



From the Next Room

by Lowry Pei

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K A R E N

CHAPTER ONE

The first night of my visit, before I knew what I had come there to do, I lay in bed in the dark upstairs, hearing from downstairs the mutter of the radio, the announcer's voice rising and falling with the events of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball game, the words indistinguishable. I remembered all the times I had lain in bed and half-heard the faint sounds of my aunt Augusta downstairs, listening to the ball game, washing the dishes, watering the house plants, sitting on the porch swing and making it creak faintly under my window – I took that for granted, as natural as cicadas. I had long ago ceased to wonder what she thought about all that time; it was a wonderful relief to be close to Augusta again and so, somehow, closer to myself than I could be anywhere else. Everything in the room – my room, as we both called it – everything except for me was the same as it always had been. It was one of my anchors in life to think of it always the same, waiting for me, whoever I might be, to return.

Downstairs the phone rang, startling me; who would call at such an hour? Maybe there was a man in Augusta's life she hadn't told me about. I heard her answer it, and strained to make out the words she said, but couldn't. She talked for a few minutes; the house was suddenly quieter – she had turned the radio off. Then her voice stopped, I heard her hang up the phone, and for a minute or two everything was still. Even the cicadas seemed to hold their breath. I was on the verge of falling asleep when I heard the screen door in the kitchen open and close, banging against the doorframe and then, as ever, bouncing off and coming to rest with a second clack. Was she going to meet someone? I waited, thinking I might hear the car start up, but beginning to drift again, and then from outside there was a crash, the unmistakable sound of shattering glass. It snatched me

awake. There had been a kind of thump with it – something had hit something else, hard, a sound that absolutely did not belong in the New Franklin night. Had something happened to her? I swung my feet out of bed and stood up, listening for anything else out of the ordinary, but there was nothing. As I opened the door of my room I heard the screen door again and Augusta's footsteps in the kitchen, seeming to be in a hurry.

"Augusta?" I called. There was no reply.

The screen door banged again. I grabbed up the pair of shorts I had been wearing and pulled them on; I was already wearing a T-shirt. As I crossed the dark upstairs living room toward the back stairs, I heard the same thump and crash again, even louder this time. My heart began to race and as if to catch up to it I ran down the stairs, through the kitchen, out onto the back porch – I had a flash of grabbing a hoe or a spade from the garden tools on the porch and helping Augusta fend off some kind of attack, but in the back yard there was nothing, no one. At first I didn't even see Augusta, not until I heard her, and at first I didn't know it was Augusta I was hearing because I had never heard her cry. But that was what she was doing, crouched in the yard near the edge of the garden.

"What is it? What's wrong?" I put my hand on her shoulder; I could feel her trying to get control of herself. She hit the ground with her fist.

"God damn it!" she said, and with my New Franklin reflexes I immediately thought, Not so loud, the neighbors will hear.

"What is it? Are you hurt? What was that noise?"

She took a breath that shuddered slightly. "That was me throwing a glass against the garage." She didn't look up.

"It was?" That was a relief in a way, but . . .

"They do smash well, don't they? Actually, I threw two. The first one was so satisfying I had to do another." Slowly Augusta stood up; she looked anything but satisfied. She wouldn't quite meet my eyes as we stood facing each other in the dimness of the back yard.

"What is this all about?" I said, hearing myself using the teacher-voice I had acquired since the last time I had been to Augusta's.

She heaved a sigh and looked away. "I didn't want to tell you. I told myself I wouldn't."

"What?"

There was a long silence between us while we looked at each other. The insect sounds skipped a beat and then instantly resumed; at

the stop sign a couple of blocks away a big truck could be heard going through its gears.

"I found a lump in my breast. A real one. It wasn't a cyst. Are you sure you want to hear about this?"

I felt as though I was being shoved onstage without knowing my lines. "Just tell me," I said, trying to keep my voice even, though the truth was I didn't want to know.

"I went to the hospital day before yesterday, in St. Louis, and they took it out. I'm supposed to go back next week and find out what it is, but damn it, I know what the doctor thinks already. The bastard thinks I've got cancer."

I felt as though I hadn't quite heard, as though she had said something more I didn't catch. "How could he think that if he hasn't even seen the tests yet?"

"He's a doctor, it's what he does," she said impatiently, as if she had to teach me the alphabet. "Oh, I don't know, Christ, maybe he wasn't thinking anything." She began to head back toward the house, and I followed her. "I should have gone to the doctor sooner, I suppose, but you know how I am about doctors." She wouldn't look at me. "I kept thinking it wasn't real, or it had always been there, or maybe it would go away by itself, maybe I could will it to disappear."

"Right," I said, but I could imagine acting exactly the same.

"Maybe it was a mistake to be on the pill all this time, I don't know. It's just been part of life – I don't even think about it. You know how it is."

I did; I had been on the pill for only a few months, but already I took it for granted. A quiver of fear shot through me, a sensation of trying to catch up to something out of control.

"I could see it in his face as soon as he felt the lump. He was sure of what it was, I know he was, but he tried to cover it up with that impersonal doctor act where they sound like you're talking about what's wrong with your car – I could have hit him. The surgery you don't even want to know about. Just hope it doesn't happen to you. It makes you feel as though it isn't even your own body anymore, it belongs to them all of a sudden."

Hearing her made something in my gut tighten the way it would at the sight of a deep cut, made me want to protect my own body – but the attack, if it came, would come from within. She was right, I didn't want to know. We had gotten to the porch, but somehow neither of us turned to go inside, as if this couldn't be talked about under the kitchen light. I thought of a story she had just told me that

evening, about telling her last boyfriend, Charlie, that he had better things to do than have an affair with a middle-aged schoolteacher – she hadn't known about this when she ended it with him. And now mustn't she be thinking, Maybe never again? I couldn't imagine what that would feel like.

"When do you find out?"

"Next Tuesday." Four days to go. I could tell how long they were going to be already. Augusta was looking slightly to one side of me, as if there were something over my shoulder that she was watching all the time, that she had to keep an eye on, and I wondered if she had spent days watching that invisible something every second she wasn't distracted. Neither of us spoke for a while; there didn't seem to be any words worth saying.

But I had to break the silence. "How are you?" I said.

"It's a fucking nightmare," she said, surprising me but only for an instant.

You're it, I told myself. You're family, you're the one who's here. "What can I do?" I said, and immediately felt inane.

"Don't do anything, for Christ's sake. If you're going to start acting polite because of this, you might as well just go home. I mean it. Whatever you do, don't feel sorry for me, you understand?" Her eyes flashed at me angrily.

I raised both hands in surrender. "Okay, okay."

"That's exactly why I didn't want to tell you. I was hoping I could hide it, but I guess it wasn't possible."

"Wait a minute – you weren't planning to go this whole visit without telling me, were you?" Even Augusta couldn't go that far.

"I was."

"Just go along the same as ever and let me leave without knowing?" She didn't nod or say anything, but I knew the answer was yes. "So if I hadn't happened to come visit I never would have found out, is that the idea?"

"You were the only person I ever thought of telling," she said, as if that were all anyone could ask.

"Well, how long were you going to wait? How bad would it have to get before you'd say something?"

"All right. I get the message." For a moment we were locked together in opposition, staring at each other; I was the first to look away, out over the dark back yard. I realized I was gripping the railing with both hands as if I had to be careful not to fall. "It's probably just as well," Augusta said.

Just as well? What the hell was she thinking? “Augusta, you can’t go through something like this all alone.”

“Who says?” she answered, and I knew she meant that she went through life that way. I felt excluded all of a sudden, relegated to some distance I hadn’t known was there, as if I had only imagined myself close to her all along. “You don’t see me here, the rest of the time, when no one’s around. I can’t be leaning on anybody, that’s the way it is.” I remembered when the summerhouse had collapsed, with her on top of it, while she was trying to repair its roof; I had taken Augusta to the doctor’s office to get her sprained ankle looked at, her with her arm around my shoulder and swearing a little between her teeth. But what was there to do now, even if she would let me?

I was still looking out at the yard; there was a kind of embarrassment between us that prevented me from turning to face her. We’d shared about every secret there was to share, but never this – it felt obscene. Augusta perched on the railing next to me, facing the porch. I sneaked a look at her; she had her arms folded across her chest and was studying the floor in front of her shoes. I turned so that I, too, had my back to the yard, and dared to let my shoulder touch hers. We stayed like that for a long moment; I tried to feel, through that point of contact, how she was inside. Maybe I would never know. What wouldn’t be talked about anymore, now, were my confusions, my stupidities and stubbornnesses – they wouldn’t bear mentioning in the face of this. She put her arm around me, and I reached up to touch the hand that rested on my shoulder; I wanted to cry but held it down with an effort that she must have heard or felt. “Don’t say anything,” she said. “There’s nothing anyway. Let’s just go to bed.”

Silently I trooped into the kitchen after her, and we turned off the lights. I couldn’t help following her around in a way that felt childish, as if when there was nothing to say the only thing left was to offer up my dumb bodily presence for what it might be worth. At the top of the stairs we embraced for a moment – was she thinner than usual? – and then she moved away, or moved me away, as if, perhaps, she couldn’t stand to be touched. Helplessly I went back into my own room and closed the door, trailed around the room aimlessly, looked out the windows at the empty street and the side yard, sat down in the old armchair and huddled up in it as if I had to wait something out before I could go back to bed. The thought that she might have cancer, that she might lose her breast or even die, felt crazy, impossible to believe. But now I knew what she was thinking about as she lurked around the downstairs. She had seemed tired, I realized, ever since I

got off the plane – in the airport I had actually been walking faster than she had, which never happened, and I kicked myself for not paying more attention to her. No wonder she seemed tired: how long had it been since she'd had a good night's sleep?

I tried to find comfort in the room and the sameness, but I couldn't; Augusta's news seemed to shrink everything else, make it seem petty and foreshortened. All I could think of was that my grandparents had lived in these rooms and died, that my parents were older than Augusta, that the twenty years separating me from her did not seem, tonight, half as long as they usually did.

The plumbing groaned somewhere deep in the house as it always did when someone ran water in the bathroom. The insect sounds outside seemed to come in waves. I heard the squeak of a faucet being turned off, Augusta's toothbrush tapping against the rim of the sink; then nothing. A floorboard creaked. Just outside my room, there was a door that led to the roof of the front porch; I heard Augusta open it, as she often did at night, in case a breeze might come in through the screen. I listened for her footsteps moving away, into her room, but heard nothing; then a board creaked again just outside my room, and I knew she was standing at the screen door, looking out over the porch roof at the night, the dark houses dimly visible under the streetlamps, a scene that never changed. Only the door to my room separated us, and I felt that I should get up and open it, or say her name to let her know that I was there, awake, with her, but the helplessness stopped me. Yet the connection was there, between her and me, like an actual cord stretching between us through which my soul was being painfully pulled.

CHAPTER TWO

Late in the afternoon, while Augusta was away dumping off a load of brush, a peculiar stillness and a change in the light made me look up from where I was snipping the saw-tooth-edged blades of pampas grass. The weather was humid, electric; it clung like stockings I wanted to take off but couldn't. It was Monday and neither of us had talked, after the first time, about what would happen Tuesday morning. The sky looked a way that I had seen only once before in my life – something beyond overcast: not gray but distinctly green, and flat. It had no depth; it was as though someone had rolled gray-green fabric up off some enormous bolt just out of view, a fake backdrop, the wrong color, coming up behind the houses and trees. New Franklin was silent; even the crickets were silent.

