made up my mind before we started that I wouldn't give up; and partly what it was was the feeling she aroused in me, a feeling that was, to be honest, made up of tenderness and concern and a kind of mere affection, a brotherliness, as if she were my brother, not different from me at all.

Actually this was brought on by an increasing failure, as the sex went on, of one kind of sophistication—of worldly sophistication—and by the increase in me of another kind, of a childish sophistication, a growth of innocence: Orra said, or exclaimed, in a half-harried, half-amazed voice, in a hugely admiring, gratuitous way, as she clutched at me in approval, “Wiley, I never had feelings like these before!”

And to be the first to have caused them, you know? It's like being a collector, finding something of great value, where it had been unsuspected and disguised, or like earning any honor; this partial success, this encouragement gave rise to this pride, this inward innocence.

Of course that lessened the risk for this occasion; I could fail now and still say, *It was worth it*, and she would agree; but it lengthened the slightly longer-term risk; because I might feel trebly a fool someday. Also, it meant we might spend months making love in this fashion—I'd get impotent, maybe not in terms of erection, but I wouldn't look forward to sex—still, that was beautiful to me in a way, too, and exciting. I really didn't know what I was thinking: whatever I thought was part of the sex.

I went on; I wanted to hit the jackpot now. Then Orra shouted, “It's *there!* It's THERE!” I halted, thinking she meant it was in some specific locale, in some specific motion I'd just made with my tired tongue and jaw; I lifted my head—but couldn't speak: in a way, the sexuality pressed on me too hard for me to speak; anyway, I didn't have to; she had lifted her head with a kind of overt twinship and she was looking at me down the length of her body; her face was askew and boyish—every feature was wrinkled; she looked angry and yet naive and swindleable; she said angrily, naively, “Wiley, *it's there!*”

But even before she spoke that time, I knew she'd meant it was in her;

the fox had been startled from its covert again; she had seen it, had felt it run in her again. She had been persuaded that it was in her for good.

I started manipulating her delicately with my hand; and in my own excitement, and thinking she was ready, I sort of scrambled up and, covering her with myself, and playing with her with one hand, guided my other self, my lower consciousness, into her. My God, she was warm and restless inside; it was heated in there and smooth, insanely smooth, and oiled, and full of movements. But I knew at once I'd made a mistake: I should have gone on licking her; there were no regular contractions; she was anxious for the prick, she rose around it, closed around it, but in a rigid, dumb, faraway way; and her twitchings played on it, ran through it, through the walls of it and into me; and they were uncontrolled and not exciting, but empty: she didn't know what to do, how to be fucked and come. I couldn't pull out of her, I didn't want to, I couldn't pull out; but if there were no contractions for me to respond to, how in hell would I find the rhythm for her? I started slowly, with what seemed infinite suggestiveness to me, with great dirtiness, a really grown-up sort of fucking—just in case she was far along—and she let out a huge, shuddering, hour-long sigh and cried out my name and then, in a sobbing, exhausted voice, said, "I lost it. . . . Oh, Wiley, I lost it. . . . Let's stop. . . ." My face was above hers; her face was wet with tears; why was she crying like that? She had changed her mind; now she wanted to come; she turned her head back and forth; she said, "I'm no good. . . . I'm no good. . . . Don't worry about me. . . . You come. . . ."

No matter what I mumbled, "Hush," and "Don't be silly," and in a whisper, "Orra, I love you," she kept on saying those things, until I slapped her lightly and said, "*Shut up, Orra.*"

Then she was silent again.

The thing was, apparently, that she was arrhythmic: at least that's what I thought; and that meant there weren't going to be regular contractions; any rhythm for me to follow; and any rhythm I set up as I fucked, she broke with her movements: so that it was that when she moved, she made her excitement go away. It would be best if she moved very smally: but I was afraid to tell her that, or even to try to hold her hips firmly, and guide them, to instruct her in that way for fear she'd

get self-conscious and lose what momentum she'd won. And also I was ashamed that I'd stopped going down on her. I experimented—doggedly, sweatily, to make up for what I'd done—with fucking in different ways, and I fantasized about us being in Mexico, someplace warm and lushly colored where we made love easily and filthily and graphically. The fantasy kept me going. That is, it kept me hard. I kept acting out an atmosphere of sexual pleasure—I mean of my sexual pleasure—for her to rest on, so she could count on that. I discovered that a not very slow sort of one-one-one stroke, or fuck-fuck-fuck—Orra-now-now-now, really got to her; her feelings would grow heated; and she could shift up from that with me into a one-two, one-two, one-two, her excitement rising; but if she or I then tried to shift up farther to one-two-three, one-two-three, she'd lose it all. That was too complicated for her: my own true love, my white American. But her feelings when they were present were very strong, they came in gusts, huge squalls of heat as if from a furnace with a carelessly banging door, and they excited and allured both of us. That excitement and the dit-dit-ditting got to her; she began to be generally, continuingly sexual. It's almost standard to compare sexual excitement to holiness; well, after a while, holiness seized her; she spoke in tongues, she testified. She was shaking all over; she was saved temporarily and sporadically: that is, she kept lapsing out of that excitement, too. But it would recur. Her hands would flutter; her face would be pale and then red, then very, very red; her eyes would stare at nothing; she'd call my name. I'd plug on one-one-one, then one-two, one-two, then I'd go back to one-one-one: I could see as before—in the deep pleasure I felt even in the midst of the labor—why a woman was proud of what she felt, why a man might kill her in order to stimulate in her (although he might not know this was why he did it) these signs of pleasure. The familiar Orra had vanished; she said, “GodohGodoh-God”; it was sin and redemption and holiness and visions time. Her throbs were very direct, easily comprehensible, but without any pattern; they weren't in any regular sequence; still, they were exciting to me, maybe all the more exciting because of the piteousness of her not being able to regulate them, of their being like blows delivered inside her by an enemy whom she couldn't even half domesticate or make friendly to

herself or speak to. She was the most out-of-control girl I ever screwed. She would at times start to thrust like a woman who had her sexuality readied and well understood at last, and I'd start to distend with anticipation and a pride and relief as large as a house; but after two thrusts—or four, or six—she'd have gotten too excited, she'd be shaking, she'd thrust crookedly and out of tempo, the movement would collapse; or she'd suddenly jerk in midmovement without warning and crash around with so great and so meaningless a violence that she'd lose her thing; and she'd start to cry. She'd whisper wetly, "I lost it"; so I'd say, "No, you didn't," and I'd go on or start over, one-one-one; and of course, the excitement would come back; sometimes it came back at once; but she was increasingly afraid of herself, afraid to move her lower body; she would try to hold still and just *receive* the excitement; she would let it pool up in her; but then, too, she'd begin to shake more and more; she'd leak over into spasmodic and oddly sad, too large movements; and she'd whimper, knowing, I suppose, that those movements were breaking the tempo in herself; again and again, tears streamed down her cheeks; she said in a not quite hoarse, in a sweet, almost hoarse whisper, "I don't want to come, Wiley, you go ahead and come."

My mind had pretty much shut off; it had become exhausted; and I didn't see how we were going to make this work; she said, "Wiley, it's all right—please, it's all right—I don't want to come."

I wondered if I should say something and try to trigger some fantasy in her; but I didn't want to risk saying something she'd find unpleasant or think was a reproach or a hint for her to be sexier. I thought if I just kept on dit-dit-ditting, sooner or later she'd find it in herself, the trick of riding on her feelings, and getting them to rear up, crest, and topple. I held her tightly, in sympathy and pity, and maybe fear, and admiration: she was so unhysterical; she hadn't yelled at me or broken anything; she hadn't ordered me around: she was simply alone and shaking in the middle of a neural storm in her that she seemed to have no gift for handling. I said, "Orra, it's O.K.: I really prefer long fucks," and I went on, dit-dit-dit-dit, then I'd shift up to dit-dot, dit-dot, dit-dot, dit-dot. . . . My back hurt, my legs were going; if sweat was sperm, we would have looked like liquefied snowfields.

Orra made noises, more and more quickly, and louder and louder; then the noises she made slackened off. Then, step by step, with shorter and shorter strokes, then out of control and clumsy, simply reestablishing myself inside the new approach, I settled down, fucked slowly. The prick was embedded far in her; I barely stirred; the drama of sexual movement died away, the curtains were stilled; there was only sensation on the stage.

I bumped against the stone blocks and hidden hooks that nipped and bruised me into the soft rottenness, the strange, glowing, breakable hardness of coming, of the sensations at the approaches to coming.

I panted and half rolled and pushed and edged it in, and slid it back, sweatily—I was semiexpert, aimed, intent. Sex can be like a wilderness that imprisons you: the daimons of the locality claim you. I was achingly nagged by sensations; my prick had been somewhat softened before, and now it swelled with a sore-headed but fine distension; Orra shuddered and held me cooperatively; I began to forget her.

I thought she was making herself come on the slow fucking, on the prick which, when it was seated in her like this, when I hardly moved it, seemed to belong to her as much as to me; the prick seemed to *enter* me, too: we both seemed to be sliding on it; the sensation was like that; but there was the moment when I became suddenly aware of her again, of the flesh and blood and bone in my arms, beneath me. I had a feeling of grating on her, and of her grating on me. I didn't recognize the unpleasantness at first. I don't know how long it went on before I felt it as a withdrawal in her, a withdrawal that she had made, a patient and restrained horror in her, and impatience in me: our arrival at sexual shambles.

My heart filled suddenly—filled; and then all feeling ran out of it—it emptied itself.

I continued to move in her slowly, numbly, in a shabby hubbub of faceless shuddering and shufflings of the midsection and half-thrusts, half-twitches; we went on holding each other, in silence, without slackening the intensity with which we held each other; our movements, that flopping in place, that grinding against each other, went on; neither of us protested in any way. Bad sex can be sometimes stronger and more moving than good sex. She made sobbing noises—and held on to me.

After a while sex seemed very ordinary and familiar and unromantic. I started going dit-dit-dit again.

Her hips jerked up half a dozen times before it occurred to me again that she liked to thrust like a boy, that she wanted to thrust; and then it occurred to me that she wanted me to thrust.

I maneuvered my ass slightly and tentatively delivered a shove, or rather, delivered an authoritative shove, but not one of great length, one that was exploratory; Orra sighed, with relief it seemed to me; and jerked, encouragingly, too late, as I was pulling back. When I delivered a second thrust, a somewhat more obvious one, more amused, almost boyish, I was like a boy whipping a fairly fast ball, in a game, at a first baseman—she jerked almost wolfishly, gobbling up the extravagant power of the gesture, of the thrust; with an odd shudder of pleasure, of irresponsibility, of boyishness, I suddenly realized how physically strong Orra was, how well knit, how well put together her body was, how great the power in it, the power of endurance in it; and a phrase—absurd and demeaning but exciting just then—came into my head: *to throw a fuck*; and I settled myself atop her, braced my toes and knees and elbows and hands on the bed and half-scramblingly worked *it*—*it* was clearly mine; but I was Orra's—worked *it* into a passionate shove, a curving stroke about a third as long as a full stroke; but amateur and gentle: that is, tentative still; and Orra screamed then; how she screamed: she made known her readiness; then the next time, she grunted: “Uhhnnnahnhhhhh . . .” a sound thick at the beginning but that trailed into refinement, into sweetness, a lingering sweetness.

It seemed to me I really wanted to fuck like this, that *I* had been waiting for this all my life. But it wasn't really my taste, that kind of fuck: I liked to throw a fuck with less force and more gradations and implications of force rather than with the actual thing; and with more immediate contact between the two sets of pleasures and with more admissions of defeat and triumph; my pleasure was a thing of me reflecting her, her spirit entering me; or perhaps it was merely a mistake, my thinking that; but it seemed shameful and automatic, naive and animal, to throw the prick into her like that.

She took the thrust: she convulsed a little; she fluttered all over; her

skin fluttered; things twitched in her, in the disorder surrounding the phallic blow in her. After two thrusts, she collapsed, went flaccid, then toughened and readied herself again, rose a bit from the bed, aimed the flattened, mysteriously funnel-like container of her lower end at me, too high, so that I had to pull her down with my hands on her butt or on her hips; and her face, when I glanced at her beneath my lids, was fantastically pleasing, set, concentrated, busy, harassed; her body was strong, was stone, smooth stone and wet-satin paper bags and snaky webs, thin and alive, made of woven snakes that lived, thrown over the stone; she held the great, writhing-skinned stone construction toward me, the bony marvel, the half-dish of bone with its secretive, gluey-smooth entrance, *the place where I was*—it was undefined, except for that: *the place where I was*; she took and met each thrust—and shuddered and collapsed and rose again: she seemed to rise to the act of taking it; I thought she was partly mistaken, childish, to think that the center of sex was to meet and take the prick thrown into her as hard as it could be thrown, now that she was excited; but there was a weird wildness, a wild freedom, like children cavorting, uncontrolled, set free, but not hysterical, merely without restraint; the odd, thickened, knobbed pole springing back and forth as if mounted on a web of wide rubber bands: it was a naive and a complete release. I whumped it in and she went, “UHNNN!” and a half-iota of a second later, I was seated all the way in her, I jerked a minim of an inch deeper in her, and went, “UHNNN!” too. Her whole body shook. She would go, “UHN!” And I would go, “UHN!”