We had been attacking the yard for days – projects that Augusta said absolutely had to be done, though they'd been in the making since I could remember. In the far corner of the back, next to the alley, was an area she, and I on my summer visits, had ignored for years; an old hedge had grown into a tangle of branches as tall as I was, with skinny, ungainly trees sticking up out of it – hardly even trees, because they didn't have branches, just leafy stems growing out of their tops. "Garbage trees," Augusta called them. Back there, too, the brush pile had grown so big that no one ever wanted to start the task of hauling it away, and a clump of pampas grass, three feet in diameter and almost as high as the hedge, cut anyone unwary enough to rub its leaves the wrong way.

We attacked side by side, with pruners and hatchets that could have been sharper, and Augusta seemed to have more energy than when I'd arrived. Still she wasn't the Augusta I knew who had always been able to work longer than I could, no matter how hot it might get,

or how unpleasant the task. We didn't talk much but I was aware of her and myself all the time, aware of our bodies, of physical labor and how the privilege of doing this might be lost. The simplest things: the feel of a twig on my wrist, the tangled light and shade at the base of the hedge. The tough old stems of the hedge were too thick for my pruners to cut; I hacked at them with the hatchet, violently, wrenched at them till they snapped, leaving their tough fraying fibers still connected, but possible to slice through. The work became a kind of silent fight that Augusta and I shared without mentioning it, especially when we began trying to dig out the clumps of hedge, cutting roots with the spade, slicing away at the earth to try to get at what had become so tangled over the years that there was no making sense of it any more, almost no way to tell one clump from another except that I chose to attack at a certain spot, to grab with both hands, brace my foot against other thick, immovable stems, and pull with all my might. At first I thought I'd never get any of it out. But every time I stopped to pant and mutter to myself I became more determined that those old roots were not going to beat me, and grudgingly they began to give way, once I realized how hard I was going to have to try. I hadn't done anything that physically difficult in a long time; it gave me satisfaction to come upon dead wood that was brittle enough to snap off with my hands – something in me wanted to win this battle without even tools, on my strength alone. When Augusta joined me in my struggle with the hedge I wanted to tell her to stop because I could see how tired she was getting – but did that matter? It would make her sleep, wouldn't it? And she was still strong, together we could defeat the matted roots that were too tenacious for me alone.

At the end of each day we went in tired and scratched, our necks as sunburned as a farmer's, took showers, drank beer, ate dinner. Then we talked; some part of me had been waiting all day for that. We talked about me, even though what was happening to Augusta made my stuff seem self-indulgent and small; hers wouldn't bear mentioning. If I should slip and feel sorry for her, she'd bite my head off. Instead we talked about whether it was imaginable that I might marry anyone at my age, and if it was, then why not Will – whom I had once claimed to love, who had asked me more than once to marry him, who was an entirely admirable person – and every other humiliating question about the crummy job I did of impersonating an adult – but we never brought up what we were waiting for.

When I straightened up and saw the fake green sky I looked around as if someone would tell me what to do, and remembered the last time: I was in the back yard in Evanston, and my mother ran out and ordered me to get into the house at once, in a tone that brooked no arguments; only afterwards, after the storm had broken, she told me that the sky had looked like that before a tornado that came within a few miles of New Franklin when she and Augusta were girls. I was wearing an old long-sleeved shirt of Augusta's, and gardening gloves, and a bandanna tied around my head to keep the sweat from running down in my eyes. I began gathering up the tools, wondering if I should hurry, but nothing seemed to be happening at all except that this wrong sky stretched overhead, and the town under it held its breath in a kind of trance. As I put the clippers into the old chest of drawers on the back porch where Augusta kept her tools, I heard the sound of a car approaching up the alley; there she was. She rolled up the car windows before she got out. So she had noticed too. But she didn't look alarmed, only businesslike as she came toward the house. "Better go in and close the windows," she said. Of course – I knew that, what was stopping me? Things I'd read about tornadoes somewhere crossed my mind – if the windows were closed all the way the difference in pressure would make them explode outwards. But we always left a crack during thunderstorms, so that cool air could get in. The place to be was the southwest corner of the basement. Under something strong. I knew which way was southwest when I was above ground, but what part of the basement, exactly, was the corner we belonged in? And was there anything there to hide under? Surely nothing strong enough to support the weight of bricks that would fall on it if the house got blown apart. But that was inconceivable. "You do the upstairs, okay?" Augusta said, stepping up on the porch.

I went upstairs, telling myself how absurd it was to be thinking about getting buried under a pile of rubble; hadn't there been thunderstorms, and big ones, every summer of my life? A wind had started up by the time I reached the first window to close it, and before I even finished the west side of the house the smell of approaching rain had filled the room, and the sky outside was turning black. It was cooler already.

"This is going to be a good one," Augusta said when I came down; she looked wonderfully alive, her eyes sparkling though inside the house, now, it was dark enough to think about turning on a light. I followed her down the dim hall to the front porch; we stood there to watch the storm come. It was sudden as a thought. The rain had barely

begun when it was coming in sheets, curtains of rain that advanced over houses, cars, the street, one after another, driven by a wind that sent the drops flying in our faces, pushed us indoors. Augusta closed the front door on the wind just as the first lightning flashed; the crack of thunder was not far behind it. So it was close, then. The loudness of it unnerved some part of me that hadn't grown up, but I couldn't let that show.

"Want to go out on the back porch? I'll bet we could sit there without getting wet," Augusta said. But when we had carried a couple of kitchen chairs out there she wouldn't sit down; I did, but she stood with her back to me looking out at the rain, the silver undersides of all the leaves on the trees turned up by the wind. Her straight back seemed oblivious to lightning and thunder. The limbs of the trees lashed at the black air, looking as if they might snap at any moment; it crossed my mind that the storm might finish our project and then some, uproot more than the old hedge in its violence. It was tearing off leaves in handfuls and plastering them to fences and garage walls, papering the yard with their wet silvery skins; a pail, standing on the old metal picnic table, took off and momentarily flew, turning in midair and landing on the back walk with a hollow bang, barely audible above the storm. A part of me seemed to be pulled out into it, out of myself like a bird ripped from its branch, too light to come down, carried the speed of the wind without choice. Like when I found out I was pregnant, and when I wasn't anymore. When Will asked me to marry him. When I stood in front of a class full of ninth-graders and they looked at me as if I were in charge.

"Not bad," Augusta said finally, turning away, when the storm had passed its peak; but it seemed to me she was disappointed that it hadn't been more violent.

Now that the rain had finally come it would not stop; the sky grew less black, but the rain continued, not with so much force, but steadily, a soaking rain that would make it impossible to work in the garden tomorrow – and the next day the weeds would be twice as high. I went inside to see what we might eat for dinner and turned on the kitchen light, but nothing happened; the clock was stopped too. "The power's out," I called to Augusta, but she didn't reply. I looked over my shoulder; she wasn't on the porch, and I hadn't heard her come in. I opened the screen door and put my head out; she was crossing the back yard at a leisurely pace as if it were a beautiful sunny day, her only concession to the rain a floppy gardening hat she kept on the back porch. She dumped the water out of the wheelbarrow and left

it upside-down; then putting her hands in the back pockets of her jeans, she stood and surveyed the yard, the alley, the houses beyond it – what was she looking at? After a few moments she bent down and picked up a big sycamore leaf, freshly torn from the tree, that was lying on the ground at her feet, and seemed to examine it closely, though her back was to me and it was hard to tell; then she dropped it as if it were of no interest whatever, and went on standing there, soaked to the skin, and stock-still in a way that no one out in the rain was likely to be. All of a sudden I thought that something too private to watch was going on; the screen door creaked slightly, as always, as I let it close, and I hoped she hadn't noticed. What in the world was I going to do?

Rummage in the kitchen drawers until I found candles for later, look in the refrigerator for what had better be cooked before it spoiled. When Augusta finally came in, and passed through the kitchen on her way upstairs to change her clothes, I pretended nothing was out of the ordinary, but we both knew better.

After dinner we sat on the back porch again, the power still out, the rain still steady, falling as though it would last all night. From time to time distant lightning lit up some corner of the blackness, outlined the trees and dark houses of New Franklin; thunder grumbled to itself elsewhere. Occasionally the flicker of a candle flame crossed a window we could see from our porch. I could smell the plants growing all around me, the wormy black Illinois dirt full of proliferating life. Augusta searched the kitchen cabinets until she found some batteries she could put in her portable radio, and turned on the Cardinals game; shots of static interrupted it with each distant lightning flash, and the batteries were not the strongest in the first place. The faintness of the announcers' voices was fitting; they were in New York, a place that hardly seemed to exist from where we sat.

Tomorrow morning Augusta would get in the car – by herself; I had offered to go with her but she had refused – and drive to St. Louis, sit in a doctor's waiting room, be shown in by his indifferent nurse, and once he had closed the door on the two of them he would say Yes, it's cancer – or No, it's not. How did you wait for that, how did you get ready to hear the news? And was she waiting for me to ask? But there would be something cruel about bringing it up, and though I had heard, and half-believed, that you had to be willing to hurt people sometimes in order to help them, I wasn't ready to start that with Augusta.

We had sat for a long time in silence, listening to the game and the rain, when out of the dark Augusta said, "When you were with Will, were you alone or not?"

I had to think about that. "I suppose that depends on when you're talking about," I said. We sat without speaking for another minute or two, until it seemed to me that Augusta must have forgotten about whatever she had been driving at.

"You know what I really think?" she said. "If I was going to be with somebody by now it would have started a long time ago." Something *had* started a long time ago, with Allan, when Augusta was in college, and they had been lovers years ago, for a week. Even after he finally married, the connection between them wouldn't go away. I knew she never talked about Allan to anyone but me, and I was almost sure that we were both thinking of him as we sat on the porch surrounded by a curtain of rain, but there was no point in bringing him up now.

"Well, you've got to do something besides correct papers and read murder mysteries, I know you." Even when the time between lovers stretched out long and she complained of it, I never thought of Augusta as permanently alone. Or together.

"I might want to, but who says life has to work out the way you want?" She waited for an answer, but I had nothing to say to that. "I knew it wouldn't break my heart when Charlie and I split up," she said. Charlie was not good enough for her anyway, in my opinion. Like most of them. "That's why I did it. Even though we had great sex, I have to admit."

"Well, why give that up?" I said. Augusta didn't answer right away, and in the silence I thought about things I'd done without meaning to.

"The terrible thing was that breaking up with him didn't really bother me very much. You know how you think you're going to find somebody and always be on the same side – that sounds sappy, but ..."

"I know what you mean."

"I wasn't even really hoping for that with him. That's what I found out. So I told him he had better things to do." She paused; a corner of the sky lit up, and static interrupted the radio. If that was her problem, things were even harder than I had thought.

"Augusta, someday you're going to have to give life a break," I said, indignant with her all of a sudden. "What kind of an excuse do you need to let yourself be happy for a while?"

"I don't know," she said, quietly, nothing like the combative voice I had expected to snap back at me, and I realized I had forgotten all about tomorrow. Shame rushed over me, and then anger, not at Augusta but at the way things worked; we sat surrounded by rain for some time, saying nothing. She couldn't die; she hadn't even really lived yet, I thought, and then caught myself: who are you to pass judgment?

"Listen, I – " I was stumbling over some sort of apology, which I knew would only irritate her anyway, but she cut me off:

"Wait."

The announcer was saying something about men on second and third, two outs, the count was three and one. A jolt of static obscured the words for an instant and Augusta muttered "Damn"; then the voice came back, excited – "the tying run is in, here comes the go-ahead run, the throw to the plate . . . not in time! Cardinals lead, 5-4!"

"What were you saying?"

The sound of the rain was everywhere, trickling in the gutters and downspouts, millions of drops falling on millions of leaves in this one yard alone; how did the earth absorb it all? "You and I have been on the same side for a long time now," I said.

"I know," Augusta replied. The fall of rain continued steadily.

CHAPTER THREE

I knew even before Augusta opened the door of her car what the answer was. I was sitting on the back porch, scraping mud from my sneakers with a trowel, having thought, in my need to do something while Augusta was gone to the doctor's, that uprooting what was left of the hedge would be easier after the night's rain, when I heard the car come up the alley. She pulled onto the patch of yard where she usually parked; I felt frozen where I was – not knowing was unbearable, and yet I dreaded the moment of asking. Augusta shut off the car's engine and for a long moment nothing happened; the sun was reflecting off the windshield, and I couldn't see her face. Everything in sight was the same as it had been for years; how could something terrible have come into this world of ours? But the longer she sat there without getting out, the emptier I felt. I dropped the trowel and stood up, without realizing I had done either until Augusta opened the door and got out; she stood looking at the house and me, one hand still on the car door. She looked exposed there under the bright sky, and smaller than she had ever seemed to me; I saw how small the human body is, how fragile after all, when all these years I had imagined that she harbored a strength I'd never fathom. Her face was long and gaunt, as she stood there looking over the house; I could feel that she wasn't thinking, only looking, at the place she had grown up in and lived in most of her life, seeing it in a way she'd never seen it before. I went toward her and her eyes on me felt frightening, as if she knew that it ran in the family and could see through to whatever was working away inside me, to bring me, too, to where she was, but I knew I had to stand that. There could not be any complaining now, about anything. She came forward a few steps to

meet me and I held her; she was nearly rigid in my arms, but she didn't push me away. My heart was pounding. I could feel her against me, breathing, and I thought, it's next to me, cancer, that close.

We walked back to the porch and sat down on the steps without speaking, without even looking at each other; my eyes were on the grass growing in the cracks between the bricks of the walk. When we had sat down I raised my eyes to hers, but only for a moment; long enough for her to be sure I knew. "He wants to operate in a week," she said.

"A week from today?" I could hear the protest in my own voice, as if I were the one to be operated on and the hurry were an extra cruelty the doctor chose to inflict, and as soon as I heard it I knew that was absurd. "Operate how?" I didn't want to make her say it, but I had to hear.

"Modified radical mastectomy. Left side. I do get to keep one," she said; I could hear her trying to ride it out, to stay in control, and the attempt made me start to cry. I had not known for sure she was so gallant, though I had loved her for most of my life. I caught hold of her hand and we both held on with a hard grip; impossible to tell who was comforting who. When she finally let go I put my arm around her, not sure if she wanted me to or not, but I had to touch her, make my presence known.

"I thought they took out the lump."

"They say it might not be enough," she said, and I didn't want to know more. Imagine a knife removing my breast; was there any anesthesia deep enough to deaden that thought?

"What happens after that?" I asked – as if the operation weren't enough. But I wanted to get away from it as fast as I could. I couldn't bear to think about what it would take to face that, knowing that maybe Augusta was as afraid as I would be and yet somehow she was still holding up better than I ever would.

"Nothing that sounds like a hell of a lot of fun."

"But is that going to take care of it?"

"If they caught it in time," she said. Neither of us spoke for a while, letting those words repeat themselves in the air around us.

"What do we do now?" I said, without thinking, only noticing afterwards that I had said the words aloud.

"I don't know," Augusta said, and I didn't either. What do you do next after you hear you have cancer? What do you have for lunch? Do you go out and work in the yard as if nothing had

changed – or yell and throw things, make your will, go up in the attic and read all the letters you’ve been saving all your life and never looked at – get drunk and pass out – stay up all night, refuse to sleep . . . was there anything a person might not do?

It wasn’t for me to tell her how to respond, that was for certain. Just be there, I told myself, just wait. My hand was still on her shoulder; I had never touched Augusta for so long at a stretch since some time when I was a child. There was a story about us that I had heard told a dozen times, but couldn’t remember for myself; we were visiting New Franklin when I was five years old, and my parents, and Augusta, and I went to the town pool. We swam, lay in the sun and baked for a while, stopped at the A & W for a hot dog – when we got home all of us were dying for a nap. Augusta lay down on the couch upstairs – she must have been twenty-five then, if I was five – and fell asleep; when she woke up, she discovered that I was lying on her back, sound asleep myself. She didn’t move until I finally woke up of my own accord. I wished, now, that I could remember what that had felt like, being that small and climbing onto her grown-up body as if it were there just to make me comfortable, and falling asleep in that taking-for-granted way.

“It was so strange driving back,” she said. “So strange. It was like seeing a movie of the outside world projected on the windows of my car. I felt as though I could have driven right through another car, or off the side of the bridge, or anywhere, and it wouldn’t have mattered because none of it was real. I kept thinking, when is the illusion going to break down, when is it going to stop looking so much like the real world – because I know it’s fake. But the exit was there, New Franklin was there – everything, down to the last blade of grass. Even the house; even you.”

“I’m real,” I said.

“Pinch me, maybe I’ll wake up.”

I leaned my head against her shoulder instead. “I love you,” I said.

“Good,” she said grimly. We sat for a while, and I thought of the night before on the back porch, when she had seemed to be saying that aloneness was something a person grew into inexorably, without choice – I always wanted to drag her back from that part of herself, to lead her to the ordinary life she couldn’t seem to find on her own, but no one ever made Augusta do

anything – I knew that. And now it was beyond anyone’s power to keep her from being alone in this. So did that mean I shouldn’t try?

“It never occurred to me that this would be my life,” she said. “I was going to do something else.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, I was still figuring that out.”

“Please don’t talk like it’s over, okay?”

“I was thinking maybe I’d quit teaching now that you’ve started. One in the family’s got to be enough.”

“And then what?” I couldn’t imagine Augusta as anything but a teacher, but if she wanted to talk about becoming an astronaut it was okay with me – anything as long as it sounded like she had a future.

“Well, I could get Cheryl to show me how to sell real estate. Now that the developers have hit town.”

My mother had made enough money selling real estate to buy herself a house bigger than Augusta’s; I couldn’t picture Augusta in that business for one day. “Sell it? You’d probably do your best to keep people from moving here.”

“True.” She was silent for a long minute. I was tempted to pick up the trowel and dig out some of the grass growing in the cracks between the bricks, and I would have if this had been a normal day, but I couldn’t now. “Half the house still belongs to her, you know. Mom and Dad left it to both of us. But she doesn’t want to live here, I’m sure of that. I don’t know if you do, either, but it’s going to be yours.”

It took me a moment to register what she was saying, in a matter-of-fact voice: I’m going to die and leave it to you. Mine: this big old house, with no one in it. The last thing on earth I coveted. “Couldn’t we share it?”

“Who?”

“Us. You and me.”

“We already do, don’t we?” Augusta said, almost impatiently, and I knew what she was telling me: Look, I might die, I’ve got to be able to say that.

Abruptly she got up and said, “I’m going to go change.” To hear the news she had dressed herself up in a severe blue suit that I wasn’t sure I had ever seen her wear, as if going to her own funeral. A bad sign. It looked nothing like her – she belonged in blue jeans and checked shirts – and the sooner she got out of it, the better, as far as I was concerned.

She went inside and the screen door banged after her as if this were any ordinary day, her going-in any ordinary going-in, not going in to begin to live with what she knew, to face the knowledge that in a week part of her that I couldn't imagine losing would be taken away. How would she feel when she took off her clothes? Would she look in the mirror and think of when she first had breasts, of children she hadn't had, of a man who'd wanted to touch her there and the look in his eyes when he saw her naked? I knew how that part of it felt; and if forever she had to imagine him looking away, perhaps that would be death dragged out year after year.

Augusta came downstairs dressed as I was accustomed to seeing her, but her eyes were red. She sat down at the end of the kitchen table, next to me, and for a long moment we sat and looked at the pattern of the oilcloth on the table, the spots where the threads were beginning to show through the blue-checked surface. I put my hand on hers.

"That bastard," she said at last. I could feel a kind of current run through her and into me; for a moment the sensation made my heart pound as though she was angry at me.

"Who?"

"That goddamn doctor. You can't believe what a smug bastard he is. Oh well, yes, it's cancer, too bad, but we'll just lop off a breast and take out a few lymph nodes and it'll be no problem unless of course we're too late and you die anyway. But if you don't we'll fit you with a prosthesis and no one will ever know the difference, unless of course you should happen to take your clothes off. Jesus. Fuck him."

"It sounds awful," I said, weakly, not knowing what else to say. Could he really be that much of a monster?

"You have no idea."

"I know."

"I know what he's thinking, too, that son of a bitch. It's written all over his face that I'm not going to make it. He's humoring me, for Christ's sake, he doesn't want me to act up just because I've got cancer – be reasonable, cooperate, don't make a scene, be a good patient and kick the bucket. What the hell does he know? When was the last time he had a terminal disease?"

There didn't seem to be any answer to that. If he was as much of a bastard as she said he was, why did she go to him? Why

take his word for what she had to do? But the last thing I could do at that moment was argue with her. What the hell did I know, either, I thought – less than the doctor. Would she be as angry at me when she got around to it? At least I hadn't told her she was going to die – and yet telling her she wasn't going to would hardly be better; I'm out of my depth, I thought. There was no going back, no one but me to do what I could. Who else was she going to tell, now that it was real?

"This is one amazing experience," Augusta said, more to the ceiling than to me. "I hope you don't have to try it, but let me tell you, it really does something for your outlook on the world."

"I'm sure it does." But I couldn't guess what the something might be.

"You'd be astounded how many things don't matter a damn all of a sudden. Like repairing those God-forsaken shutters. There's got to be things that matter more than that."

"I know."

"Do you remember," she said, "when you were little and you first understood about dying? I mean, understood that you were really going to die someday?"

"Kind of," I said, though it seemed to me that I had understood a lot less than that sounded like.

"I must have been – I don't know – maybe eight or nine? I remember at some point what they said in church about eternity finally hit me. I used to lie in bed and try to imagine what forever was, what it could possibly mean for something to have no end, and how all that time I'd be dead. I'd try to imagine a hundred years, and then a thousand – I couldn't even get that far – and I knew no matter how far I got eternity would be longer than that. And all that time nothing, the universe would go on forever without me and it wouldn't even notice, let alone care. I guess I never really did buy the afterlife. I knew I was supposed to, but it didn't seem to me that anybody actually believed that stuff. It never did me any good, anyway; the whole thing scared the hell out of me. Then I forgot about it, or something." She paused. "You think you've got it all worked out, you're an adult, you've faced the facts – bullshit."

I knew she wasn't talking about me, but still some part of me wanted to say that I had never claimed anything of the sort – hadn't even gotten that far. This was no time to mention myself. I could feel myself doing what I did with older people sometimes, thinking, it's all over my head, she knows, she's in charge, all I

have to do is do what she tells me; but another voice kept reminding me that was not enough, I might end up in charge myself before I knew it. In a week she'd be in the hospital and the family around her would be me – and who else?

My mother of course – as soon as I thought that, I dreaded it in a way. But she would take over, take the responsibility off me, and maybe under the circumstances there wouldn't be room for us to fight.

"We'd better call my mom, don't you think?"

Augusta looked at me directly for the first time since she'd come downstairs; she studied my face, and it was hard for me to hold her gaze. Had I offended her? She seemed to look into me, to ask me something without words.

"I was hoping we could get by without that," she said at last. Before I could say anything she held up one hand, palm toward me. "I know, I know," she said, inclining her head slightly and averting her eyes in a way that looked a little like giving in; I knew it meant stubbornness.

"When are you planning to tell her, then?"

"I don't know. It's got to happen, I realize that, but . . . not right now."