Then when it seemed from her strengthening noises and her more rapid and jerkier movements that she was near the edge of coming, I’d start to place the whumps, in neater and firmer arrangements, more obviously in a rhythm, more businesslike, more teasing, with pauses at each end of a thrust; and that would excite her up to a point; but then her excitement would level off, and not go over the brink. So I would speed up: I’d thrust harder, then harder yet, then harder and faster; she made her noises and half-thrust back. She bit her lower lip; she set her teeth in her lower lip; blood appeared. I fucked still faster, but on a shorter stroke, almost thrumming on her, and angling my abdomen hopefully to drum on her clitoris; sometimes her body would go limp; but her cries

would speed up, bird after bird flew out of her mouth while she lay limp as if I were a boxer and had destroyed her ability to move; then when the cries did not go past a certain point, when she didn't come, I'd slow and start again. I wished I'd been a great athlete, a master of movement, a woman, a lesbian, a man with a gigantic prick that would explode her into coming. I moved my hands to the corners of the mattress; and spread my legs; I braced myself with my hands and feet; and braced like that, free-handed in a way, drove into her; and the new posture, the feeling she must have had of being covered, and perhaps the difference in the thrust got to her; but Orra's body began to set up a babble, a babble of response, then—I think the posture played on her mind.

But she did not come.

I moved my hands and held the dish of her hips so that she couldn't wiggle or deflect the thrust or pull away: she began to "Uhn" again but interspersed with small screams: we were like kids playing catch (her poor brutalized clitoris), playing hard hand: this was what she thought sex was; it was sexual, as throwing a ball hard is sexual; in a way, too, we were like acrobats hurling ourselves at each other, to meet in midair and fall entangled to the net. It was like that.

Her mouth came open, her eyes had rolled to one side and stayed there—it felt like twilight to me—I knew where she was sexually, or thought I did. She pushed, she egged us on. She wasn't breakable this way. Orra. I wondered if she knew, it made me like her, how naive this was, this American fuck, this kids-playing-at-twilight-on-the-neighborhood-street fuck. After I seated it and wriggled a bit in her and moozed on her clitoris with my abdomen, I would draw it out not in a straight line but at some curve so that it would press against the walls of her cunt and she could keep track of where it was; and I would pause fractionally just before starting to thrust, so she could brace herself and expect it; I whomped it in and understood her with an absurd and probably unfounded sense of my sexual virtuosity; and she became silent suddenly, then she began to breathe loudly, then something in her toppled; or broke, then all at once she shuddered in a different way. It really was as if she lay on a bed of wings, as if she had a half-dozen wings folded under her, six huge wings, large, veined, throbbing, alive wings, real

ones, with fleshy edges from which glittering feathers sprang backward; and they all stirred under her.

She half-rose; and I'd hold her so she didn't fling herself around and lose her footing, or her airborneness, on the uneasy glass mountain she'd begun to ascend, the frail transparency beneath her, that was forming and growing beneath her, that seemed to me to foam with light and darkness, as if we were rising above a landscape of hedges and moonlight and shadows: a mountain, a sea that formed and grew; it grew and grew; and she said "OH!" and "OHHHH!" almost with vertigo, as if she were airborne but unsteady on the vans of her wings, and as if I were there without wings but by some magic dispensation and by some grace of familiarity; I thunked on and on, and she looked down and was frightened; the tension in her body grew vast; and suddenly a great, a really massive violence ran through her, but now it was as if, in fear at her height, or out of some automatism, the first of her three pairs of wings began to beat, great fans winnowingly, great wings of flesh out of which feathers grew, catching at the air, stabilizing and yet lifting her: she whistled and rustled so; she was at once so still and so violent; the great wings engendered, their movement engendered in her, patterns of flexed and crossed muscles: her arms and legs and breasts echoed or carried out the strain, or strained to move the weight of those winnowing, moving wings. Her breaths were wild but not loud and slanted every which way, irregular and new to this particular dream, and very much as if she looked down on great spaces of air; she grabbed at me, at my shoulders, but she had forgotten how to work her hands; her hands just made the gestures of grabbing, the gestures of a well-meaning, dark but beginning to be luminous, mad, amnesiac angel. She called out, "Wiley, Wiley!" but she called it out in a *whisper*, the whisper of someone floating across a night sky, of someone crazily ascending, someone who was going crazy, who was taking on the mad purity and temper of angels, someone who was tormented unendurably by this, who was unendurably frightened, whose pleasure was enormous, half human, mad. Then she screamed in rebuke, "Wiley!" She screamed my name: "*Wiley!*"—she did it hoarsely and insanely, asking for help, but blaming me, and merely as exclamation; it was a gutter sound in part, and ugly;

the ugliness destroyed nothing, or maybe it had an impetus of its own, but it whisked away another covering, a membrane of ordinariness—I don't know—and her second pair of wings began to beat; her whole body was aflutter on the bed. I was as wet as—as some fish, thonking away, sweatily. Grinding away. I said, "It's O.K., Orra. It's O.K." And poked on. In midair. She shouted, "*What is this!*" She shouted it in the way a tremendously large person who can defend herself might shout at someone who was unwisely beating her up. She shouted—angrily, as an announcement of anger, it seemed—"Oh my God!" Like: *Who broke this cup?* I plugged on. She raised her torso, her head, she looked me clearly in the eye, her eyes were enormous, were bulging, and she said, "*Wiley, it's happening!*" Then she lay down again and screamed for a couple of seconds. I said a little dully, grinding on, "It's O.K., Orra. It's O.K." I didn't want to say *Let go* or to say anything lucid because I didn't know a damn thing about female orgasm after all, and I didn't want to give her any advice and wreck things; and also I didn't want to commit myself in case this turned out to be false alarm; and we had to go on. I pushed in, lingered, pulled back, went in, only half on beat, one-thonk-one-thonk, then one-one-one saying, "This is sexy, this is good for me, Orra, this is very good for me," and then, "Good Orra," and she trembled in a new way at that, "Good Orra," I said, "Good . . . Orra," and then all at once, it happened. Something pulled her over; and something gave in; and all three pairs of wings began to beat: she was the center and the source and the victim of a storm of wing beats; we were at the top of the world; the huge bird of God's body in us hovered; the great miracle pounded on her back, pounded around us; she was straining and agonized and distraught, estranged within this corporeal-incorporeal thing, this angelic other avatar, this other substance of herself: the wings were outspread; they thundered and gaspily galloped with her; they half-broke her; and she screamed, "*Wiley!*" and "*Mygodmygod*" and "IT'S NOT STOPPING, WILEY, IT'S NOT STOPPING!" She was pale and red; her hair was everywhere; her body was wet, and thrashing. It was as if something unbelievably strange and fierce—like the holy temper—lifted her to where she could not breathe or walk: she choked in the there,

a scrambling seraph, tumbling and aflame and alien, powerful beyond belief, hideous and frightening and beautiful beyond the reach of the human. A screaming child, an angel howling in the Godly sphere: she churned without delicacy, as wild as an angel bearing threats; her body lifted from the sheets, fell back, lifted again; her hands beat on the bed; she made very loud hoarse tearing noises—I was frightened for her: this was her first time after six years of playing around with her body. It hurt her; her face looked like something made of stone, a monstrous carving; only her body was alive; her arms and legs were outspread and tensed and they beat or they were weak and fluttering. She was an angel as brilliant as a beautiful insect infinitely enlarged and irrevocably foreign: she was unlike me: she was a girl making rattling, astonished, uncontrolled, unhappy noises, a girl looking shocked and intent and harassed by the variety and viciousness of the sensations, including relief, that attacked her. I sat up on my knees and moved a little in her and stroked her breasts, with smooth sideways winglike strokes. And she screamed, “*Wiley, I’m coming!*” and with a certain idiocy entered on her second orgasm or perhaps her third since she’d started to come a few minutes before; and we would have gone on for hours but she said, “It hurts, Wiley, I hurt, make it stop. . . .” So I didn’t move; I just held her thighs with my hands; and her things began to trail off, to trickle down, into little shiverings; the stoniness left her face; she calmed into moderated shudders, and then she said, she started to speak with wonder but then it became an exclamation and ended on a kind of a hollow note, the prelude to a small scream: she said, “*I came. . . .*” Or “*I ca-a-a-ammmmmmmme. . . .*” What happened was that she had another orgasm at the thought that she’d had her first.

That one was more like three little ones, diminishing in strength. When she was quieter, she was gasping, she said, “Oh, you *love* me. . . .”

That, too, excited her. When that died down, she said—angrily—“I always knew they were doing it wrong, I always knew there was nothing wrong with me. . . .” And that triggered a little set of ripples. Sometime earlier, without knowing it, I’d begun to cry. My tears fell on her thighs, her belly, her breasts, as I moved up, along her body, above her, to lie

atop her. I wanted to hold her, my face next to hers; I wanted to hold her. I slid my arms in and under her, and she said, "Oh, Wiley," and she tried to lift her arms, but she started to shake again; then, trembling anyway, she lifted her arms and hugged me with a shuddering sternness that was unmistakable; then she began to cry, too.

THE BEAR CAME OVER THE MOUNTAIN

ALICE MUNRO

Fiona lived in her parents' house, in the town where she and Grant went to university. It was a big, bay-windowed house that seemed to Grant both luxurious and disorderly, with rugs crooked on the floors and cup rings bitten into the table varnish. Her mother was Icelandic—a powerful woman with a froth of white hair and indignant far-left politics. The father was an important cardiologist, revered around the hospital but happily subservient at home, where he would listen to strange tirades with an absentminded smile. All kinds of people, rich or shabby-looking, delivered these tirades, and kept coming and going and arguing and conferring, sometimes in foreign accents. Fiona had her own little car and a pile of cashmere sweaters, but she wasn't in a sorority, and this activity in her house was probably the reason.

Not that she cared. Sororities were a joke to her, and so was politics, though she liked to play "The Four Insurgent Generals" on the phonograph, and sometimes also she played the "Internationale," very loud, if there was a guest she thought she could make nervous. A curly-haired, gloomy-looking foreigner was courting her—she said he was a Visigoth—and so were two or three quite respectable and uneasy young interns. She made fun of them all and of Grant as well. She would drolly repeat some of his small-town phrases. He thought maybe she was joking when she proposed to him, on a cold bright day on the beach at Port Stanley. Sand was stinging their faces and the waves delivered crashing loads of gravel at their feet.

"Do you think it would be fun—" Fiona shouted. "Do you think it would be fun if we got married?"

He took her up on it, he shouted yes. He wanted never to be away from her. She had the spark of life.

Just before they left their house Fiona noticed a mark on the kitchen floor. It came from the cheap black house shoes she had been wearing earlier in the day.

"I thought they'd quit doing that," she said in a tone of ordinary annoyance and perplexity, rubbing at the gray smear that looked as if it had been made by a greasy crayon.

She remarked that she would never have to do this again, since she wasn't taking those shoes with her.

"I guess I'll be dressed up all the time," she said. "Or semi dressed up. It'll be sort of like in a hotel."

She rinsed out the rag she'd been using and hung it on the rack inside the door under the sink. Then she put on her golden-brown fur-collared ski jacket over a white turtle-necked sweater and tailored fawn slacks. She was a tall, narrow-shouldered woman, seventy years old but still upright and trim, with long legs and long feet, delicate wrists and ankles and tiny, almost comical-looking ears. Her hair, which was light as milkweed fluff, had gone from pale blond to white somehow without Grant's noticing exactly when, and she still wore it down to her shoulders, as her mother had done. (That was the thing that had alarmed Grant's own mother, a small-town widow who worked as a doctor's receptionist. The long white hair on Fiona's mother, even more than the state of the house, had told her all she needed to know about attitudes and politics.)

Otherwise Fiona with her fine bones and small sapphire eyes was nothing like her mother. She had a slightly crooked mouth which she emphasized now with red lipstick—usually the last thing she did before she left the house. She looked just like herself on this day—direct and vague as in fact she was, sweet and ironic.

Over a year ago Grant had started noticing so many little yellow notes stuck up all over the house. That was not entirely new. She'd always written things down—the title of a book she'd heard mentioned on the radio or the jobs she wanted to make sure she did that day. Even

her morning schedule was written down—he found it mystifying and touching in its precision.