"What other family is there?" There was my dad, who would show up at once if I called him – divorce or no, he'd been a relative too long to stop being one. But I knew Augusta had never been close to him in a way that would make her call him now. Who had there been like that? I knew she wouldn't tell Charlie, the latest ex. There was Jerry, who had been around her whole life, who had asked her to marry him a couple of times – and she had always said no – at one time Jerry would have done anything for Augusta, but she wouldn't necessarily accept it. If she said she needed his help he probably still would give it any way he could; but she wouldn't. It wasn't his help she needed; she had made up her mind about that a long time ago. She had intended never to need anyone's, and now, when she did, she seemed horribly alone.

"I was hoping," she said, and then stopped. She seemed to be having difficulty looking at me for a moment. "Look, I'm a selfish person, that's always been pretty clear, right? But I might die of this, I think I'm entitled to a little selfishness, maybe I haven't been before, but this is different, don't you think?"

"What is it?" I said, but I already halfway knew.

"I know it puts you in a hell of a position, but I was hoping that you'd stay and – kind of go through this with me, and – not involve anybody else. I feel as though I couldn't stand it. I don't want anybody else looking at me, I don't want them feeling sorry for me, I couldn't stand their eyes. Every time I think about what people would say and the way they'd look at me, it makes me want to hit them. I mean it. It makes me violent. I have this terrible picture of people trying to be sympathetic and me telling them to go straight to hell. Or worse. Really trying to hurt them."

Now she wouldn't look up; she studied her hands, palms and then backs, as if she hadn't seen them before, and wouldn't meet my eyes.

"A hell of a thing to find out about yourself," she said after a minute.

"Are you going to do that to me?"

"I don't think so. No. You're the exception for some reason, you always have been."

Perhaps this was a privilege I didn't want, but it was years too late to think that. Hadn't I come here without telling anyone either – wasn't I just as much a concealer of our private world? But I hadn't known I was bargaining for this. If the doctor came and said to me, "You're the next of kin, we must make a decision," did she really want to leave that to me?

"My mom's going to be furious at both of us if we do this."

"I've got bigger things to worry about."

Yes. No doubt she did. But my mother was already angry at me, and if I didn't tell her wouldn't it be betrayal, telling her once and for all that my loyalty was to Augusta? I could imagine her voice when she would say the words, Why didn't you tell me? And all I would be able to answer would be, Augusta asked me not to. I could do the whole tirade myself: You are my daughter and you let me sit up here not knowing while my sister went through a major operation – how do you know what could have gone wrong? She could have died, and you didn't even tell me – what do you think I am? A casual acquaintance? Did you ever think at all about how I might feel?

Yes, Mom, I did.

"I'm sorry to do this to you," Augusta said.

"Oh, don't," I said, "don't apologize, I can't stand it," and I knew that meant I had agreed, that I was going to have to pay for this somehow later on and that I was saying yes to nothing I was

likely to enjoy; but it had to be done, the choice was out of my hands. "Look," I said. "Do one thing for me. Tell somebody else. One person. I don't want to be the only one who knows."

"I trust you," she said, as if I'd told her I didn't trust myself, but that wasn't it and I was sure she knew it.

"I have to be able to talk to somebody about this."

"Call someone. Call Liz," she said. But Liz had gotten married and moved to California and I wasn't sure I was her best friend anymore.

"I don't think that's the answer," I said. "Anyway, she's only heard about you, she doesn't really know you."

"Well then, pick somebody else," she said, making me feel like a self-indulgent person who couldn't see that life wouldn't always work exactly the way I planned it, and maybe that was true, but what was going on here and now was not about me, it was her life we were trying to save. Thinking of that made me as stubborn as Augusta, and after what I had agreed to, she owed me one.

"I want somebody else who knows you to know about this."

"Who?" she said, as if she would stump me and that would be the end of it. Not my parents, not Charlie, not Jerry; surely not anyone she taught with – I knew without asking that they were the very people she didn't want feeling sorry for her. For a moment I felt cornered, alone with this, and then I knew the answer.

"Allan," I said.

Augusta stared at me, her face long and blank with thought; then her eyes left mine – she seemed to read something written up near the ceiling to her left, scarcely breathing, holding entirely still as if her whole being had been drawn into that thought. Then she came back to me and considered me as if I were a puzzle or a phenomenon she'd never seen before. I thought I saw the faintest suggestion of a smile, a wryness about her mouth, and her eyes had changed in some way. "Allan, huh?" I knew there was no arguing with it; I'd read his letters to her, though I shouldn't have, snooping around her house when I was fifteen, and I knew he still loved her then, more than was good for him, even though he was married. Something of that still remained, I was sure, from what Augusta let drop occasionally. I was surprised, now that I thought of it, that she hadn't said his name first.

"All I've heard from him since Christmas was a five-minute phone call last week. The day you came. And the last time before Christmas was at least a year ago."

“Is that a reason not to tell him?”

“We-e-ell,” she said, drawing the word out in what I thought of as a New Franklin way, “I guess it’s not.” She pursed her lips and looked out the window. “Should be pretty interesting,” she murmured, and for a moment I thought I saw her as she would look if she were alone, in her kitchen with no one around, saying those words to herself.

CHAPTER FOUR

The angel passed over; we were silent for a minute or two, and then with a kind of start I came to myself. I had been somewhere else but I wasn't sure where. Augusta was still lost in thought, staring out the window blankly. It was a hot day, almost cloudless after the night's storm; the singing of crickets was getting loud, stitching the day together. I could almost imagine how, moment by moment, every plant in the yard was growing. By tomorrow at the latest one of us would have to mow the grass or it would be too high to cut – if we cared about those things anymore.

The noon siren came as it always did, without warning, winding up inexorably to a dire pitch worthy of a full-fledged emergency and then, as soon as it reached its peak, losing its breath and dying away. The siren seemed to wake Augusta up; without saying anything, she got up and left the kitchen, and I heard her footsteps going upstairs.

Only twelve o'clock – the morning had only just ended; time enough to alter everything. There had been times, after things had started to go bad between my parents, when I thought of simply leaving them to get it over with by themselves, coming here and moving in with Augusta; hadn't this already started to be more home than home? And now it seemed as though that had finally happened, in a way I'd never imagined. Saying that I would go through this with her had brought New Franklin into me once and for all – hot streets, shaded porches, sycamore trees, Downtown Market, the sound of a train coming through town in the middle of the night; the possibility of death had made a world inside me. I closed my eyes and felt myself becoming the hot, still air of the day and the cricket sound and nothing else – but that got scary, I had to be in control, I couldn't let down now,

and I opened my eyes and was in my body again, feeling the sweat run down my spine in a trickle of coolness. My arms and legs were covered with freckles that hadn't existed back in Boston; the mud on my sneakers had dried and a fingernail made it flake off into powdery dust. If she died would I still sit here like this, still carrying on the long conversation with her? As soon as I thought of it, I knew that even if she died she wouldn't leave the house. Then would coming here be too sad to bear, or would I feel guilty if I stopped keeping her company?

Stop it, I ordered myself. Stop thinking like that. Plenty of people have breast cancer and don't die.

I got up and climbed the back stairs, hoping I wouldn't catch Augusta in some private moment, but the door to her room was shut. My room was on the side of the house that would be away from the afternoon sun, and I raised the shades and opened the windows to let in what little breeze there might be. I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, tugged a hairbrush through my rebellious hair and for a moment hoped against hope that the Midwestern sun would lighten it a little, make it something closer to strawberry blonde instead of the coppery color it actually was. Of course that same sun would only bring out the freckles I had been hoping to outgrow for years; there was no real way to win that game. Then I caught myself thinking about how I looked and felt ashamed of it.

I came out of the bathroom and stood looking around the upstairs, leaning on the railing of the back stairway. Most of it was one big space lined with bookshelves to the ceiling, so tall you would need a stepladder to get at the books on the top shelves; the dark green shades on the west windows were down. Against the underwater dimness of the upstairs, the glare that outlined the windowshades and shot through the occasional holes and tears in the old fabric seemed outlandishly bright, as if the outdoor air were burning; narrow planes of light, getting in at the edges of the windows, cut into the room's air, setting dust motes on fire, drawing exact lines of surprising brightness on the rug, up and over the arm of the sofa whose pattern was almost worn away, up the leg of the old library table. The creak of the railing when I shifted my weight against it seemed to set up ripples on the surface of the house's silence. From outside came cricket sounds and, somewhere in the distance, the ragged crescendo and decrescendo of a lawn mower. I had been in this room at this hour of the day a hundred times, had breathed the smell of the house that never changed, and waited out the hottest part of the afternoon on that sofa reading a

murder mystery with only half of my mind; it had seemed to me for years that everything in Augusta's house was right, in place, and I counted on that as something to go back to, but now it struck me that everything needed to be dusted, reupholstered . . . no matter how thoroughly I spruced up her house, even if I finished every maintenance project we'd ever talked about doing, it wouldn't matter.

I wandered back into my room, not knowing what to do with myself, and ended up leaning on the dresser looking at my grim face in the mirror until my own eyes seemed opaque and I had to look away. I opened the little top drawers of the dresser, where I'd accumulated various treasures over the years of visits – an old ticket stub from a Cardinals game, a picture of me and my parents in happier days, earrings without mates, an amethyst ring of my grandmother's that I was always tempted to take home with me but never did. There was a packet of letters from George, the boy I'd almost made love with, there in that same room, when I was fifteen and a half; I took them out and slipped the rubber band off. I had put them there in the first place a couple of years after George and I met, thinking that since it was summer he might be home from college in St. Louis and I might get to see him. Bringing the letters to New Franklin with me was supposed to help me get my nerve up to call him – proof that there was a relationship between us I could presume upon – but it didn't work. Now, coming across them again, they still felt like mail.

At first the letters were only days apart – I could remember the anxiety of waiting for them, wondering if he still loved me, if I had said the wrong thing in my last letter, if all that had even been real. There I was back in Evanston, my parents openly unhappy with their marriage for the first time, my girlfriends still saying the same things about the same boys; it seemed impossible that a few hundred miles away there was a seventeen-year-old named George who was in love with me, whom I had been in bed with, fallen asleep with – even more impossible that I had done it with Augusta's blessing. Had that really happened to the same me who sat around the house on Forest View waiting for the mail, dreading what might happen between my parents, being told when to come in at night from nothing more exciting than a movie with my girlfriends M.J. and Jeanette?

Then there were not so many letters. Time did its work. The postmarks were a couple of weeks apart, then a month, then a couple of months. George endured senior year in high school, applied to colleges, got into Oberlin . . . I no longer understood why he bothered to write to a girl in Evanston. I didn't go back to New Franklin the

following summer, the only time I ever went a whole summer without visiting there, because my parents were separating and it was impossible to think of anything else. But I still had George's address, and now and then we still wrote. I began to think that it was only the interruptedness of our original relationship that kept the letters going. "I'm supposed to be reading Nietzsche, which I can't even spell, much less understand. I like Kierkegaard, but maybe I'd like him better if he wasn't so much of a Christian, which frankly strikes me as out of date ..."

Then I, too, was in college, in Boston. George had found a girlfriend; here was a letter telling me that, which I remembered had given me a couple of very peculiar days my freshman year. I was already lonely enough in Boston, where the weather seemed all gray and wrong and people in stores were universally rude, and then I got this letter from George and I wasn't even sure if I was entitled to be upset about it. Anyway, there was no one to tell except my roommate; I was sure she'd laugh at me if I did, and besides, she had the same name as the girlfriend, which was Elaine.

I didn't answer the girlfriend letter for a long time, and when I finally found something to say about it, George probably didn't care, or so I decided when he didn't answer my reply. Well, why should he – hadn't our relationship run its course?

Then there was one more letter, about a year later. It said nothing about the girlfriend. I was never even sure why he chose to send it to me, but it was the one I had re-read the most, and standing there I read it again.

"Dear Karen – "

(The handwriting was difficult, as in all of his letters, small, hasty-looking, very black, written with a fountain pen.)

"Are you there? Absurd question but I have to ask.

"Thinking about leaving school. School seems to be leaving me. Short on daylight but each day seems too long. Minutes take forever when you struggle with your will, trying to find that, some way to face the Void as we so glibly call it, a word that explains nothing. You can't will your will into being – *Catch-22* – and there you are or are not as the case may be. I don't know if you've been through this or not but I know that everybody who is awake has been. Most people have not, are not. Instead they walk around in absurdity with nothing to stand on but they don't know it, which may be enviable. I do anyway. What I've gotten in its place is I know what the books are about now. All

poets, novelists, philosophers who are any good are trying to find a way to face it. 'The Unnameable.' That's Beckett if you care. I have the skeleton key to half the books in the library – all the good ones – I know what made people write them. You pry the oyster open and you get this particular pearl but then the oyster can't close himself up again and go on with his oyster life. Not possible. No can do. Words of one syllable. Don't you hate it when people in suits talk about 'can do' and 'no pain, no gain' and such like horseshit? Roaring mindlessness, gaping abyss, they haven't got the first clue. If someone walked up and handed them the first clue they'd drop it in the trash. Poison, it might wake them up. Save me from such emptiness, people would rather fall into it than face it. I can understand that in a way. Maybe they guess what facing it would mean. Thank you, I prefer the greater emptiness, though 'prefer' is a joke since there doesn't seem to be a choice about this. It is there. Do you know this?

"At least this is serious. Life and death, really. Don't imagine I'm being melodramatic, that's the easy way out.

"Everybody writes the book because of this one thing, really, but that doesn't mean they have an answer, that's what drives me crazy. I just read a novel where the character spends the whole book thinking about how meaningless everything is and asking himself 'why live?' and then at the end he has his big revelation and gets the Answer and it turns out to be 'why not?' The back cover has the nerve to say stuff like 'a shattering tale of self-knowledge,' la la, what crap. The whole thing seems more like a bad joke on the reader to me. Plunge people further into despair.

"I don't know where this is going, by definition. If you know I wish you'd tell me. Leave school? Why not? They almost never say a word about the real thing, I don't know if they don't know or they don't dare, it's all incredibly intellectual but who cares? But who's to say it's any better anywhere else? Would it be worse to flip burgers? I haven't tried it.

"George."

Perhaps I kept re-reading this letter because each time felt like the first time. It changed as I got older; standing there in the silent house, knowing Augusta's news, I felt I understood it for the first time. I had felt that before but this was different. Maybe I could begin to answer it now, as I could not when I first got it. I had started ten times to write a reply but had never gotten far enough to mail it – usually it began with something about how in all the introductions to the books

we read the author's life always got summed up in a paragraph, born here in such and such a year, married so-and-so, Dean of St. Paul's, published this poem and that novel, died in some other year, and didn't that leave out everything that mattered? That was official knowledge; I was dissatisfied with it too. I almost knew everything he meant about the Void but I was afraid to, and I didn't know where to go after the first page of the reply I never finished. Now at least I knew that words could not have fixed what had been tormenting George, any more than they could cure Augusta now. No wonder I didn't have the Answer.

What was Augusta doing this minute, was there anything I could do for her?

I could almost feel a pressure from her room, as of a privacy jealously guarded, even from me. She had already broken her own rules by asking for my help, and now that she had done so, I had a feeling that her privacy felt invaded, even though she had been the one to ask.

For a while I tried to recall how my mother had treated me when I was sick and what everyone had done when my grandmother had her last illness, until I remembered that it was exactly that, acting the way people were supposed to around the sick, that Augusta couldn't stand. There was nothing to do but to trust my instincts, heartless as they sounded to a part of me: Leave her alone, eat lunch and mow the grass like any day, do anything you need to do, but don't let the continuity be broken.

I went downstairs and as I came out onto the back porch again I automatically bent down to check the dirt in the two big potted aralias that sat there – they were dry. There was some water in the watering can sitting on the bricks nearby, and I gave them that, trying to imagine how it would be if I inherited the house – coming out onto my porch, watering my aralias – but it was hollow without her, and what else would I do – teach in Collinsville, the way she had now for twenty years? I couldn't come here and live Augusta's life, or live here at all, I realized for the first time, without her. No point in leaving it to me. Maybe if she understood that, she'd realize that she absolutely could not die.

And anyway, was this a life, what she had lived so far? Was this enough?

Maybe she'd been close to the truth once when she said that perhaps she couldn't stand what people call happiness. But even saying that, she never seemed to understand that she made the choices. Like telling Charlie he had better things to do, or not letting herself stay with Allan after a week. Would she rather be sure of being in control than anything – rather than be loved? I had always wanted to push her out of that, to make her see things some way that would let her be happier, but no one could make Augusta do anything, and who was I, twenty years younger, to tell her how to live her life?

I still should have tried, I thought, as if the opportunity had passed.

In the late afternoon, hot and sweaty – the mower had broken down halfway through the back yard and I hadn't been able to fix it – I went upstairs to take a shower and when I came out there Augusta was, sitting on the floor next to the bookshelves, with a photograph album open on her lap.

"Look at this."

I sat down next to her in my bathrobe and she moved the old album over so it was half on her lap and half on mine. It smelled of age and dust and hot summers, the smell of attics full of things that have almost been forgotten. There was a row of scrapbooks on the bottom shelf, their leather backs cracked and frayed, which had sat there, as far as I could remember, all my life, taken for granted and never opened. No, perhaps that wasn't so – I had a vague memory of looking through them on a rainy afternoon once, as a child, in the farthest reaches of boredom. It had seemed to me then that these were pictures of an unimaginably distant past, populated by people I didn't know, their clothes impossible – comical – the pictures tiny and brown, and foreign even in that way, not at all what I knew a snapshot to be. I looked again; the picture that caught my eye was of a woman clearly not young, in a long polka-dot dress, sitting on a back porch holding up the arms of a baby who stood precariously between her knees. She wasn't looking at the camera but at the baby, studying it patiently. Behind her a girl child peeked out the back door, as if wondering how long this would take. I was on the verge of asking "Who's this?" but as I looked at the sepia flecks that were this girl's eyes I realized that was my mother, the woman was my grandmother, the baby was Augusta. How could I not have known? Even Augusta, a year old at the most, looked like herself, staring out at the camera seriously, concentrating on staying upright, determination written on her face that even then, in

its baby-roundness, somehow held the long, elegant face she'd carry through the world. I felt as though there were recognitions in me that I'd never known of, waiting to be brought to life, that I'd always known how these faces looked years before I had been born, and I was even a bit embarrassed that I needed to be reminded. The other pictures around that one opened up to me: my mother, at six or seven, in a pair of underpants standing under a sprinkler and laughing. Where was that part of her now, where had it gone? Augusta in a stroller – a clumsy thing, built as if babies weighed fifty pounds – looking to me like her present self trapped in the body of a toddler, thinking What the hell am I doing in this contraption; that made me smile. "Look at you," I said.

"I'm not exactly the Gerber baby, am I?"

I turned a couple of pages backwards; there was a young woman with her hair piled on the top of her head in complicated braids, wearing a high-necked white blouse with the tiniest buttons down its front, her hands clasped in front of her formally, a tentative, asked-for smile on her face – was this a graduation picture? Surely she was on the verge of something. I knew that look, I had been in her place, but I didn't know her; she was too far back. "Who is that?"

"My mom."

That made another jump inside me, a different one because even knowing who she was I couldn't make the connection; there was no bridge in me between this girl and my grandmother, who had been born old as far as I was concerned. Or never born at all; simply arrived from the country where grandmothers and grandfathers came from, into my child life, to be old and know everything and get older and die. How old was this hesitatingly beautiful girl, not even a woman yet, who could not imaginably become my grandmother? Eighteen at the most? I could see in her eyes – not a thought, just knowledge – that she would never age, that she would stay in the country of the young forever, and knowing the end of the story was cruel, as if my looking at her from after her death sent her a premonition no one would want – cruelest because I was she, because by looking I had to bear that lesson myself.

"Really something, isn't it?" Augusta said, and I nodded. "I think that was even before she got married."

"I should hope so, she looks about seventeen."

"She married young," said Augusta, in a tone which seemed to mean, It can be done. "Could be she gave Dad this picture when they were courting, I don't know. Maybe he had it taken. I doubt her family

would have spent the money on it, they didn't have much. He would have been working in the store then. Probably he was a partner in the store, I'm sure he was, because that was how he was able to marry her. She told me once that his father didn't want to lend him the money to buy into the business – he thought it was crazy to leave the farm and move into town – but he did it for her because he knew she really wanted to marry him. Dad wanting her he could have ignored, but he could never say no to my mother."

It was dizzying to think of these people having real lives, wanting each other undeniably, longing and scheming to get together – to think that went back and back in my own family. I had read countless novels and love poems but somehow that had never disturbed my conviction that I was inventing for the first time everything I went through – or maybe what I thought, deep down, was that in every generation a few exceptional people, like me, happened upon love and desire. Not everyone – far from it – and in particular not my grandparents.

Augusta turned a few pages; my grandmother was abruptly an adult, a mother. I recognized Augusta and my mother again, I caught a glimpse of the house. I wanted to stop and study it, see if it had changed at all, but Augusta flipped through the pages faster. "I know it's in here somewhere," she muttered. At the back, between the last page and the cover, was one more ancient snapshot, unmounted, stuck in. She pulled it out, handed it to me: it was a picture of a small boy, perhaps three years old, holding a ball, a child like any child but no one I knew. "I found that in her dresser after she died," Augusta said. "I'm sure that's Robbie."

"Ah," I said, remembering what I had heard from my mother, told in a low, guarded voice as if it were a secret or perhaps even, in some mysterious way, a source of shame. Robbie had been my grandparents' first child, the older brother of my mother and Augusta, who died of whooping cough when he was six.

"She never once talked about him to me, do you realize that? It was my dad who told me. She had this in an envelope with a lock of his hair. I never heard his name mentioned all the time I was growing up, not once. I guess they couldn't stand to talk about it. My father took me off somewhere and told me when I was fifteen; he said my mother wanted me to know but I had to promise never to mention it to her. I never did. Even when she was dying she didn't say his name. I used to think and think sometimes about what it would be like for something to hurt that much."

"Did my mom know?"

"She had sort of a faint memory of him, but she didn't really know what she was remembering until after Dad told me and I asked her about it. She would have been two when he died. I guess my father thought all along that she knew the whole story. But she knew somehow she wasn't supposed to talk about it."

And my mother had mentioned Robbie only once or twice to me; she had almost kept her mother's silence unbroken. Maybe there was no reason for her to have mentioned him, but the thought filled me with anger against all the silences that had prevailed in our house for most of my growing-up, as if what was really the truth about anything was too dark to be said. I had thought that started with my parents: a sort of blight that spread so gradually no one could notice it unless they came into our house from the outside, and even then at first they'd think we were only being polite around them. But the truth was, things that mattered didn't get said when the three of us were together. My father would try, in his oblique way, to say them to me, privately; but sometimes he was too considerate, too careful of me, I thought, to say what I needed to know – or perhaps he gave me too much credit for already understanding what he wasn't sure how to say. And now to discover that this was an inheritance – the reverse of a treasure – I refused it, I was damned if I'd take it, as it seemed Augusta had managed to refuse it before me.

The picture was still in my hand; he was just a child to me, a slightly blurry image at that. He didn't feel like family. How bad could grief be, never to be mentioned, to cut him off like that? Wasn't that the cruelest thing my grandmother could have done, even to herself, making the unbearable worse in the only way it could be?