7 a.m. Yoga. 7:30–7:45 teeth face hair. 7:45–8:15 walk. 8:15 Grant and Breakfast.

The new notes were different. Taped onto the kitchen drawers—Cutlery, Dishtowels, Knives. Couldn't she have just opened the drawers and seen what was inside? He remembered a story about the German soldiers on border patrol in Czechoslovakia during the war. Some Czech had told him that each of the patrol dogs wore a sign that said *Hund*. Why? said the Czechs, and the Germans said, Because that is a *hund*.

He was going to tell Fiona that, then thought he'd better not. They always laughed at the same things, but suppose this time she didn't laugh?

Worse things were coming. She went to town and phoned him from a booth to ask him how to drive home. She went for her walk across the field into the woods and came home by the fence line—a very long way round. She said that she'd counted on fences always taking you somewhere.

It was hard to figure out. She said that about fences as if it was a joke, and she had remembered the phone number without any trouble.

"I don't think it's anything to worry about," she said. "I expect I'm just losing my mind."

He asked if she had been taking sleeping pills.

"If I have I don't remember," she said. Then she said she was sorry to sound so flippant.

"I'm sure I haven't been taking anything. Maybe I should be. Maybe vitamins."

Vitamins didn't help. She would stand in doorways trying to figure out where she was going. She forgot to turn on the burner under the vegetables or put water in the coffeemaker. She asked Grant when they'd moved to this house.

"Was it last year or the year before?"

He said that it was twelve years ago.

She said, "That's shocking."

"She's always been a bit like this," Grant said to the doctor. "Once

she left her fur coat in storage and just forgot about it. That was when we were always going somewhere warm in the winters. Then she said it was unintentionally on purpose, she said it was like a sin she was leaving behind. The way some people made her feel about fur coats.”

He tried without success to explain something more—to explain how Fiona’s surprise and apologies about all this seemed somehow like routine courtesy, not quite concealing a private amusement. As if she’d stumbled on some adventure that she had not been expecting. Or was playing a game that she hoped he would catch on to. They had always had their games—nonsense dialects, characters they invented. Some of Fiona’s made-up voices, chirping or wheedling (he couldn’t tell the doctor this), had mimicked uncannily the voices of women of his that she had never met or known about.

“Yes, well,” the doctor said. “It might be selective at first. We don’t know, do we? Till we see the pattern of the deterioration, we really can’t say.”

In a while it hardly mattered what label was put on it. Fiona, who no longer went shopping alone, disappeared from the supermarket while Grant had his back turned. A policeman picked her up as she walked down the middle of the road, blocks away. He asked her name and she answered readily. Then he asked her the name of the prime minister of the country.

“If you don’t know that, young man, you really shouldn’t be in such a responsible job.”

He laughed. But then she made the mistake of asking if he’d seen Boris and Natasha.

These were the Russian wolfhounds she had adopted some years ago as a favor to a friend, then devoted herself to for the rest of their lives. Her taking them over might have coincided with the discovery that she was not likely to have children. Something about her tubes being blocked, or twisted—Grant could not remember now. He had always avoided thinking about all that female apparatus. Or it might have been after her mother died. The dogs’ long legs and silky hair, their narrow, gentle, intransigent faces made a fine match for her when she took them out for walks. And Grant himself, in those days, landing his first job at

the university (his father-in-law's money welcome in spite of the political taint), might have seemed to some people to have been picked up on another of Fiona's eccentric whims, and groomed and tended and favored. Though he never understood this, fortunately, until much later.

She said to him, at suppertime on the day of the wandering-off at the supermarket, "You know what you're going to have to do with me, don't you? You're going to have to put me in that place. Shallowlake?"

Grant said, "Meadowlake. We're not at that stage yet."

"Shallowlake, Shillylake," she said, as if they were engaged in a playful competition. "Sillylake. Sillylake it is."

He held his head in his hands, his elbows on the table. He said that if they did think of it, it must be as something that need not be permanent. A kind of experimental treatment. A rest cure.

There was a rule that nobody could be admitted during the month of December. The holiday season had so many emotional pitfalls. So they made the twenty-minute drive in January. Before they reached the highway the country road dipped through a swampy hollow now completely frozen over. The swamp-oaks and maples threw their shadows like bars across the bright snow.

Fiona said, "Oh, remember."

Grant said, "I was thinking about that too."

"Only it was in the moonlight," she said.

She was talking about the time that they had gone out skiing at night under the full moon and over the black-striped snow, in this place that you could get into only in the depths of winter. They had heard the branches cracking in the cold.

So if she could remember that so vividly and correctly, could there really be so much the matter with her?

It was all he could do not to turn around and drive home.

There was another rule which the supervisor explained to him. New residents were not to be visited during the first thirty days. Most peo-

ple needed that time to get settled in. Before the rule had been put in place, there had been pleas and tears and tantrums, even from those who had come in willingly. Around the third or fourth day they would start lamenting and begging to be taken home. And some relatives could be susceptible to that, so you would have people being carted home who would not get on there any better than they had before. Six months later or sometimes only a few weeks later, the whole upsetting hassle would have to be gone through again.

"Whereas we find," the supervisor said, "we find that if they're left on their own they usually end up happy as clams. You have to practically lure them into a bus to take a trip to town. The same with a visit home. It's perfectly okay to take them home then, visit for an hour or two—they're the ones that'll worry about getting back in time for supper. Meadowlake's their home then. Of course, that doesn't apply to the ones on the second floor, we can't let them go. It's too difficult, and they don't know where they are anyway."

"My wife isn't going to be on the second floor," Grant said.

"No," said the supervisor thoughtfully. "I just like to make everything clear at the outset."

They had gone over to Meadowlake a few times several years ago, to visit Mr. Farquar, the old bachelor farmer who had been their neighbor. He had lived by himself in a drafty brick house unaltered since the early years of the century, except for the addition of a refrigerator and a television set. He had paid Grant and Fiona unannounced but well-spaced visits and, as well as local matters, he liked to discuss books he had been reading—about the Crimean War or Polar explorations or the history of firearms. But after he went to Meadowlake he would talk only about the routines of the place, and they got the idea that their visits, though gratifying, were a social burden for him. And Fiona in particular hated the smell of urine and bleach that hung about, hated the perfunctory bouquets of plastic flowers in niches in the dim, low-ceilinged corridors.

Now that building was gone, though it had dated only from the fifties. Just as Mr. Farquar's house was gone, replaced by a gimcrack sort

of castle that was the weekend home of some people from Toronto. The new Meadowlake was an airy, vaulted building whose air was faintly pleasantly pine-scented. Profuse and genuine greenery sprouted out of giant crocks.

Nevertheless, it was the old building that Grant would find himself picturing Fiona in during the long month he had to get through without seeing her. It was the longest month of his life, he thought—longer than the month he had spent with his mother visiting relatives in Lanark County, when he was thirteen, and longer than the month that Jacqui Adams spent on holiday with her family, near the beginning of their affair. He phoned Meadowlake every day and hoped that he would get the nurse whose name was Kristy. She seemed a little amused at his constancy, but she would give him a fuller report than any other nurse he got stuck with.

Fiona had caught a cold, but that was not unusual for newcomers.

“Like when your kids start school,” Kristy said. “There’s a whole bunch of new germs they’re exposed to, and for a while they just catch everything.”

Then the cold got better. She was off the antibiotics, and she didn’t seem as confused as she had been when she came in. (This was the first time Grant had heard about either the antibiotics or the confusion.) Her appetite was pretty good, and she seemed to enjoy sitting in the sun-room. She seemed to enjoy watching television.

One of the things that had been so intolerable about the old Meadowlake had been the way the television was on everywhere, overwhelming your thoughts or conversation wherever you chose to sit down. Some of the inmates (that was what he and Fiona called them then, not residents) would raise their eyes to it, some talked back to it, but most just sat and meekly endured its assault. In the new building, as far as he could recall, the television was in a separate sitting room, or in the bedrooms. You could make a choice to watch it.

So Fiona must have made a choice. To watch what?

During the years that they had lived in this house, he and Fiona had watched quite a bit of television together. They had spied on the lives of every beast or reptile or insect or sea creature that a camera was able

to reach, and they had followed the plots of what seemed like dozens of rather similar fine nineteenth-century novels. They had slid into an infatuation with an English comedy about life in a department store and had watched so many reruns that they knew the dialogue by heart. They mourned the disappearance of actors who died in real life or went off to other jobs, then welcomed those same actors back as the characters were born again. They watched the floorwalker's hair going from black to gray and finally back to black, the cheap sets never changing. But these, too, faded; eventually the sets and the blackest hair faded as if dust from the London streets was getting in under the elevator doors, and there was a sadness about this that seemed to affect Grant and Fiona more than any of the tragedies on *Masterpiece Theatre*, so they gave up watching before the final end.

Fiona was making some friends, Kristy said. She was definitely coming out of her shell.

What shell was that? Grant wanted to ask, but checked himself, to remain in Kristy's good graces.

If anybody phoned, he let the message go onto the machine. The people they saw socially, occasionally, were not close neighbors but people who lived around the countryside, who were retired, as they were, and who often went away without notice. The first years that they had lived here Grant and Fiona had stayed through the winter. A country winter was a new experience, and they had plenty to do, fixing up the house. Then they had gotten the idea that they too should travel while they could, and they had gone to Greece, to Australia, to Costa Rica. People would think that they were away on some such trip at present.

He skied for exercise but never went as far as the swamp. He skied around and around in the field behind the house as the sun went down and left the sky pink over a countryside that seemed to be bound by waves of blue-edged ice. He counted off the times he went round the field, and then he came back to the darkening house, turning the television news on while he got his supper. They had usually prepared supper together. One of them made the drinks and the other the fire, and they talked about his work (he was writing a study of legendary Norse

wolves and particularly of the great Fenris wolf who swallows up Odin at the end of the world) and about whatever Fiona was reading and what they had been thinking during their close but separate day. This was their time of liveliest intimacy, though there was also, of course, the five or ten minutes of physical sweetness just after they got into bed—something that did not often end up in sex but reassured them that sex was not over yet.

In a dream Grant showed a letter to one of his colleagues whom he had thought of as a friend. The letter was from the roommate of a girl he had not thought of for a while. Its style was sanctimonious and hostile, threatening in a whining way—he put the writer down as a latent lesbian. The girl herself was someone he had parted from decently, and it seemed unlikely that she would want to make a fuss, let alone try to kill herself, which was what the letter was apparently, elaborately, trying to tell him.

The colleague was one of those husbands and fathers who had been among the first to throw away their neckties and leave home to spend every night on a floor mattress with a bewitching young mistress, coming to their offices, their classes, bedraggled and smelling of dope and incense. But now he took a dim view of such shenanigans, and Grant recollected that he had in fact married one of those girls, and that she had taken to giving dinner parties and having babies, just as wives used to do.

“I wouldn’t laugh,” he said to Grant, who did not think he had been laughing. “And if I were you I’d try to prepare Fiona.”

So Grant went off to find Fiona in Meadowlake—the old Meadowlake—and got into a lecture theater instead. Everybody was waiting there for him to teach his class. And sitting in the last, highest row was a flock of cold-eyed young women all in black robes, all in mourning, who never took their bitter stares off him and conspicuously did not write down, or care about, anything he was saying.

Fiona was in the first row, untroubled. She had transformed the lecture room into the sort of corner she was always finding at a party—some high-and-dry spot where she drank wine with mineral water, and

smoked ordinary cigarettes and told funny stories about her dogs. Holding out there against the tide, with some people who were like herself, as if the dramas that were being played out in other corners, in bedrooms and on the dark verandah, were nothing but childish comedy. As if chastity was chic, and reticence a blessing.

"Oh, phooey," Fiona said. "Girls that age are always going around talking about how they'll kill themselves."

But it wasn't enough for her to say that—in fact, it rather chilled him. He was afraid that she was wrong, that something terrible had happened, and he saw what she could not—that the black ring was thickening, drawing in, all around his windpipe, all around the top of the room.

He hauled himself out of the dream and set about separating what was real from what was not.

There had been a letter, and the word "RAT" had appeared in black paint on his office door, and Fiona, on being told that a girl had suffered from a bad crush on him, had said pretty much what she said in the dream. The colleague hadn't come into it, the blackrobed women had never appeared in his classroom, and nobody had committed suicide. Grant hadn't been disgraced, in fact he had got off easily when you thought of what might have happened just a couple of years later. But word got around. Cold shoulders became conspicuous. They had few Christmas invitations and spent New Year's Eve alone. Grant got drunk, and without its being required of him—also, thank God, without making the error of a confession—he promised Fiona a new life.

The shame he felt then was the shame of being duped, of not having noticed the change that was going on. And not one woman had made him aware of it. There had been the change in the past when so many women so suddenly became available—or it seemed that way to him—and now this new change, when they were saying that what had happened was not what they had had in mind at all. They had collaborated because they were helpless and bewildered, and they had been injured by the whole thing, rather than delighted. Even when they had taken the initiative they had done so only because the cards were stacked against them.

Nowhere was there any acknowledgment that the life of a philanthropist (if that was what Grant had to call himself—he who had not had half as many conquests or complications as the man who had reproached him in his dream) involved acts of kindness and generosity and even sacrifice. Not in the beginning, perhaps, but at least as things went on. Many times he had catered to a woman's pride, to her fragility, by offering more affection—or a rougher passion—than anything he really felt. All so that he could now find himself accused of wounding and exploiting and destroying self-esteem. And of deceiving Fiona—as of course he had deceived her—but would it have been better if he had done as others had done with their wives and left her?

He had never thought of such a thing. He had never stopped making love to Fiona in spite of disturbing demands elsewhere. He had not stayed away from her for a single night. No making up elaborate stories in order to spend a weekend in San Francisco or in a tent on Manitoulin Island. He had gone easy on the dope and the drink and he had continued to publish papers, serve on committees, make progress in his career. He had never had any intention of throwing up work and marriage and taking to the country to practice carpentry or keep bees.

But something like that had happened after all. He took an early retirement with a reduced pension. The cardiologist had died, after some bewildered and stoical time alone in the big house, and Fiona had inherited both that property and the farmhouse where her father had grown up, in the country near Georgian Bay. She gave up her job, as a hospital coordinator of volunteer services (in that everyday world, as she said, where people actually had troubles that were not related to drugs or sex or intellectual squabbles). A new life was a new life.

Boris and Natasha had died by this time. One of them got sick and died first—Grant forgot which one—and then the other died, more or less out of sympathy.

He and Fiona worked on the house. They got cross-country skis. They were not very sociable, but they gradually made some friends. There were no more hectic flirtations. No bare female toes creeping up under a man's pants leg at a dinner party. No more loose wives.

Just in time, Grant was able to think, when the sense of injustice

wore down. The feminists and perhaps the sad silly girl herself and his cowardly so-called friends had pushed him out just in time. Out of a life that was in fact getting to be more trouble than it was worth. And that might eventually have cost him Fiona.

On the morning of the day when he was to go back to Meadowlake for the first visit, Grant woke early. He was full of a solemn tingling, as in the old days on the morning of his first planned meeting with a new woman. The feeling was not precisely sexual. (Later, when the meetings had become routine, that was all it was.) There was an expectation of discovery, almost a spiritual expansion. Also timidity, humility, alarm.

He left home too early. Visitors were not allowed before two o'clock. He did not want to sit out in the parking lot, waiting, so he made himself turn the car in a wrong direction.

There had been a thaw. Plenty of snow was left, but the dazzling hard landscape of earlier winter had crumbled. These pocked heaps under a gray sky looked like refuse in the fields.

In the town near Meadowlake he found a florist's shop and bought a large bouquet. He had never presented flowers to Fiona before. Or to anyone else. He entered the building feeling like a hopeless lover or a guilty husband in a cartoon.

"Wow. Narcissus this early," Kristy said. "You must've spent a fortune." She went along the hall ahead of him and snapped on the light in a closet, or sort of kitchen, where she searched for a vase. She was a heavy young woman who looked as if she had given up in every department except her hair. That was blond and voluminous. All the puffed-up luxury of a cocktail waitress's style, or a stripper's, on top of such a workaday face and body.

"There, now," she said, and nodded him down the hall. "Name's right on the door."

So it was, on a nameplate decorated with bluebirds. He wondered whether to knock, and did, then opened the door and called her name.

She wasn't there. The closet door was closed, the bed smoothed.

Nothing on the bedside table, except a box of Kleenex and a glass of water. Not a single photograph or picture of any kind, not a book or a magazine. Perhaps you had to keep those in a cupboard.

He went back to the nurses' station, or reception desk, or whatever it was. Kristy said "No?" with a surprise that he thought perfunctory.

He hesitated, holding the flowers. She said, "Okay, okay—let's set the bouquet down here." Sighing, as if he was a backward child on his first day at school, she led him along a hall, into the light of the huge sky windows in the large central space, with its cathedral ceiling. Some people were sitting along the walls, in easy chairs, others at tables in the middle of the carpeted floor. None of them looked too bad. Old—some of them incapacitated enough to need wheelchairs—but decent. There used to be some unnerving sights when he and Fiona went to visit Mr. Farquar. Whiskers on old women's chins, somebody with a bulged-out eye like a rotted plum. Dribblers, head wagglers, mad chatterers. Now it looked as if there'd been some weeding out of the worst cases. Or perhaps drugs, surgery had come into use, perhaps there were ways of treating disfigurement, as well as verbal and other kinds of incontinence—ways that hadn't existed even those few years ago.

There was, however, a very disconsolate woman sitting at the piano, picking away with one finger and never achieving a tune. Another woman, staring out from behind a coffee urn and a stack of plastic cups, looked bored to stone. But she had to be an employee—she wore a pale-green pants outfit like Kristy's.

"See?" said Kristy in a softer voice. "You just go up and say hello and try not to startle her. Remember she may not— Well. Just go ahead."

He saw Fiona in profile, sitting close up to one of the card tables, but not playing. She looked a little puffy in the face, the flab on one cheek hiding the corner of her mouth, in a way it hadn't done before. She was watching the play of the man she sat closest to. He held his cards tilted so that she could see them. When Grant got near the table she looked up. They all looked up—all the players at the table looked up, with displeasure. Then they immediately looked down at their cards, as if to ward off any intrusion.

But Fiona smiled her lopsided, abashed, sly, and charming smile and pushed back her chair and came round to him, putting her fingers to her mouth.

"Bridge," she whispered. "Deadly serious. They're quite rabid about it." She drew him towards the coffee table, chatting. "I can remember being like that for a while at college. My friends and I would cut class and sit in the common room and smoke and play like cutthroats. One's name was Phoebe, I don't remember the others."

"Phoebe Hart," Grant said. He pictured the little hollow-chested, black-eyed girl, who was probably dead by now. Wreathed in smoke, Fiona and Phoebe and those others, rapt as witches.

"You knew her too?" said Fiona, directing her smile now towards the stone-faced woman. "Can I get you anything? A cup of tea? I'm afraid the coffee isn't up to much here."

Grant never drank tea.

He could not throw his arms around her. Something about her voice and smile, familiar as they were, something about the way she seemed to be guarding the players and even the coffee woman from him—as well as him from their displeasure—made that not possible.

"I brought you some flowers," he said. "I thought they'd do to brighten up your room. I went to your room, but you weren't there."

"Well, no," she said. "I'm here."

Grant said, "You've made a new friend." He nodded towards the man she'd been sitting next to. At this moment that man looked up at Fiona and she turned, either because of what Grant had said or because she felt the look at her back.

"It's just Aubrey," she said. "The funny thing is I knew him years and years ago. He worked in the store. The hardware store where my grandpa used to shop. He and I were always kidding around and he could not get up the nerve to ask me out. Till the very last weekend and he took me to a ball game. But when it was over my grandpa showed up to drive me home. I was up visiting for the summer. Visiting my grandparents—they lived on a farm."

"Fiona. I know where your grandparents lived. It's where we live. Lived."

“Really?” she said, not paying full attention because the cardplayer was sending her his look, which was not one of supplication but command. He was a man of about Grant’s age, or a little older. Thick coarse white hair fell over his forehead, and his skin was leathery but pale, yellowish-white like an old wrinkled-up kid glove. His long face was dignified and melancholy, and he had something of the beauty of a powerful, discouraged, elderly horse. But where Fiona was concerned he was not discouraged.

“I better go back,” Fiona said, a blush spotting her newly fattened face. “He thinks he can’t play without me sitting there. It’s silly, I hardly know the game anymore. I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse me.”

“Will you be through soon?”

“Oh, we should be. It depends. If you go and ask that grim-looking lady nicely she’ll get you some tea.”

“I’m fine,” Grant said.

“So I’ll leave you then, you can entertain yourself? It must all seem strange to you, but you’ll be surprised how soon you get used to it. You’ll get to know who everybody is. Except that some of them are pretty well off in the clouds, you know—you can’t expect them all to get to know who you are.”

She slipped back into her chair and said something into Aubrey’s ear. She tapped her fingers across the back of his hand.

Grant went in search of Kristy and met her in the hall. She was pushing a cart on which there were pitchers of apple juice and grape juice.

“Just one sec,” she said to him, as she stuck her head through a doorway. “Apple juice in here? Grape juice? Cookies?”

He waited while she filled two plastic glasses and took them into the room. Then she came back and put two arrowroot cookies on paper plates.

“Well?” she said. “Aren’t you glad to see her participating and everything?”

Grant said, “Does she even know who I am?”

He could not decide. She could have been playing a joke. It would not be unlike her. She had given herself away by that little pretense at the end, talking to him as if she thought perhaps he was a new resident.

If that was what she was pretending. If it was a pretense.

But would she not have run after him and laughed at him then, once the joke was over? She would not have just gone back to the game, surely, and pretended to forget about him. That would have been too cruel.

Kristy said, "You just caught her at sort of a bad moment. Involved in the game."

"She's not even playing," he said.

"Well, but her friend's playing. Aubrey."

"So who is Aubrey?"

"That's who he is. Aubrey. Her friend. Would you like a juice?"

Grant shook his head.

"Oh, look," said Kristy. "They get these attachments. That takes over for a while. Best buddy sort of thing. It's kind of a phase."

"You mean she really might not know who I am?"

"She might not. Not today. Then tomorrow—you never know, do you? Things change back and forth all the time and there's nothing you can do about it. You'll see the way it is once you've been coming here for a while. You'll learn not to take it all so serious. Learn to take it day by day."

Day by day. But things really didn't change back and forth, and he didn't get used to the way they were. Fiona was the one who seemed to get used to him, but only as some persistent visitor who took a special interest in her. Or perhaps even as a nuisance who must be prevented, according to her old rules of courtesy, from realizing that he was one. She treated him with a distracted, social sort of kindness that was successful in holding him back from the most obvious, the most necessary question. He could not demand of her whether she did or did not remember him as her husband of nearly fifty years. He got the impression that she would be embarrassed by such a question—embarrassed not for herself but for him. She would have laughed in a fluttery way and mortified him with

her politeness and bewilderment, and somehow she would have ended up not saying either yes or no. Or she would have said either one in a way that gave not the least satisfaction.

Kristy was the only nurse he could talk to. Some of the others treated the whole thing as a joke. One tough old stick laughed in his face. "That Aubrey and that Fiona? They've really got it bad, haven't they?"

Kristy told him that Aubrey had been the local representative of a company that sold weed killer—"and all that kind of stuff"—to farmers.

"He was a fine person," she said, and Grant did not know whether this meant that Aubrey was honest and openhanded and kind to people, or that he was well spoken and well dressed and drove a good car. Probably both.

And then when he was not very old or even retired—she said—he had suffered some unusual kind of damage.

"His wife is the one takes care of him usually. She takes care of him at home. She just put him in here on temporary care so she could get a break. Her sister wanted her to go to Florida. See, she's had a hard time, you wouldn't ever have expected a man like him— They just went on a holiday somewhere and he got something, like some bug, that gave him a terrible high fever? And it put him in a coma and left him like he is now."

He asked her about these affections between residents. Did they ever go too far? He was able now to take a tone of indulgence that he hoped would save him from any lectures.

"Depends what you mean," she said. She kept writing in her record book while deciding how to answer him. When she finished what she was writing she looked up at him with a frank smile.

"The trouble we have in here, it's funny, it's often with some of the ones that haven't been friendly with each other at all. They maybe won't even know each other, beyond knowing, like, is it a man or a woman? You'd think it'd be the old guys trying to crawl in bed with the old women, but you know half the time it's the other way round. Old women going after the old men. Could be they're not so wore out, I guess."

Then she stopped smiling, as if she was afraid she had said too much, or spoken callously.

"Don't take me wrong," she said. "I don't mean Fiona. Fiona is a lady."

Well, what about Aubrey? Grant felt like saying. But he remembered that Aubrey was in a wheelchair.

"She's a real lady," Kristy said, in a tone so decisive and reassuring that Grant was not reassured. He had in his mind a picture of Fiona, in one of her long eyelet-trimmed blue-ribboned nightgowns, teasingly lifting the covers of an old man's bed.

"Well, I sometimes wonder—" he said.

Kristy said sharply, "You wonder what?"

"I wonder whether she isn't putting on some kind of a charade."

"A what?" said Kristy.

Most afternoons the pair could be found at the card table. Aubrey had large, thick-fingered hands. It was difficult for him to manage his cards. Fiona shuffled and dealt for him and sometimes moved quickly to straighten a card that seemed to be slipping from his grasp. Grant would watch from across the room her darting move and quick, laughing apology. He could see Aubrey's husbandly frown as a wisp of her hair touched his cheek. Aubrey preferred to ignore her as long as she stayed close.