All at once it struck me that the same thing was happening now, in Augusta's not telling; maybe she hadn't been able to refuse the inheritance after all. And hadn't I agreed to be her accomplice in this, to make the same mistake that it suddenly seemed we'd been making all along?

"Have you tried to reach Allan?" I asked, putting the picture back, not quite daring to look up for a moment. When I did, I thought perhaps Augusta had read everything that had gone through my mind, that she knew I was admonishing her and she didn't like it one bit.

"I thought I'd give him a chance to get home from work and take his tie off," she said. She looked grey again, and I felt a wave of guilt for having dragged her back from the past, from other people's sorrow and happiness. Some help you are, I thought to myself. To try

to make amends, I closed the album I was holding and opened another one, but it was too late; Augusta didn't even look, and I couldn't bring myself to pretend an interest in it.

"Do you think he really wants to know this?" she asked, getting up from the floor and heading toward the bathroom.

I hadn't bothered to imagine what he might want or not want. "Maybe not, but he cares about you, doesn't he?"

"I don't know when I've done anything to deserve it," Augusta said, closing the door behind her; but she hadn't contradicted me.

CHAPTER FIVE

When I came downstairs, no longer wearing my dirty gardening clothes, Augusta had started dinner. "No point in starving to death on top of everything else," she said.

"I'll cook if you don't feel like it."

"It's something to do."

"Do you want some help?"

"Go out and buy a bottle of wine. Buy two. Make it something good."

"I don't know anything about wine, you know that."

"Go to Corral Liquors and take their advice. Buy red. Take twenty bucks out of my wallet, it's on the shelf in the cupboard next to the car keys. In fact, why don't you see if there's enough there to buy a bottle of brandy, too? The hell with saving money, it hasn't made any difference so far."

There were thirty-two dollars in her wallet, and I left the two, thinking that she sounded like herself again all of a sudden and anything that might keep her sounding that way, I would do.

A couple of blocks from the house, at the corner by the little store where we bought forgotten items at the last minute, I pulled up to the stop sign and crossing my path in a pickup truck – a new one that I hadn't seen before – was Jerry. Like all of his trucks this one said "Reese Plumbing and Heating" on the side, and I could hear things clank in the back as he started up. I honked, waved at him, and he pulled over; I pulled up behind him and we both got out.

"Hey," he said, as if it had been about two days, and held out his callused hand to shake mine. He looked the same as always – graying, secretly amused. On every visit I ran into him sooner or later

somewhere in town and we always talked for a minute; we never mentioned the fact that he never came over anymore.

"You're working late," I said, hearing myself acquire a slight accent. There was something about Jerry that always made me feel I had lived in New Franklin all my life.

"What time is it, anyways?"

"Must be close to six. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm getting by. Seems like everybody in these new houses has central air, and they all want theirs fixed by yesterday. Did you finish school yet?"

I knew he didn't mean teaching. "I graduated last year, Jerry, I told you that, don't you remember?"

"You did? So what are you doing now?"

"I'm a teacher."

He raised his eyebrows and a look of tactfully suppressed amusement crossed his face; he nodded. "Are you really."

Well, it's not *that* funny, I thought, they did give me a credential. "Believe it or not. I'm teaching high school in Boston. English."

"It must be in the blood," he said, looking off up the street as if something interesting were over my shoulder. That was as close as he'd get to mentioning Augusta, I was pretty sure. I had known when I was fifteen that it would have been a mistake for Augusta to marry him, but every time I saw him I remembered how he must have felt about it. "How's the house holding up?" he asked.

"Okay," I said, suddenly longing to tell him everything, so much so that I couldn't go on for a moment. He looked at me as if to say, Are you all right? "How's yours?" I managed, remembering that he had been building himself a place out in the country.

"Pretty good – if I could just get everybody's air conditioning working and their drains unplugged, we might finish it this summer."

"We?" I looked for a wedding ring but he wasn't wearing one. "Have you got a girlfriend?"

For a moment he looked up at the sky as if this were a difficult question to decide. "Well . . . yeah," he admitted; his face seemed to add, I ought to know better, but . . .

That was Jerry's humor, I knew by now, and it actually made me want to laugh, mostly just from recognition of what it was. "It's about time," I said, though I knew nothing about Jerry's private life anymore. I was allowed to tease him, that was all that mattered. "What's she like? I'll bet you go for younger women."

He snorted. "Sure. They're nuts about me, too," he said, holding his hands out to his sides slightly as if to show off his greasy dark-green work clothes. Maybe that was what I liked about him – he was so used to being himself. Could I swear him to secrecy and tell him that Augusta had cancer and I was trying to help her get through it and she was going to have an operation in a week? It seemed to me that the facts would be less terrible if he knew them, that he would know something to say, would take some attitude that New Franklin understood which would have in it, after all, a wisdom I'd never come up with alone. But I had promised her – and even if I hadn't, it didn't seem right to unload it on him.

I shook his hand again. "I've got to go get something for dinner."

"Be around for a while?"

I nodded.

"Well, I'll be seeing you, then." He got in his truck, and waved without looking back as he drove off; for a moment, continuing toward the store, I almost felt abandoned.

At home Augusta had the radio on, and while we cooked and ate we didn't talk much, listening to what was wrong in Afghanistan and the Middle East, Sri Lanka, Wall Street, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission; other people's problems were comforting, they had nothing to do with our own. When we had finished, Augusta poured a little brandy in her wine glass and sat in silence slowly drinking it, visibly thinking; I didn't interrupt her. When the brandy was gone she got up and went upstairs; distantly, I could hear her close the door of her room.

I was finishing the dishes when she came back into the kitchen and sat down; she waited for me to look over at her before she said, "Well, I think we're going to have a visitor."

"We are?" Had she called my mother after all?

"Allan. I told him and he said, 'I'll be there.' First thing, like it was just obvious. I told him he didn't have to do that, but he paid no attention. I'm not even sure I want him to, but I don't think I can stop him."

Allan? Here? "When's he coming?" All I could feel was confusion, and by the look on her face, Augusta felt the same.

"Um – day after tomorrow. Or the day after that."

A couple of days at the most. Well, I wouldn't be in this alone, anyway, but what would we do with him? "Where's he going to stay?"

"Here, I guess. He said he didn't want to impose, but I can't see telling him to go sleep in a motel."

"Is he going to end up in the furniture room?" There was another bedroom next to mine, never opened, full of furniture that Augusta had decided was in the way and had moved in there after she inherited the house.

"That'll be pretty cozy, don't you think?" Augusta said.

"If he doesn't mind climbing over a few china cabinets to get to the bed."

"Maybe we'll get him to carry some of that stuff up to the attic."

"Maybe he'd be better off at a motel. Does he have any idea what he's getting into?"

"How could he? He hasn't seen me in fourteen years."

And yet he had said at once that he was coming out, as soon as she told him her news. "Are you glad he's coming?"

"Glad?" she said. "I don't know. I didn't tell him not to. I guess I am – the last time I saw him was at Penn Station, and he wasn't exactly happy with me for leaving." That was the part of the story I had never understood – why, after they had finally become lovers, years after they'd met in college – when they had their second chance, as Allan had called it in a letter I shouldn't have read, and Augusta, by her own telling of it, had been actually happy with him for a week – one whole week, out of a lifetime – why had she left and never gone back? That made no sense to me – or him, I was sure. "Of course, we've been writing forever, it's not as though he never got over it."

But the letter had said just the opposite; he was married by then, but he had gotten up in the middle of the night to tell Augusta he was still in love with her. She had half a dozen letters from that same summer in the shoe box I had found in the basement, and when I finally admitted I'd read one of them she said they were all like that. A long time had passed since then – seven years – but did things like that go away?

"What does he write to you about nowadays?"

"Oh – life and love. Being forty-two."

"So come on, tell me how you feel." There's no time left for us to mess around, I thought.

"Looks like we're going to find out, doesn't it?" She poured some more brandy in her glass and took a sip. "It could be pretty

awkward, I mean, what if he shows up and I realize I don't have anything to say to him after all?"

"Tell him to go back, I guess," I said, and thought to myself, Could it be that I'm jealous?

"Maybe I'll let you tell him. You made me call him up."

But maybe I was right, I thought, maybe it will be a help. "What was it like talking to him?"

"Strange. He calls me sometimes, but I haven't called him in years. I was afraid I was going to get his wife and have to tell her who I was. I don't know if Allan ever told her about me, or not, but I'd hate for her to know it was me calling if he ever did. Anyway, he answered." Augusta was silent for a while. "You know, you can't just call up somebody and say 'Hi, I've got cancer.' At least I can't. And what else is there to say? I think he knew something was wrong as soon as he heard my voice. I was trying to pretend to have a normal conversation, which was ridiculous because I never call him in the first place, and after a minute or so he wouldn't answer me. I thought for a second something was wrong with the line. Then he said, 'You called me about something.' I almost started to cry when he said that. It was like I wouldn't really have cancer until I said it out loud to him, and I had to say it.

"When I told him he didn't say anything for a long time. Then he said, 'I'll be there.' As if that was automatic. I told him he didn't have to, and he said, 'You might need somebody to talk to.' So how the hell could I say no to that?"

"He must really love you."

"Or think he does."

I made a show of not commenting on that.

"I'm just not cut out for somebody on a white horse to come along and rescue, that's all. Especially somebody who's already married."

"What's he going to tell his wife?"

"He didn't say."

Inside I wasn't sure how I felt. Maybe this would cause so much trouble with his wife that he wouldn't come – was that what I was hoping for? If it was, I had only myself to thank. But forget your almighty self, I thought. How many times had my mother told me I was self-centered? Actually only a few, but it had hit the mark, every time. "Selfishness is one of the few things that won't cause cancer," Will had said to me once, to comfort me about that, and in a funny way it had worked; but now the thought was grisly.

"He's going to be in for a hell of a shock when he sees me," Augusta said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Why?"

"Oh, come *on*."

"Well, he's fourteen years older, too. You might be the one who gets shocked."

"It's too late for that," she said, and poured a little more brandy into her glass. "You want some of this stuff?"

"Just a little." But when I tried it, it was too strong – caustic, almost. I couldn't understand how drinking that got to be fun.

"I wish you could have seen us in college," Augusta said. "We must have been a real sight. You wouldn't believe what an effort we made to be intellectuals. Probably because we were at the U. of I. instead of that snooty Eastern school you went to. You ever been in the Union there?"

"No."

"Well, it doesn't matter. We'd sit over a cup of coffee for hours at a table where a hundred people had carved their names in the top, and have these incredibly tangled philosophical arguments. We didn't even understand them ourselves, nobody else could have. Neither of us had any money so it took no effort at all to look like impoverished students, and anyway, I think we were proud of being broke."

That was no surprise; as far as I could tell, she still was, which reminded me – the gutter on the front porch was coming off, and shouldn't someone do something about it? Maybe that would be Allan's job; he didn't know he was asking for that.

"Maybe that was all part of the act. I mean, it wouldn't do for intense young intellectuals to be rich, now would it? But here's what else – somehow we got it into our heads to pretend that we were above passion, that this was all a pure affair of the mind – which I'm sure won't make one bit of sense to you now that you're so old and jaded. It doesn't to me, anymore. I suppose that was intended to set us apart from the hoi polloi. I didn't even realize at the time what a couple of snobs we were. I'm sure we were dying for people to notice all this and be generally awestruck, which of course they failed to do. It was ridiculous, but God, was it innocent."

Augusta looked away, in the direction of the dark back yard beyond the window screens. The word "innocent" repeated itself in my mind; it was not one I had ever thought of in connection with Augusta. Just the opposite; she had always been the person who did and said what I thought you shouldn't, who kept showing me that the fences I

thought were there didn't exist after all. If there was one thing she threatened it was my innocence, but what about her own? And was it still there, somewhere inside, unchanged – could it be innocence, after all, that made her do everything she did?