But let her smile her greeting at Grant, let her push back her chair and get up to offer him tea—showing that she had accepted his right to be there and possibly felt a slight responsibility for him—and Aubrey's face took on its look of sombre consternation. He would let the cards slide from his fingers and fall on the floor, to spoil the game.

So that Fiona had to get busy and put things right.

If they weren't at the bridge table they might be walking along the halls, Aubrey hanging on to the railing with one hand and clutching Fiona's arm or shoulder with the other. The nurses thought that it was a marvel, the way she had got him out of his wheelchair. Though for longer trips—to the conservatory at one end of the building or the television room at the other—the wheelchair was called for.

The television seemed to be always turned to the sports channel and

Aubrey would watch any sport, but his favorite appeared to be golf. Grant didn't mind watching that with them. He sat down a few chairs away. On the large screen a small group of spectators and commentators followed the players around the peaceful green, and at appropriate moments broke into a formal sort of applause. But there was silence everywhere as the player made his swing and the ball took its lonely, appointed journey across the sky. Aubrey and Fiona and Grant and possibly others sat and held their breaths, and then Aubrey's breath broke out first, expressing satisfaction or disappointment. Fiona's chimed in on the same note a moment later.

In the conservatory there was no such silence. The pair found themselves a seat among the most lush and thick and tropical-looking plants—a bower, if you like—which Grant had just enough self-control to keep from penetrating. Mixed in with the rustle of the leaves and the sound of splashing water was Fiona's soft talk and her laughter.

Then some sort of chortle. Which of them could it be?

Perhaps neither—perhaps it came from one of the impudent flashy-looking birds who inhabited the corner cages.

Aubrey could talk, though his voice probably didn't sound the way it used to. He seemed to say something now—a couple of thick syllables. *Take care. He's here. My love.*

On the blue bottom of the fountain's pool lay some wishing coins. Grant had never seen anybody actually throwing money in. He stared at these nickels and dimes and quarters, wondering if they had been glued to the tiles—another feature of the building's encouraging decoration.

Teenagers at the baseball game, sitting at the top of the bleachers out of the way of the boy's friends. A couple of inches of bare wood between them, darkness falling, quick chill of the evening late in the summer. The skittering of their hands, the shift of haunches, eyes never lifted from the field. He'll take off his jacket, if he's wearing one, to lay it around her narrow shoulders. Underneath it he can pull her closer to him, press his spread fingers into her soft arm.

Not like today when any kid would probably be into her pants on the first date.

Fiona's skinny soft arm. Teenage lust astonishing her and flashing along all the nerves of her tender new body, as the night thickens beyond the lighted dust of the game.

Meadowlake was short on mirrors, so he did not have to catch sight of himself stalking and prowling. But every once in a while it came to him how foolish and pathetic and perhaps unhinged he must look, trailing around after Fiona and Aubrey. And having no luck in confronting her, or him. Less and less sure of what right he had to be on the scene but unable to withdraw. Even at home, while he worked at his desk or cleaned up the house or shovelled snow when necessary, some ticking metronome in his mind was fixed on Meadowlake, on his next visit. Sometimes he seemed to himself like a mulish boy conducting a hopeless courtship, sometimes like one of those wretches who follow celebrated women through the streets, convinced that one day these women will turn around and recognize their love.

He made a great effort, and cut his visits down to Wednesdays and Saturdays. Also he set himself to observing other things about the place, as if he was a sort of visitor at large, a person doing an inspection or a social study.

Saturdays had a holiday bustle and tension. Families arrived in clusters. Mothers were usually in charge, they were like cheerful but insistent sheepdogs herding the men and children. Only the smallest children were without apprehension. They noticed right away the green and white squares on the hall floors and picked one color to walk on, the other to jump over. The bolder ones might try to hitch rides on the back of wheelchairs. Some persisted in these tricks in spite of scolding, and had to be removed to the car. And how happily, then, how readily, some older child or father volunteered to do the removing, and thus opt out of the visit.

It was the women who kept the conversation afloat. Men seemed cowed by the situation, teenagers affronted. Those being visited rode in a wheelchair or stumped along with a cane, or walked stiffly, unaided, at the procession's head, proud of the turnout but somewhat blank-eyed,

or desperately babbling, under the stress of it. And now surrounded by a variety of outsiders these insiders did not look like such regular people after all. Female chins might have had their bristles shaved to the roots and bad eyes might be hidden by patches or dark lenses, inappropriate utterances might be controlled by medication, but some glaze remained, a haunted rigidity—as if people were content to become memories of themselves, final photographs.

Grant understood better now how Mr. Farquar must have felt. People here—even the ones who did not participate in any activities but sat around watching the doors or looking out the windows—were living a busy life in their heads (not to mention the life of their bodies, the portentous shifts in their bowels, the stabs and twinges everywhere along the line), and that was a life that in most cases could not very well be described or alluded to in front of visitors. All they could do was wheel or somehow propel themselves about and hope to come up with something that could be displayed or talked about.

There was the conservatory to be shown off, and the big television screen. Fathers thought that was really something. Mothers said the ferns were gorgeous. Soon everybody sat down around the little tables and ate ice cream—refused only by the teenagers, who were dying of disgust. Women wiped away the dribble from shivery old chins and men looked the other way.

There must be some satisfaction in this ritual, and perhaps even the teenagers would be glad, one day, that they had come. Grant was no expert on families.

No children or grandchildren appeared to visit Aubrey, and since they could not play cards—the tables being taken over for the ice cream parties—he and Fiona stayed clear of the Saturday parade. The conservatory was far too popular then for any of their intimate conversations.

Those might be going on, of course, behind Fiona's closed door. Grant could not manage to knock, though he stood there for some time staring at the Disney birds with an intense, a truly malignant dislike.

Or they might be in Aubrey's room. But he did not know where that was. The more he explored this place, the more corridors and seating

spaces and ramps he discovered, and in his wanderings he was still apt to get lost. He would take a certain picture or chair as a landmark, and the next week whatever he had chosen seemed to have been placed somewhere else. He didn't like to mention this to Kristy, lest she think he was suffering some mental dislocations of his own. He supposed this constant change and rearranging might be for the sake of the residents—to make their daily exercise more interesting.

He did not mention either that he sometimes saw a woman at a distance that he thought was Fiona, but then thought it couldn't be, because of the clothes the woman was wearing. When had Fiona ever gone in for bright flowered blouses and electric blue slacks? One Saturday he looked out a window and saw Fiona—it must be her—wheeling Aubrey along one of the paved paths now cleared of snow and ice, and she was wearing a silly woolly hat and a jacket with swirls of blue and purple, the sort of thing he had seen on local women at the supermarket.

The fact must be that they didn't bother to sort out the wardrobes of the women who were roughly the same size. And counted on the women not recognizing their own clothes anyway.

They had cut her hair, too. They had cut away her angelic halo. On a Wednesday, when everything was more normal and card games were going on again, and the women in the Crafts Room were making silk flowers or costumed dolls without anybody hanging around to pester or admire them, and when Aubrey and Fiona were again in evidence so that it was possible for Grant to have one of his brief and friendly and maddening conversations with his wife, he said to her, "Why did they chop off your hair?"

Fiona put her hands up to her head, to check.

"Why—I never missed it," she said.

He thought he should find out what went on on the second floor, where they kept the people who, as Kristy said, had really lost it. Those who walked around down here holding conversations with themselves or throwing out odd questions at a passerby ("Did I leave my sweater in the church?") had apparently lost only some of it.

Not enough to qualify.

There were stairs, but the doors at the top were locked and only the staff had the keys. You could not get into the elevator unless somebody buzzed for it to open, from behind the desk.

What did they do, after they lost it?

"Some just sit," said Kristy. "Some sit and cry. Some try to holler the house down. You don't really want to know."

Sometimes they got it back.

"You go in their rooms for a year and they don't know you from Adam. Then one day, it's oh, hi, when are we going home. All of a sudden they're absolutely back to normal again."

But not for long.

"You think, wow, back to normal. And then they're gone again." She snapped her fingers. "Like so."

In the town where he used to work there was a bookstore that he and Fiona had visited once or twice a year. He went back there by himself. He didn't feel like buying anything, but he had made a list and picked out a couple of the books on it, and then bought another book that he noticed by chance. It was about Iceland. A book of nineteenth-century watercolors made by a lady traveller to Iceland.

Fiona had never learned her mother's language and she had never shown much respect for the stories that it preserved—the stories that Grant had taught and written about, and still did write about, in his working life. She referred to their heroes as "old Njal" or "old Snorri." But in the last few years she had developed an interest in the country itself and looked at travel guides. She read about William Morris's trip, and Auden's. She didn't really plan to travel there. She said the weather was too dreadful. Also—she said—there ought to be one place you thought about and knew about and maybe longed for—but never did get to see.

When Grant first started teaching Anglo-Saxon and Nordic Literature he got the regular sort of students in his classes. But after a few years he noticed a change. Married women started going back to school. Not with the idea of qualifying for a better job or for any job but simply to give themselves something more interesting to think about than their usual

housework and hobbies. To enrich their lives. And perhaps it followed naturally that the men who taught them these things would become part of the enrichment, that these men would seem to these women more mysterious and desirable than the men they still cooked for and slept with.

The studies chosen were usually Psychology or Cultural History or English Literature. Archaeology or Linguistics was picked sometimes but dropped when it turned out to be heavy going. Those who signed up for Grant's courses might have a Scandinavian background, like Fiona, or they might have learned something about Norse mythology from Wagner or historical novels. There were also a few who thought he was teaching a Celtic language and for whom everything Celtic had a mystic allure.

He spoke to such aspirants fairly roughly from his side of the desk.

"If you want to learn a pretty language, go and learn Spanish. Then you can use it if you go to Mexico."

Some took his warning and drifted away. Others seemed to be moved in a personal way by his demanding tone. They worked with a will and brought into his office, into his regulated, satisfactory life, the great surprising bloom of their mature female compliance, their tremulous hope of approval.

He chose the woman named Jacqui Adams. She was the opposite of Fiona—short, cushiony, dark-eyed, effusive. A stranger to irony. The affair lasted for a year, until her husband was transferred. When they were saying good-bye, in her car, she began to shake uncontrollably. It was as if she had hypothermia. She wrote to him a few times, but he found the tone of her letters overwrought and could not decide how to answer. He let the time for answering slip away while he became magically and unexpectedly involved with a girl who was young enough to be her daughter.

For another and more dizzying development had taken place while he was busy with Jacqui. Young girls with long hair and sandalled feet were coming into his office and all but declaring themselves ready for sex. The cautious approaches, the tender intimations of feeling required with Jacqui were out the window. A whirlwind hit him, as it did many

others, wish becoming action in a way that made him wonder if there wasn't something missed. But who had time for regrets? He heard of simultaneous liaisons, savage and risky encounters. Scandals burst wide open, with high and painful drama all round but a feeling that somehow it was better so. There were reprisals—there were firings. But those fired went off to teach at smaller, more tolerant colleges or Open Learning Centers, and many wives left behind got over the shock and took up the costumes, the sexual nonchalance of the girls who had tempted their men. Academic parties, which used to be so predictable, became a mine-field. An epidemic had broken out, it was spreading like the Spanish flu. Only this time people ran after contagion, and few between sixteen and sixty seemed willing to be left out.

Fiona appeared to be quite willing, however. Her mother was dying, and her experience in the hospital led her from her routine work in the registrar's office into her new job. Grant himself did not go overboard, at least in comparison with some people around him. He never let another woman get as close to him as Jacqui had been. What he felt was mainly a gigantic increase in well-being. A tendency to pudginess that he had had since he was twelve years old disappeared. He ran up steps two at a time. He appreciated as never before a pageant of torn clouds and winter sunset seen from his office window, the charm of antique lamps glowing between his neighbors' living-room curtains, the cries of children in the park at dusk, unwilling to leave the hill where they'd been tobogganing. Come summer, he learned the names of flowers. In his classroom, after coaching by his nearly voiceless mother-in-law (her affliction was cancer of the throat), he risked reciting and then translating the majestic and gory ode, the head-ransom, the Hofuolausn, composed to honor King Eric Blood-axe by the skald whom that king had condemned to death. (And who was then, by the same king—and by the power of poetry—set free.) All applauded—even the peaceniks in the class whom he'd cheerfully taunted earlier, asking if they would like to wait in the hall. Driving home that day or maybe another he found an absurd and blasphemous quotation running around in his head.

And so he increased in wisdom and stature—

And in favor with God and man.

That embarrassed him at the time and gave him a superstitious chill. As it did yet. But so long as nobody knew, it seemed not unnatural.

He took the book with him, the next time he went to Meadowlake. It was a Wednesday. He went looking for Fiona at the card tables and did not see her.

A woman called out to him, "She's not here. She's sick." Her voice sounded self-important and excited—pleased with herself for having recognized him when he knew nothing about her. Perhaps also pleased with all she knew about Fiona, about Fiona's life here, thinking it was maybe more than he knew.

"He's not here either," she said.

Grant went to find Kristy.

"Nothing, really," she said, when he asked what was the matter with Fiona. "She's just having a day in bed today, just a bit of an upset."

Fiona was sitting straight up in the bed. He hadn't noticed, the few times that he had been in this room, that this was a hospital bed and could be cranked up in such a way. She was wearing one of her high-necked maidenly gowns, and her face had a pallor that was not like cherry blossoms but like flour paste.

Aubrey was beside her in his wheelchair, pushed as close to the bed as it could get. Instead of the nondescript open-necked shirts he usually wore, he was wearing a jacket and a tie. His natty-looking tweed hat was resting on the bed. He looked as if he had been out on important business.

To see his lawyer? His banker? To make arrangements with the funeral director?

Whatever he'd been doing, he looked worn out by it. He too was gray in the face.

They both looked up at Grant with a stony, grief-ridden apprehension that turned to relief, if not to welcome, when they saw who he was.

Not who they thought he'd be.

They were hanging on to each other's hands and they did not let go. The hat on the bed. The jacket and tie.

It wasn't that Aubrey had been out. It wasn't a question of where he'd been or whom he'd been to see. It was where he was going.

Grant set the book down on the bed beside Fiona's free hand.

"It's about Iceland," he said. "I thought maybe you'd like to look at it."

"Why, thank you," said Fiona. She didn't look at the book. He put her hand on it.

"Iceland," he said.

She said, "Ice-land." The first syllable managed to hold a tinkle of interest, but the second fell flat. Anyway, it was necessary for her to turn her attention back to Aubrey, who was pulling his great thick hand out of hers.

"What is it?" she said. "What is it, dear heart?"

Grant had never heard her use this flowery expression before.

"Oh, all right," she said. "Oh, here." And she pulled a handful of tissues from the box beside her bed.

Aubrey's problem was that he had begun to weep. His nose had started to run, and he was anxious not to turn into a sorry spectacle, especially in front of Grant.

"Here. Here," said Fiona. She would have tended to his nose herself and wiped his tears—and perhaps if they had been alone he would have let her do it. But with Grant there Aubrey would not permit it. He got hold of the Kleenex as well as he could and made a few awkward but lucky swipes at his face.

While he was occupied, Fiona turned to Grant.

"Do you by any chance have any influence around here?" she said in a whisper. "I've seen you talking to them—"

Aubrey made a noise of protest or weariness or disgust. Then his upper body pitched forward as if he wanted to throw himself against her. She scrambled half out of bed and caught him and held on to him. It seemed improper for Grant to help her, though of course he would have done so if he'd thought Aubrey was about to tumble to the floor.

"Hush," Fiona was saying. "Oh, honey. Hush. We'll get to see each other. We'll have to. I'll go and see you. You'll come and see me."

Aubrey made the same sound again with his face in her chest, and there was nothing Grant could decently do but get out of the room.

"I just wish his wife would hurry up and get here," Kristy said. "I wish she'd get him out of here and cut the agony short. We've got to start serving supper before long and how are we supposed to get her to swallow anything with him still hanging around?"

Grant said, "Should I stay?"

"What for? She's not sick, you know."

"To keep her company," he said.

Kristy shook her head.

"They have to get over these things on their own. They've got short memories usually. That's not always so bad."

Kristy was not hard-hearted. During the time he had known her Grant had found out some things about her life. She had four children. She did not know where her husband was but thought he might be in Alberta. Her younger boy's asthma was so bad that he would have died one night in January if she had not got him to the emergency ward in time. He was not on any illegal drugs, but she was not so sure about his brother.

To her, Grant and Fiona and Aubrey too must seem lucky. They had got through life without too much going wrong. What they had to suffer now that they were old hardly counted.

Grant left without going back to Fiona's room. He noticed that the wind was actually warm that day and the crows were making an uproar. In the parking lot a woman wearing a tartan pants suit was getting a folded-up wheelchair out of the trunk of her car.

The street he was driving down was called Black Hawks Lane. All the streets around were named for teams in the old National Hockey League. This was in an outlying section of the town near Meadowlake. He and Fiona had shopped in the town regularly but had not become familiar with any part of it except the main street.

The houses looked to have been built all around the same time, perhaps thirty or forty years ago. The streets were wide and curving and there were no sidewalks—recalling the time when it was thought unlikely that anybody would do much walking ever again. Friends of

Grant's and Fiona's had moved to places something like this when they began to have their children. They were apologetic about the move at first. They called it "going out to Barbecue Acres."

Young families still lived here. There were basketball hoops over garage doors and tricycles in the driveways. But some of the houses had gone downhill from the sort of family homes they were surely meant to be. The yards were marked by car tracks, the windows were plastered with tinfoil or hung with faded flags.

Rental housing. Young male tenants—single still, or single again.

A few properties seemed to have been kept up as well as possible by the people who had moved into them when they were new—people who hadn't had the money or perhaps hadn't felt the need to move on to someplace better. Shrubs had grown to maturity, pastel vinyl siding had done away with the problem of repainting. Neat fences or hedges gave the sign that the children in the houses had all grown up and gone away, and that their parents no longer saw the point of letting the yard be a common run-through for whatever new children were loose in the neighborhood.

The house that was listed in the phone book as belonging to Aubrey and his wife was one of these. The front walk was paved with flagstones and bordered by hyacinths that stood as stiff as china flowers, alternately pink and blue.

Fiona had not got over her sorrow. She did not eat at mealtimes, though she pretended to, hiding food in her napkin. She was being given a supplementary drink twice a day—someone stayed and watched while she swallowed it down. She got out of bed and dressed herself, but all she wanted to do then was sit in her room. She wouldn't have taken any exercise at all if Kristy or one of the other nurses, and Grant during visiting hours, had not walked her up and down in the corridors or taken her outside.

In the spring sunshine she sat, weeping weakly, on a bench by the wall. She was still polite—she apologized for her tears, and never argued with a suggestion or refused to answer a question. But she wept. Weeping had left her eyes raw-edged and dim. Her cardigan—if it was hers—would

be buttoned crookedly. She had not got to the stage of leaving her hair unbrushed or her nails uncleaned, but that might come soon.

Kristy said that her muscles were deteriorating, and that if she didn't improve soon they would put her on a walker.

"But you know once they get a walker they start to depend on it and they never walk much anymore, just get wherever it is they have to go."

"You'll have to work at her harder," she said to Grant. "Try and encourage her."

But Grant had no luck at that. Fiona seemed to have taken a dislike to him, though she tried to cover it up. Perhaps she was reminded, every time she saw him, of her last minutes with Aubrey, when she had asked him for help and he hadn't helped her.

He didn't see much point in mentioning their marriage, now.

She wouldn't go down the hall to where most of the same people were still playing cards. And she wouldn't go into the television room or visit the conservatory.

She said that she didn't like the big screen, it hurt her eyes. And the birds' noise was irritating and she wished they would turn the fountain off once in a while.

So far as Grant knew, she never looked at the book about Iceland, or at any of the other—surprisingly few—books that she had brought from home. There was a reading room where she would sit down to rest, choosing it probably because there was seldom anybody there, and if he took a book off the shelves she would allow him to read to her. He suspected that she did that because it made his company easier for her—she was able to shut her eyes and sink back into her own grief. Because if she let go of her grief even for a minute it would only hit her harder when she bumped into it again. And sometimes he thought she closed her eyes to hide a look of informed despair that it would not be good for him to see.

So he sat and read to her out of one of these old novels about chaste love, and lost-and-regained fortunes, that could have been the discards of some long-ago village or Sunday school library. There had been no attempt, apparently, to keep the contents of the reading room as up-to-date as most things in the rest of the building.

The covers of the books were soft, almost velvety, with designs of leaves and flowers pressed into them, so that they resembled jewelry boxes or chocolate boxes. That women—he supposed it would be women—could carry home like treasure.

The supervisor called him into her office. She said that Fiona was not thriving as they had hoped.

“Her weight is going down even with the supplement. We’re doing all we can for her.”

Grant said that he realized they were.

“The thing is, I’m sure you know, we don’t do any prolonged bed care on the first floor. We do it temporarily if someone isn’t feeling well, but if they get too weak to move around and be responsible we have to consider upstairs.”

He said he didn’t think that Fiona had been in bed that often.

“No. But if she can’t keep up her strength, she will be. Right now she’s borderline.”

He said that he had thought the second floor was for people whose minds were disturbed.

“That too,” she said.

He hadn’t remembered anything about Aubrey’s wife except the tartan suit he had seen her wearing in the parking lot. The tails of the jacket had flared open as she bent into the trunk of the car. He had got the impression of a trim waist and wide buttocks.

She was not wearing the tartan suit today. Brown belted slacks and a pink sweater. He was right about the waist—the tight belt showed she made a point of it. It might have been better if she hadn’t, since she bulged out considerably above and below.

She could be ten or twelve years younger than her husband. Her hair was short, curly, artificially reddened. She had blue eyes—a lighter blue than Fiona’s, a flat robin’s-egg or turquoise blue—slanted by a slight puffiness. And a good many wrinkles made more noticeable by a walnut-stain makeup. Or perhaps that was her Florida tan.

He said that he didn’t quite know how to introduce himself.

"I used to see your husband at Meadowlake. I'm a regular visitor there myself."

"Yes," said Aubrey's wife, with an aggressive movement of her chin.

"How is your husband doing?"

The "doing" was added on at the last moment. Normally he would have said, "How is your husband?"

"He's okay," she said.

"My wife and he struck up quite a close friendship."

"I heard about that."

"So. I wanted to talk to you about something if you had a minute."

"My husband did not try to start anything with your wife, if that's what you're getting at," she said. "He did not molest her in any way. He isn't capable of it and he wouldn't anyway. From what I heard it was the other way round."

Grant said, "No. That isn't it at all. I didn't come here with any complaints about anything."

"Oh," she said. "Well, I'm sorry. I thought you did."

That was all she was going to give by way of apology. And she didn't sound sorry. She sounded disappointed and confused.

"You better come in, then," she said. "It's blowing cold in through the door. It's not as warm out today as it looks."

So it was something of a victory for him even to get inside. He hadn't realized it would be as hard as this. He had expected a different sort of wife. A flustered homebody, pleased by an unexpected visit and flattered by a confidential tone.

She took him past the entrance to the living room, saying, "We'll have to sit in the kitchen where I can hear Aubrey." Grant caught sight of two layers of front-window curtains, both blue, one sheer and one silky, a matching blue sofa and a daunting pale carpet, various bright mirrors and ornaments.

Fiona had a word for those sort of swooping curtains—she said it like a joke, though the women she'd picked it up from used it seriously. Any room that Fiona fixed up was bare and bright—she would have been astonished to see so much fancy stuff crowded into such a small space. He could not think what that word was.

From a room off the kitchen—a sort of sunroom, though the blinds were drawn against the afternoon brightness—he could hear the sounds of television.

Aubrey. The answer to Fiona's prayers sat a few feet away, watching what sounded like a ball game. His wife looked in at him. She said, "You okay?" and partly closed the door.

"You might as well have a cup of coffee," she said to Grant.

He said, "Thanks."

"My son got him on the sports channel a year ago Christmas, I don't know what we'd do without it."

On the kitchen counters there were all sorts of contrivances and appliances—coffeemaker, food processor, knife sharpener, and some things Grant didn't know the names or uses of. All looked new and expensive, as if they had just been taken out of their wrappings, or were polished daily.

He thought it might be a good idea to admire things. He admired the coffeemaker she was using and said that he and Fiona had always meant to get one. This was absolutely untrue—Fiona had been devoted to a European contraption that made only two cups at a time.

"They gave us that," she said. "Our son and his wife. They live in Kamloops. B.C. They send us more stuff than we can handle. It wouldn't hurt if they would spend the money to come and see us instead."

Grant said philosophically, "I suppose they're busy with their own lives."

"They weren't too busy to go to Hawaii last winter. You could understand it if we had somebody else in the family, closer at hand. But he's the only one."

The coffee being ready, she poured it into two brown-and-green ceramic mugs that she took from the amputated branches of a ceramic tree trunk that sat on the table.

"People do get lonely," Grant said. He thought he saw his chance now. "If they're deprived of seeing somebody they care about, they do feel sad. Fiona, for instance. My wife."

"I thought you said you went and visited her."

"I do," he said. "That's not it."