"Anyway, we'd sit there and have these philosophical arguments, and then Allan would walk me back to my dorm, and we'd hold hands, and when we got there he'd give me one kiss, which would sort of embarrass both of us, and then he'd march off in this very intense and purposeful way. I don't know whose benefit this was all for. Only one night we were walking back in the middle of the winter and right in front of the dorm I slipped on some ice and when I fell, he fell too because I had such a grip on his hand. There's nothing like slipping on ice and lying there on the sidewalk with your legs sticking up in the air, right when people are coming back from the library, to make you feel like a fool. We got snow down our necks, and both of us were pretty sure that at least twenty people had seen us take a pratfall together. So we went inside the entryway and brushed the snow off ourselves, and each other, and then he really kissed me. I guess there was no point in pretending anymore. I kissed him back, believe me. I felt as though we'd never stop. If we'd been at his apartment, where there was some privacy, maybe we wouldn't have. But that didn't happen."

"Why not?" I said, when I realized she wouldn't go on. That was what I always wanted to know – why every part of this story, every time she came back to it, ended with "but that didn't happen."

"Oh – I don't know. Maybe I let people talk me out of it because I was Presbyterian and he was Jewish. A lot of our friends couldn't get their little minds around that."

"Since when does anyone tell you who to go to bed with?"

"I was young. Younger than you."

But I still didn't believe her. If she'd been willing to lose her virginity to Jerry at seventeen in the back seat of a car, I was sure that a couple of years later no one would have talked her out of sleeping with Allan but herself. It must be doubly difficult now, I thought, to look back on that; but Augusta wouldn't meet my eyes. For a long time neither of us could come up with anything to say.

*

I was standing in my room in my nightgown, unable somehow to get in bed and end the day, when an impulse struck me that I

couldn't resist. I went back out into the living room and pulled the photograph albums off their shelf and opened them again, flipping past people I didn't know, past my mother as a child and in high school, my grandfather at his store, the family lined up at Christmas in front of the tree, the two girls surrounded by wrapping paper and ribbon, holding presents. Past my parents when they were first married – after a moment their happiness was too difficult to look at. For a while I thought I wouldn't find what I was looking for. Then I turned a page and there was Augusta, a few years younger than me, tall and a little awkward-looking, but so beautiful nevertheless that I wondered if all the boys had been afraid of her. Her eyes looked as if she already knew exactly what kind of person she was, knew that life would be uncompromising – and was ready for that, welcoming it – daring it, even. It was the courage in her that I had always loved, and I had wanted to see it and the innocence both at once, side by side; I had never understood before what the rest of her was called. There it was, nakedly there, open to the world's gaze, with no protection but itself, enough to break the heart, or bind the heart for keeps to the soul that shone so close to the surface. That was what had happened to Allan; I knew as if told in so many words, and I knew that under all the layers of herself nothing had changed, not really, she had only become more like herself despite everything – despite New Franklin and keeping up appearances, despite never finding someone to love for long – I knew, even if no one else knew and Augusta herself denied it, that the same Augusta was still there, still ready for life to begin, and I couldn't bear the thought that she might die without having let it happen.

When I heard her footsteps on the stairs I closed the album and put it back and stood up, feeling that I didn't know what to do with myself, fidgeting as I waited for her to get to the top. "What is it?" she said when she saw me, but I couldn't answer, I could only go to her and put my arms around her whether she wanted me to or not. For a moment she returned my embrace, and then she let go and I felt I had to let go too.

She moved past me and stood looking out the screen door that led out to the front porch roof, and after a few moments of watching her straight back I went and stood at her side. Out there were other second stories, some lit up, some dark, roofs and trees, streetlights making dim pools; from the trees the insects sang, as ever, some in a sustained whirring that never changed, some in waves that came and went – their sound seemed to spiral around inside itself, and to lead the mind into that same whirling, out into the hypnotic night. Augusta

laid her hand on my shoulder, and I reached up to touch it with my own. I love you, I wanted to say, but she already knew that and I couldn't speak.

A L L A N

CHAPTER SIX

I finally realize I can't turn back when I'm actually in the jetway and the door to the gate area is in sight. This may be the stupidest thing I ever did, but it's going to happen anyway, and even though my life is about knowing what to say to people, I don't have the words.

At the last possible moment I notice my carry-on bag is about to knock over the little girl in front of me who is trotting to keep up with her mother's pulling hand. I rein myself in, pressing back against the pressure from behind; then everybody stops and for a while we're all jammed in the sloping metal corridor while a knot of people at the front of the line shout and kiss. At first I try to look past them and find Augusta, but there's too much confusion and I don't want my first glimpse of her after fourteen years to come in the midst of confusion. I walk through the doorway keeping my eyes on the kid in front of me, until I'm a step or two inside the gate area, and then I look up and Augusta is the first person I see, as if she has a spotlight on her. The gray in her hair surprises me, and the thinness of her scares me, but I expected her to be thin. What I'm not ready for is her presence itself, her being more than a memory, more than an idea.

"Hello," I say, holding out my hand and wondering if she's going to take it, as if nothing at all is guaranteed, not even elementary politeness.

"Hello." Our hands touch, one moment longer than necessary.

"So – it's been a long time," I say, and she gives me a look that seems to say, No shit.

"How was your flight?"

"Fine." She turns to go and I follow.

"Did they feed you on the plane?"

Who cares? "So to speak – that stuff they call food. They only give it to you to keep your hands busy."

"So the devil won't find work for them?" she says, not looking my way, and I think maybe I have made a big mistake after all, sticking myself into a situation where I can't do any good.

"Actually," I say, "I didn't bring the devil with me on this trip."

"Who did you bring?"

What does that mean? She makes me as uncomfortable as a teenager. "I didn't bring anybody else," I say, conscious of sounding defensive. "Nobody but me."

"Good," Augusta says, and I seem to have accidentally passed some test. What will the next one be?

"Look," she says. "I know you feel awkward. Skip that. I haven't got time."

"If you say so." I'm willing to try, but why won't she look at me? I'm not the only one feeling awkward. She's marching along under the digital clocks and the signs for rest rooms and snack bars as if everything hinges on getting to the baggage claim in the next three minutes. "Have you got a bag?" she asks.

"Wait a while. Stop. I mean it. Stop a minute." When I stop walking she has to turn around and come back.

"What is it?" Finally she's facing me, with annoyance written on her face.

"Slow down." I stand and look at her, refusing to move and not letting her get away from my eyes.

"I want to get out of here, I can't talk to you here."

"You don't have to."

She blinks and looks away. "Okay." She turns again and we resume walking, saying nothing, among the people who all look terribly Midwestern to me; an amazing number of them are blond.

Fourteen years, I keep thinking. At one end of the fourteen years, Penn Station; at the other, the St. Louis airport. In between, what? Work, marriage – career, so-called – crises predicted, or dictated, by advice columns and the books one sees in the front windows of stores. Being here, where I once went to college and fell in love with Augusta, makes me wonder if it was all a detour.

I hardly look at Augusta beside me; the strangeness of being next to her is enough. All these years I've been calling this thing between us love whenever I thought about it, and now I don't even know what comes next or what we'll ever say to each other. In the habits of marriage I've forgotten this kind of separateness – jittery, on

edge, one jump from love or indifference, anger or contentment, hello or goodbye. Like having an affair. But this is something else altogether. At the baggage claim we wait for my suitcase to come out without a word, as if we knew each other well enough not to talk.

Leaving the terminal building seems to release me from a spell; for an instant I feel as if we might be any two people coming out into St. Louis weather. "Is it always this hot?" I ask.

"Mostly," she says, in a country way; I wonder if she's putting it on for my benefit. In her voice I can hear the inflection I've noticed in all the voices around me since I got off the plane. So she has an accent, then? Or I do. That takes me back to college – coming to Champaign from Washington, D.C. and being looked at a certain way the first few weeks: you talk different.

Augusta points off across the rows of cars in the parking garage, stretching away under dim light. "It's that way." Around the edges of the building, daylight glares too bright to see out into. "What did you tell your wife about this trip?" she asks.

"Not much. I don't think it matters a great deal to her, anyway."

"Oh, really?"

"Well – we don't actually see each other that much. She's up to her neck in the plant business, she leaves early and I get home late. We share a house. That's about where it is." At any rate, it's easier if I tell it that way. The garage echoes with the slam of a distant car door, an engine starting up, the hydraulic screech of power steering.

"Plant business?"

"She's the plant maven of College Park, didn't I tell you?"

"No."

"She had a retail store first, then she got some contracts to supply plants for office buildings and maintain them all the time. I think the next step's going to be decorating. She's started selling antique planters, that type of thing. She's got three people working for her now, and they still have more work than they can handle."

"So what did you tell her?" Augusta says. I should have known she wouldn't let that go by.

"I told her I had to conduct a series of interviews in the St. Louis area on behalf of a client. It's not that unbelievable. I spent two weeks in North Carolina last month working on a discrimination case."

"Does she know about you and me?"

"No. Not really." Not this. "She knows your name – actually, I don't know if she could come up with it unless something reminded her. She knows I went out with you in college, she must have seen

letters from you in the mail. But she probably doesn't think anything of it. Given that you write about once a year on the average."

That gets a rise out of her – a sidelong glance: Oh yeah? "Twice," she says.

"I stand corrected."

"It's this one," she says, indicating a yellow VW wagon, past middle age. She opens the back for me to put my bag in. Here she is chauffeuring me, when I supposedly came out to help her. Is she suffering and refusing to let it show? That would be like her – if I know what she's like anymore.

We get in the car and Augusta starts it up and puts it in reverse; with her foot on the clutch she pauses and looks me in the eye. "So do you still love her?" she says, and that's the Augusta I remember. "I'm still married to her," I say. No point in being evasive if the other party knows that's what you are. But I can't bring out the word No.

"Are you having an affair with someone?" She sounds as if she's taking a deposition; where will she decide to stop? But I didn't come here to avoid saying what matters.

"No."

"Not right now, anyway," she says.

"It's not something I'm proud of. Especially lying to her. I didn't think it would come to that. I think she's had a couple of affairs herself. Not that that excuses anything. We try not to find out, is what it comes down to."

Augusta maneuvers the car through the lanes of the parking garage, the tires squeaking on the oily concrete, stops at the booth and pays with money from my wallet. We pull out into the full glare of sunlight and she turns on the car's air conditioning and gestures to me to roll my window up; the net effect is no better, maybe worse. "I don't get it," she says.

"What?"

"Your marriage."

For a moment I wonder why we're talking about me, if she's indulging me in a peculiar way. Maybe I'm putting on her the burden of hospitality and this is her way of discharging it. Maybe it's better than talking about herself.

If it's what she wants, it's what I'm here for. But I still don't know what to tell her about my marriage. Can I sit here and say that I still love Amy? "I think it's the path of least resistance," I say finally. "Maybe there's still something we have to do together."

"Like what?"

Augusta drives for a while in silence, and every answer I try out in my mind sounds false. "Okay, so maybe there isn't. Maybe we just haven't gotten around to admitting it yet."

Augusta gives me that look that you get from two kinds of people: teachers and therapists. "It may have occurred to you," she says in the most detached tone, "that life doesn't go on forever."

Why did you leave me? I want to say. Why did any of this happen? But all I can say at first was "Yes, it has." We're on the Interstate, heading toward downtown St. Louis; but where I am or even where I came from doesn't matter, what matters is the woman next to me, and I haven't seen her in fourteen years. Crazy to have kept on thinking of her all that time, feeling her as a presence – what am I to her, or she to me? I had no business, all that time, thinking of her as my first wife. The wife I didn't marry. Especially because on any day in all those years, if I had ever decided to do it, I could have bought a plane ticket and been in her presence a few hours later. But I never did.