Then he took the plunge, going on to make the request he'd come to make. Could she consider taking Aubrey back to Meadowlake maybe just one day a week, for a visit? It was only a drive of a few miles, surely it wouldn't prove too difficult. Or if she'd like to take the time off—Grant hadn't thought of this before and was rather dismayed to hear himself suggest it—then he himself could take Aubrey out there, he wouldn't mind at all. He was sure he could manage it. And she could use a break.

While he talked she moved her closed lips and her hidden tongue as if she was trying to identify some dubious flavor. She brought milk for his coffee, and a plate of ginger cookies.

"Homemade," she said as she set the plate down. There was challenge rather than hospitality in her tone. She said nothing more until she had sat down, poured milk into her coffee and stirred it.

Then she said no.

"No. I can't do that. And the reason is, I'm not going to upset him."

"Would it upset him?" Grant said earnestly.

"Yes, it would. It would. That's no way to do. Bringing him home and taking him back. Bringing him home and taking him back, that's just confusing him."

"But wouldn't he understand that it was just a visit? Wouldn't he get into the pattern of it?"

"He understands everything all right." She said this as if he had offered an insult to Aubrey. "But it's still an interruption. And then I've got to get him all ready and get him into the car, and he's a big man, he's not so easy to manage as you might think. I've got to maneuver him into the car and pack his chair along and all that and what for? If I go to all that trouble I'd prefer to take him someplace that was more fun."

"But even if I agreed to do it?" Grant said, keeping his tone hopeful and reasonable. "It's true, you shouldn't have the trouble."

"You couldn't," she said flatly. "You don't know him. You couldn't handle him. He wouldn't stand for you doing for him. All that bother and what would he get out of it?"

Grant didn't think he should mention Fiona again.

"It'd make more sense to take him to the mall," she said. "Where he could see kids and whatnot. If it didn't make him sore about his own two

grandsons he never gets to see. Or now the lake boats are starting to run again, he might get a charge out of going and watching that.”

She got up and fetched her cigarettes and lighter from the window above the sink.

“You smoke?” she said.

He said no thanks, though he didn’t know if a cigarette was being offered.

“Did you never? Or did you quit?”

“Quit,” he said.

“How long ago was that?”

He thought about it.

“Thirty years. No—more.”

He had decided to quit around the time he started up with Jacqui. But he couldn’t remember whether he quit first, and thought a big reward was coming to him for quitting, or thought that the time had come to quit, now that he had such a powerful diversion.

“I’ve quit quitting,” she said, lighting up. “Just made a resolution to quit quitting, that’s all.”

Maybe that was the reason for the wrinkles. Somebody—a woman—had told him that women who smoked developed a special set of fine facial wrinkles. But it could have been from the sun, or just the nature of her skin—her neck was noticeably wrinkled as well. Wrinkled neck, youthfully full and up-tilted breasts. Women of her age usually had these contradictions. The bad and good points, the genetic luck or lack of it, all mixed up together. Very few kept their beauty whole, though shadowy, as Fiona had done.

And perhaps that wasn’t even true. Perhaps he only thought that because he’d known Fiona when she was young. Perhaps to get that impression you had to have known a woman when she was young.

So when Aubrey looked at his wife did he see a high-school girl full of scorn and sass, with an intriguing tilt to her robin’s-egg blue eyes, pursing her fruity lips around a forbidden cigarette?

“So your wife’s depressed?” Aubrey’s wife said. “What’s your wife’s name? I forget.”

“It’s Fiona.”

"Fiona. And what's yours? I don't think I ever was told that."

Grant said, "It's Grant."

She stuck her hand out unexpectedly across the table.

"Hello, Grant. I'm Marian."

"So now we know each other's name," she said, "there's no point in not telling you straight out what I think. I don't know if he's still so stuck on seeing your—on seeing Fiona. Or not. I don't ask him and he's not telling me. Maybe just a passing fancy. But I don't feel like taking him back there in case it turns out to be more than that. I can't afford to risk it. I don't want him getting hard to handle. I don't want him upset and carrying on. I've got my hands full with him as it is. I don't have any help. It's just me here. I'm it."

"Did you ever consider—it *is* very hard for you—" Grant said—"did you ever consider his going in there for good?"

He had lowered his voice almost to a whisper, but she did not seem to feel a need to lower hers.

"No," she said. "I'm keeping him right here."

Grant said, "Well. That's very good and noble of you."

He hoped the word "noble" had not sounded sarcastic. He had not meant it to be.

"You think so?" she said. "Noble is not what I'm thinking about."

"Still. It's not easy."

"No, it isn't. But the way I am, I don't have much choice. If I put him in there I don't have the money to pay for him unless I sell the house. The house is what we own outright. Otherwise I don't have anything in the way of resources. I get the pension next year, and I'll have his pension and my pension, but even so I could not afford to keep him there and hang on to the house. And it means a lot to me, my house does."

"It's very nice," said Grant.

"Well, it's all right. I put a lot into it. Fixing it up and keeping it up."

"I'm sure you did. You do."

"I don't want to lose it."

"No."

"I'm not *going* to lose it."

"I see your point."

"The company left us high and dry," she said. "I don't know all the ins and outs of it, but basically he got shoved out. It ended up with them saying he owed them money and when I tried to find out what was what he just went on saying it's none of my business. What I think is he did something pretty stupid. But I'm not supposed to ask, so I shut up. You've been married. You are married. You know how it is. And in the middle of me finding out about this we're supposed to go on this trip with these people and can't get out of it. And on the trip he takes sick from this virus you never heard of and goes into a coma. So that pretty well gets *him* off the hook."

Grant said, "Bad luck."

"I don't mean exactly that he got sick on purpose. It just happened. He's not mad at me anymore and I'm not mad at him. It's just life."

"That's true."

"You can't beat life."

She flicked her tongue in a cat's businesslike way across her top lip, getting the cookie crumbs. "I sound like I'm quite the philosopher, don't I? They told me out there you used to be a university professor."

"Quite a while ago," Grant said.

"I'm not much of an intellectual," she said.

"I don't know how much I am, either."

"But I know when my mind's made up. And it's made up. I'm not going to let go of the house. Which means I'm keeping him here and I don't want him getting it in his head he wants to move anyplace else. It was probably a mistake putting him in there so I could get away, but I wasn't going to get another chance, so I took it. So. Now I know better."

She shook out another cigarette.

"I bet I know what you're thinking," she said. "You're thinking there's a mercenary type of a person."

"I'm not making judgments of that sort. It's your life."

"You bet it is."

He thought they should end on a more neutral note. So he asked her if her husband had worked in a hardware store in the summers, when he was going to school.

"I never heard about it," she said. "I wasn't raised here."

Driving home, he noticed that the swamp hollow that had been filled with snow and the formal shadows of tree trunks was now lighted up with skunk lilies. Their fresh, edible-looking leaves were the size of platters. The flowers sprang straight up like candle flames, and there were so many of them, so pure a yellow, that they set a light shooting up from the earth on this cloudy day. Fiona had told him that they generated a heat of their own as well. Rummaging around in one of her concealed pockets of information, she said that you were supposed to be able to put your hand inside the curled petal and feel the heat. She said that she had tried it, but she couldn't be sure if what she felt was heat or her imagination. The heat attracted bugs.

"Nature doesn't fool around just being decorative."

He had failed with Aubrey's wife. Marian. He had foreseen that he might fail, but he had not in the least foreseen why. He had thought that all he'd have to contend with would be a woman's natural sexual jealousy—or her resentment, the stubborn remains of sexual jealousy.

He had not had any idea of the way she might be looking at things. And yet in some depressing way the conversation had not been unfamiliar to him. That was because it reminded him of conversations he'd had with people in his own family. His uncles, his relatives, probably even his mother, had thought the way Marian thought. They had believed that when other people did not think that way it was because they were kidding themselves—they had got too airy-fairy, or stupid, on account of their easy and protected lives or their education. They had lost touch with reality. Educated people, literary people, some rich people like Grant's socialist in-laws had lost touch with reality. Due to an unmerited good fortune or an innate silliness. In Grant's case, he suspected, they pretty well believed it was both.

That was how Marian would see him, certainly. A silly person, full of boring knowledge and protected by some fluke from the truth about

life. A person who didn't have to worry about holding on to his house and could go around thinking his complicated thoughts. Free to dream up the fine, generous schemes that he believed would make another person happy.

What a jerk, she would be thinking now.

Being up against a person like that made him feel hopeless, exasperated, finally almost desolate. Why? Because he couldn't be sure of holding on to himself against that person? Because he was afraid that in the end they'd be right? Fiona wouldn't feel any of that misgiving. Nobody had beat her down, narrowed her in, when she was young. She'd been amused by his upbringing, able to think its harsh notions quaint.

Just the same, they have their points, those people. (He could hear himself now arguing with somebody. Fiona?) There's some advantage to the narrow focus. Marian would probably be good in a crisis. Good at survival, able to scrounge for food and able to take the shoes off a dead body in the street.

Trying to figure out Fiona had always been frustrating. It could be like following a mirage. No—like living in a mirage. Getting close to Marian would present a different problem. It would be like biting into a litchi nut. The flesh with its oddly artificial allure, its chemical taste and perfume, shallow over the extensive seed, the stone.

He might have married her. Think of it. He might have married some girl like that. If he'd stayed back where he belonged. She'd have been appetizing enough, with her choice breasts. Probably a flirt. The fussy way she had of shifting her buttocks on the kitchen chair, her pursed mouth, a slightly contrived air of menace—that was what was left of the more or less innocent vulgarity of a small-town flirt.

She must have had some hopes, when she picked Aubrey. His good looks, his salesman's job, his white-collar expectations. She must have believed that she would end up better off than she was now. And so it often happened with those practical people. In spite of their calculations, their survival instincts, they might not get as far as they had quite reasonably expected. No doubt it seemed unfair.

In the kitchen the first thing he saw was the light blinking on his

answering machine. He thought the same thing he always thought now. Fiona.

He pressed the button before he got his coat off.

"Hello, Grant. I hope I got the right person. I just thought of something. There is a dance here in town at the Legion supposed to be for singles on Saturday night, and I am on the supper committee, which means I can bring a free guest. So I wondered whether you would happen to be interested in that? Call me back when you get a chance."

A woman's voice gave a local number. Then there was a beep, and the same voice started talking again.

"I just realized I'd forgot to say who it was. Well you probably recognized the voice. It's Marian. I'm still not so used to these machines. And I wanted to say I realize you're not a single and I don't mean it that way. I'm not either, but it doesn't hurt to get out once in a while. Anyway, now I've said all this I really hope it's you I'm talking to. It did sound like your voice. If you are interested you can call me and if you are not you don't need to bother. I just thought you might like the chance to get out. It's Marian speaking. I guess I already said that. Okay, then. Good-bye."

Her voice on the machine was different from the voice he'd heard a short time ago in her house. Just a little different in the first message, more so in the second. A tremor of nerves there, an affected nonchalance, a hurry to get through and a reluctance to let go.

Something had happened to her. But when had it happened? If it had been immediate, she had concealed it very successfully all the time he was with her. More likely it came on her gradually, maybe after he'd gone away. Not necessarily as a blow of attraction. Just the realization that he was a possibility, a man on his own. More or less on his own. A possibility that she might as well try to follow up.

But she'd had the jitters when she made the first move. She had put herself at risk. How much of herself, he could not yet tell. Generally a woman's vulnerability increased as time went on, as things progressed. All you could tell at the start was that if there was an edge of it now, there'd be more later.

It gave him a satisfaction—why deny it?—to have brought that out in her. To have roused something like a shimmer, a blurring, on the surface of her personality. To have heard in her testy, broad vowels this faint plea.

He set out the eggs and mushrooms to make himself an omelette. Then he thought he might as well pour a drink.

Anything was possible. Was that true—was anything possible? For instance, if he wanted to, would he be able to break her down, get her to the point where she might listen to him about taking Aubrey back to Fiona? And not just for visits, but for the rest of Aubrey's life. Where could that tremor lead them? To an upset, to the end of her self-preservation? To Fiona's happiness?

It would be a challenge. A challenge and a creditable feat. Also a joke that could never be confided to anybody—to think that by his bad behavior he'd be doing good for Fiona.

But he was not really capable of thinking about it. If he did think about it, he'd have to figure out what would become of him and Marian, after he'd delivered Aubrey to Fiona. It would not work—unless he could get more satisfaction that he foresaw, finding the stone of blameless self-interest inside her robust pulp.

You never quite knew how such things would turn out. You almost knew, but you could never be sure.

She would be sitting in her house now, waiting for him to call. Or probably not sitting. Doing things to keep herself busy. She seemed to be a woman who would keep busy. Her house had certainly shown the benefits of nonstop attention. And there was Aubrey—care of him had to continue as usual. She might have given him an early supper—fitting his meals to a Meadowlake timetable in order to get him settled for the night earlier and free herself of his routine for the day. (What would she do about him when she went to the dance? Could he be left alone or would she get a sitter? Would she tell him where she was going, introduce her escort? Would her escort pay the sitter?)

She might have fed Aubrey while Grant was buying the mushrooms and driving home. She might now be preparing him for bed. But all the

time she would be conscious of the phone, of the silence of the phone. Maybe she would have calculated how long it would take Grant to drive home. His address in the phone book would have given her a rough idea of where he lived. She would calculate how long, then add to that time for possible shopping for supper (figuring that a man alone would shop every day). Then a certain amount of time for him to get around to listening to his messages. And as the silence persisted she would think of other things. Other errands he might have had to do before he got home. Or perhaps a dinner out, a meeting that meant he would not get home at supertime at all.

She would stay up late, cleaning her kitchen cupboards, watching television, arguing with herself about whether there was still a chance.

What conceit on his part. She was above all things a sensible woman. She would go to bed at her regular time thinking that he didn't look as if he'd be a decent dancer anyway. Too stiff, too professorial.

He stayed near the phone, looking at magazines, but he didn't pick it up when it rang again.

"Grant. This is Marian. I was down in the basement putting the wash in the dryer and I heard the phone and when I got upstairs whoever it was had hung up. So I just thought I ought to say I was here. If it was you and if you are even home. Because I don't have a machine obviously, so you couldn't leave a message. So I just wanted. To let you know.

"Bye."

The time was now twenty-five after ten.

Bye.

He would say that he'd just got home. There was no point in bringing to her mind the picture of his sitting here, weighing the pros and cons.

Drapes. That would be her word for the blue curtains—drapes. And why not? He thought of the ginger cookies so perfectly round that she'd had to announce they were homemade, the ceramic coffee mugs on their ceramic tree. A plastic runner, he was sure, protecting the hall carpet. A high-gloss exactness and practicality that his mother had never achieved but would have admired—was that why he could feel this twinge of bizarre and unreliable affection? Or was it because he'd had two more drinks after the first?

The walnut-stain tan—he believed now that it was a tan—of her face and neck would most likely continue into her cleavage, which would be deep, crepey-skinned, odorous and hot. He had that to think of, as he dialled the number that he had already written down. That and the practical sensuality of her cat's tongue. Her gemstone eyes.

Fiona was in her room but not in bed. She was sitting by the open window, wearing a seasonable but oddly short and bright dress. Through the window came a heady, warm blast of lilacs in bloom and the spring manure spread over the fields.

She had a book open in her lap.

She said, "Look at this beautiful book I found, it's about Iceland. You wouldn't think they'd leave valuable books lying around in the rooms. The people staying here are not necessarily honest. And I think they've got the clothes mixed up. I never wear yellow."

"Fiona . . .," he said.

"You've been gone a long time. Are we all checked out now?"

"Fiona, I've brought a surprise for you. Do you remember Aubrey?"

She stared at him for a moment, as if waves of wind had come beating into her face. Into her face, into her head, pulling everything to rags.

"Names elude me," she said harshly.

Then the look passed away as she retrieved, with an effort, some bantering grace. She set the book down carefully and stood up and lifted her arms to put them around him. Her skin or her breath gave off a faint new smell, a smell that seemed to him like that of the stems of cut flowers left too long in their water.

"I'm happy to see you," she said, and pulled his earlobes.

"You could have just driven away," she said. "Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken."

He kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull. He said, Not a chance.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

ISAAC BABEL (1894–1940) was born in Odessa, Ukraine (formerly Russia). At the age of twenty-one he went to St. Petersburg, and in 1923 he wrote a number of short stories printed in periodicals. An instant literary success, these formed the nucleus of the *Odessa Stories*. Other stories, scenarios, and plays followed, including *The Red Cavalry*. Unable to conform to the demands for political conformism that were being made on him, however, Babel was arrested in 1939 and was eventually killed by Stalin's police in 1940.

DAVID BEZMOZGIS was born in Riga, Latvia. In 1980 he immigrated with his parents to Toronto. He received an Honors Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from McGill University and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television. His writing has appeared in magazines such as *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Walrus*, and has been anthologized in *Best American Short Stories*, 2005. His collection of stories, *Natasha*, was published to widespread critical acclaim. He lives in Toronto.

HAROLD BRODKEY (1930–1996) was born in Staunton, Illinois, and raised in University City, Missouri, outside St. Louis. After graduating from Harvard University, Brodkey began his writing career by contributing short stories to *The New Yorker* and other magazines. His stories won him two first-place O. Henry Awards. His story collections include *First Love and Other Sorrows*, *Stories in an Almost Classical Mode*, and *The World Is the Home of Love and Death*. He is also the author of the novels *Women and Angels*, *The Runaway Soul*, and *Profane Friendship*, and a collection of nonfiction titled *Sea Battles on Dry Land*.

RAYMOND CARVER (1938–1988) was born in Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1938. His first collection of stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* (a

National Book Award nominee in 1977), was followed by *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, *Cathedral* (nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1984), and *Where I'm Calling From* in 1988, when he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He died in August of that year, shortly after completing the poems of *A New Path to the Waterfall*.

EILEEN CHANG (1920–1995), who lived in the United States after fleeing Communist China in 1956, was a prominent fiction writer, essayist, and public intellectual. She is the author of *Romances*, *The Rice-Sprout Song: A Novel of Modern China*, and *The Rouge of the North*.

ANTON PAVLOVICH CHEKHOV (1860–1904) was born in Taganrog, Ukraine. First published in the 1880s, he was a celebrated figure in Russia by the time of his death in 1904, but he remained relatively unknown internationally until the years after World War I, when his works were translated into English. His essays, plays, poetry, and short fiction have been translated into countless languages.

STUART DYBEK is the award-winning author of the story collection *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, *I Sailed with Magellan*, and *The Coast of Chicago*, and the poetry collections *Brass Knuckles* and *Streets in Their Own Ink*. He received his MFA from the University of Iowa in 1973 and is a Distinguished Writer in Residence at Northwestern University. His many awards include a PEN/Malamud Prize, a Lannan Award, and Whiting Writers' Award.

DEBORAH EISENBERG is the author of four story collections: *Transactions in a Foreign Currency*, *Under the 82nd Airborne*, *All Around Atlantis*, and *Twilight of the Superheroes*. She is the recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award, a Lannan Foundation Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Rea Award for the Short Story.

JEFFREY EUGENIDES was born in Detroit and attended Brown and Stanford Universities. His first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, was published

to great acclaim in 1993 and was made into a film directed by Sofia Coppola. His second novel, *Middlesex*, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

WILLIAM FAULKNER (1897–1962) was born in New Albany, Mississippi. His most celebrated novels include *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *The Unvanquished*. In 1949 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. His novel *A Fable* won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1955, and his *Collected Stories* won the National Book Award in 1951.

RICHARD FORD is the author of the story collections *Rock Springs*, *Women with Men*, and *A Multitude of Sins* as well as six novels: *A Piece of My Heart*, *The Ultimate Good Luck*, *The Sportswriter*, *Wildlife*, *Independence Day*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, and, most recently, *The Lay of the Land*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

DAVID GATES is a staff writer for *Newsweek* and lives in New York. He has been published in *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Grand Street*, *Ploughshares*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. His collection of stories, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

DENIS JOHNSON is the author of *Jesus' Son*, a critically acclaimed story collection, six novels, most recently *Tree of Smoke*, a collection of poetry, and a book of reportage. He is the recipient of a Lannan Foundation Fellowship and a Whiting Writers' Award, among many other honors for his work. He lives in northern Idaho.

JAMES JOYCE (1882–1941) was born in Dublin on February 2, 1882. His writings include *Chamber Music*, *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Exiles*, *Ulysses*, *Poems Penyeach*, *Finnegans Wake*, and

an early draft of *A Portrait of a Young Man, Stephan Hero*, which was published posthumously.

MIRANDA JULY is a filmmaker, writer, and performance artist. Her work has been presented at sites such as The Kitchen, the Guggenheim Museum, and in two Whitney Biennials. She wrote, directed, and starred in her first feature-length film, *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, which received numerous awards. July's short fiction has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Harper's*, and *Zoetrope*, and her collection of stories, *No One Belongs Here More Than You*, was published in 2007.

MILAN KUNDERA is a Franco-Czech novelist who was born in Brno and has lived in France, his second homeland, since 1975. He is the author of the novels *The Joke*, *Life Is Elsewhere*, *Farewell Waltz*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and *Immortality*, and the short-story collection *Laughable Loves*—all originally in Czech. His most recent novels, *Slowness*, *Identity*, and *Ignorance*, as well as his nonfiction works *The Art of the Novel*, *Testaments Betrayed*, and *The Curtain*, were originally written in French.

BERNARD MALAMUD (1914–1986) wrote eight novels; he won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for *The Fixer*, and the National Book Award for *The Magic Barrel*. Born in Brooklyn, he taught for many years at Bennington College in Vermont.

GUY DE MAUPASSANT (1850–1893) was born in France in 1850 and fought in the Franco-Prussian War before becoming a protégé of Gustave Flaubert. He published dozens of articles, nearly three hundred short stories, and six novels, the best known of which are *A Woman's Life*, *Bel-Ami*, and *Pierre and Jean*.

LORRIE MOORE is the author of the story collections *Birds of America* and *Self-Help*, and the novels *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* and

Anagrams. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*. She is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

ALICE MUNRO grew up in Wingham, Ontario, and attended the University of Western Ontario. She has published eleven story collections—*Dance of the Happy Shades*; *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*; *The Beggar Maid*; *The Moons of Jupiter*; *The Progress of Love*; *Friend of My Youth*; *Open Secrets*; *The Love of a Good Woman*; *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*; *Runaway*; and a volume of selected stories as well as a novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*. She is the recipient of many awards and prizes, including three of Canada's Governor General's Literary Awards and two of its Giller Prizes, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Edward MacDowell Medal in Literature. Her stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Paris Review*, and other publications, and her collections have been translated into numerous languages.

ROBERT MUSIL (1880–1942) was an English short-story writer, novelist, and playwright. His many works include *The Man Without Qualities*, *Five Women* (also published as *Three Women*), *The Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, and *The Confusions of Young Torless*.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV (1899–1977) was born and raised in St. Petersburg. He left Russia when the Bolsheviks seized power, eventually living in England, Germany, and the United States. He is the author of numerous stories, plays, and novels, most notably *Lolita*, which he wrote in Russian and self-translated into English.

GRACE PALEY (1922–2007) divided her time between New York City and Thetford Hill, Vermont. She is the author of the story collections *The Little Disturbances of Man*, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, and *Later the Same Day*. Her *Collected Stories* was a finalist

for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She also wrote two books of poetry and one volume of poems and prose pieces, *Long Walks and Intimate Talks*. Paley taught at Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence, Dartmouth, and the City College of New York. She was the recipient of the 1993 Vermont Award for Excellence in the Arts, the 1992 REA Award for Short Stories, and the 1989 Edith Wharton Award.

MARY ROBISON was born in Washington, D.C. She graduated from Johns Hopkins, where she studied with John Barth. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, two Pushcart Prizes, an O. Henry Award, and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction. She is the author of three previous novels, *Oh!*, *Subtraction*, and *Why Did I Ever*, and of four story collections, *Days*, *An Amateur's Guide to the Night*, *Believe Them*, and *Tell Me*. Robison has written for Hollywood and has been a contributor to *The New Yorker* since 1977.

GEORGE SAUNDERS is the author of *In Persuasion Nation*, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, *Pastoralia*, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*; a children's book, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*; and the essay collection *The Braindead Megaphone*. He writes regularly for *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and *GQ*. In 2006 he was awarded a MacArthur Foundation fellowship for "bringing to contemporary American fiction a sense of humor, pathos, and literary style all of his own." He teaches creative writing at Syracuse University.

GILBERT SORRENTINO (1929–2006) is the author of more than thirty books, including the classic *Mulligan Stew* and two novels that were finalists for the PEN/Faulkner Award: *Little Casino* and *Aberration of Starlight*. He was the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships and the 2005 Lannan Lifetime Achievement Award. Once an editor at Grove Press, Sorrentino taught at Stanford University before returning to his native Brooklyn.

WILLIAM TREVOR was born in Mitchelstown, County Cork, and spent his childhood in provincial Ireland. He attended Trinity College, Dublin. He is a member of the Irish Academy of Letters and a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. A highly acclaimed short-story writer, his notable collections include *The Collected Stories*, *Two Lives*, *After Rain*, *The Hill Bachelors*, and most recently *Cheating at Canasta*. His novels include *Felicia's Journey* and *The Story of Lucy Gault*. He received the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction in 1996.

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Middlesex

The Virgin Suicides

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