"Look at me," she says. "Am I going to die?"

It's amazing how much the same she looks – the same hair, the same shoulders – nothing will ever change her straight nose or the line of her jaw. She is thinner – or bonier – did that happen only recently? It's as though, in some weird way, she's the girl I met in college and at the same time another Augusta is there in front of that girl, blocking her from my view. Her eyes look a bit ferocious now, and her head is not held the same way. She carried herself like a dancer back then, the way dancers show their breastbone to the world – exposing the chest in a way that looks vulnerable. Now she's still straight up, but she looks stiff, as if she's holding herself that way by an act of will or even defiance. Or maybe that's pain I'm seeing. "No," I say, "you're not," but I'm not so sure.

"Good." She holds out her hand toward me without taking her eyes off the road. I take her hand, and though I remember that that touch was a kind of home to me at one time, it is as awkward as a first date. All of a sudden I'm aware of myself being in the way, like something that you trip over and bark your shins, and I imagine Augusta thinking to herself, What the hell am I going to do with him?

"Talk to me," she says. "Tell me what's going to happen."

"You're going to have this – operation" – I don't want to say its name – "and it's going to turn out to have been in time, and probably they'll do some chemotherapy to make sure, and that'll be the end of it."

"And I'll live happily ever after?" she says, making me feel that I am a fool to have imagined I could bring her any comfort.

"I don't know about that."

"Who would," she says, relenting. She glances over at me and looks back at the road. "I'm sorry, I'm not very good company."

"Augusta, I don't expect you to entertain me, I didn't come out here to impose on you. If I am, tell me to go home."

She shakes her head. "No."

"Well, when we get to New Franklin, point me toward a motel and I'll be there whenever you think I can be some use. I brought some books I've been meaning to read."

"I think maybe there's room for you in my house," she says, as if that were obvious. It's not to me; the one time I went there, our senior year in college, she invited me home for Thanksgiving, and the centerpiece of the Thanksgiving dinner was a ham. Putting me in my place. I left without eating a bite, and she left with me – it turned out her sister had had the bright idea of sending me a message that way. That started quite a fight between the two of them, I eventually discovered, which was fine with me. But that night something happened that I've relived a thousand times: we ended up riding back to Champaign on the bus, without a dinner, and when we finally got there it was about four in the morning and freezing cold, and she said she wanted to come to my apartment and sleep with me. We had never made love; that night on the bus was the only night we had ever spent together; I had never entirely understood what was holding her back, and I had wanted her for over a year. But when she said it that night all I could think was that she was doing it to prove something, to get back at them, to show she could love me even though I was Jewish – I couldn't help wondering if deep down she had some of her sister in her, if that had been the barrier all along, and I told her some of that and took her back to her dorm. When I realized that maybe I'd given her that answer because I had something to prove, it was too late for second thoughts. Which has not stopped me from having them, more times than I can count. And now here I am, twice the age I was then, going back; it's Augusta's house now, we're the adults, but inside me I still carry the same knotted uncertainty I felt the first time.

"Either you get the room with all the extra furniture in it – only I'm not sure you can actually get to the bed in there – or else the daybed in my study. Or move some of the furniture. Actually, if you did that, you'd really be doing us a favor."

"Us?"

"Me and Karen. My niece. I told you on the phone she was here, don't you remember?"

"Now that you mention it." I've heard Karen's name in Augusta's letters, but I'm not even sure how old she is; I neglected to imagine that there would be another person in Augusta's house.

"It was Karen who made me call you, as a matter of fact."

Why would she do that, she doesn't even know me, and if Augusta needed to have her arm twisted before she'd call me up . . .

"Well, I'll move some furniture if you want," I say. But I'm not sure I'll be allowed the privilege of the ordinary.

"Don't agree until you see it."

We pass through a series of interchanges among new hotels and office buildings, old warehouses, signs for the Gateway Arch, past one monumental stainless-steel leg of the Arch and then the other, and then we're on the bridge carrying the Interstate across the Mississippi. There are ominous swirlings on the water's opaque tan surface; I have a feeling a swimmer in that river would surely drown. The bridge is nothing but a stretch of highway that happens to be over water, but to me the crossing still feels like a dangerous one. Then more interchanges, more dilapidated factories, a railroad yard, a choice between Chicago and Louisville, and abruptly we are on a highway heading toward New Franklin through the Illinois countryside, hot, grassy, open, a whole world where you would never know that any such thing as the East Coast existed. There doesn't even seem to be a past – just the hot fields and the present moment, Augusta, the cancer cells inside her trying to fulfill their mission, and my tense and regretful self, on the brink of whatever's coming next.

K A R E N

CHAPTER SEVEN

I knew as I sat in the living room trying to read a Dickens novel that I didn't want Allan to arrive. I regretted ever having asked Augusta to call him. Any minute now she might get back from the airport, with him in tow, and everything would be changed. It was one thing to hear stories about him and wonder why they had never managed to get together, and another thing entirely for him to come and invade our world. I went into her room to look at the clock by her bed; if his plane had been on time, she ought to be back. They'd be in her car – had been for some time – in the same place together after not seeing each other for years. She had been quiet and jumpy all day, but it was impossible to say if Allan's arrival was the cause of that. I looked into the mirror over her bureau as if I could see there how she was feeling and whether letting Allan come out had been a mistake, but all I saw, of course, was myself, looking scattered and guilty, as if I had caught myself at something.

Get out of here, I thought to myself. Take a walk, do something, get away from this. Here was the one chance I'd had since I arrived to be alone with myself, to stop thinking about what was happening to Augusta – because I had it in my head that Allan took over that job as soon as he stepped off the plane, at least until they got here – and I'd wasted it sitting on the couch trying to read *David Copperfield*. I put on my sneakers and almost ran down the stairs and out the front door, suddenly eager to get away from Augusta's, to see something else – people going to a grocery store after work, kids hanging out at a mall, anything. There was still plain unconscious life out there where people weren't thinking about cancer and the possibility of dying much too young – could anything be better?

It was only two blocks to downtown, so-called: the street of stores along the railroad tracks, with the other main drag at a right angle to them and leading to the shopping plaza at the edge of town. As I crossed the tracks the tops of the rails were so shiny, polished by all those wheels rolling over them, that their gleaming almost made them seem liquid; I knew if I bent down to feel them they'd be hot to the touch after a day in the sun. One way was the rest of Illinois, then Indiana, then too far away to imagine, the East Coast; the other way, the river, St. Louis – farmland forever, all the way to the Rocky Mountains. I thought, not for the first time, about how those rails right under my feet were physically connected to other train tracks that went all over the country, that I was touching something that was also in Albuquerque and Chicago and New York. It was even in Boston, close enough to where I lived that sometimes at night I could hear the horn of a train going by. Thinking that made me feel for a moment, as I wandered on in the general direction of Downtown Market, as if I stood in Boston and saw myself in New Franklin from that impossible distance – a miniature town in the middle of an ocean of Midwest, an entire New Franklin that was no more than a dot, and myself a speck inside that dot. For a moment that was tremendously comforting – how could that speck feel anything? – but only for a moment; I couldn't stay at that end of the telescope. And besides, if I saw myself from the outside, wouldn't I look perfectly ordinary, like anybody else walking down the street? Wouldn't Augusta? Wake up, I thought, and all of a sudden the town seemed to be on fire with what was in people's hearts, and there was no ordinary life.

No escape, either. Well, no – there were escapes, things like reading *Glamour* or watching TV shows, but only if I could stand them, if I could forget about their insane irrelevance, and I didn't think I could do that. Maybe baseball. It worked for Augusta, even now. At least she continued to listen to ball games, watch them when they were on television, read about them in the paper every day; she actually seemed to care what happened. Maybe she wasn't kidding when she said that my education had been neglected because I didn't know how to read a box score.

The crossing signals started to ding, making me look back and realize that if a long freight came by I could be cut off from Augusta's for quite a while. Sometimes they took forever to go through town, sometimes they even stopped. The train blew its horn – I couldn't see it yet from where I stood, half a block away from the crossing – and something made me run back to the tracks, look up and down them –

yes, it was coming, but there was time – and cross back to Augusta's side. So, I thought, as it came through, the roar of the diesels peaking as they passed, and then the long clatter and racket of the freight cars making a moving wall that divided the town – so I wasn't quite as anxious to get away as I imagined.

I turned the corner toward the house, feeling hot even from that little run, and there was Augusta's car in front, with no one in it, and I realized that when I went inside Allan would be there. For a moment I felt as though I had gone back to being a visitor, as though I should have stayed home so that he would have come and found me already in the house, cool and self-possessed, and then that seemed so silly and self-centered that I was embarrassed to have thought it. Who did he think I was, I wondered, and did he know how much I'd heard about him and Augusta? Was he aware that I knew that the first time they made love was in a sleeping car on the way from St. Louis to New York? Not to mention that my own mother had been the one to try to jinx him and Augusta by serving a ham at Thanksgiving to him, the Jewish boyfriend. It would be intolerable if he thought that I was my mother over again.

I crossed the front lawn diagonally toward the front porch. There was a colony of huge, evil-looking hornets – cicada killers – living in the hedges on either side of the front walk, and I wondered if Allan had gone up the walk among them and how he had felt about it if he had. They didn't bother people, but it had taken me most of a week to believe that firmly enough to walk by them when Augusta wasn't there to lead the way. Now as I passed by the end of the hedge, where they were circling menacingly as usual, I made a point of pride out of not speeding up or altering my path toward the porch steps.

I opened the front door; from somewhere in the back of the house I could hear Augusta's voice, and then a male voice answering her. I tried to picture its owner in the last moment, as I passed through the back sitting room and the back hall and came into the kitchen; there they were at the table, Augusta and a big man, bigger than I'd thought he'd be, a man with graying hair, a mustache and a curly beard standing up and holding out his hand to me. "This is Karen," Augusta was saying, nervously I thought, and he was smiling in a social way and looking too old to be the Allan I'd always imagined, more like a father than a lover.

I shook his hand; it was strong, definite. "How do you do?" he said. "I've heard a lot about you."

Was that only politeness? "I've heard a lot about you, too," I said, glancing at Augusta to see if I was supposed to tell him that.

"Really," he said. "What kind of things?"

Did he expect me to repeat the stories I'd heard, right there on the spot? "Everything," Augusta said. "Nothing is sacred around here."

"Everything?"

"Practically," she said. "You might as well assume you have no secrets."

He looked away from us and exhaled sharply, making his eyes round – a little performance he was giving us, intended to be funny, I could see – then looked back at her and said, "I suppose it's easier that way."

"Especially since you don't have a choice," Augusta answered, and I could feel that she was playing with him in her best hard-as-nails way. For a moment the old suppressed amusement danced inside her, and I forgot about wishing that Allan hadn't come. He looked from her to me and back like someone put in his place, but I could see that he was still playing a part, and liking it. Was this their language? "Let's show him the house, what do you say?" she said to me, heading for the back hall.

"Do you remember it?" I asked him.

"Not very well. So you've heard the story of my one visit?"

"I told you, she knows," Augusta said. "This is the back sitting-room, which no one ever sits in – there's the most out-of-tune piano on the planet – that little room was supposed to be a conservatory but its growth was stunted in its youth, or something. All it does is sit there and get hot in the summer. And this" – she opened the door – "is my study, where I've graded more student papers than I care to imagine, and where Karen once spent an entire summer making out with a dashing seventeen-year-old named George –"

"Wait a minute!" I protested.

"All right, half a summer," she said, crossing the front hall. "Anyway, it's only fair if I tell him a few choice tidbits about you. Let's see, this is the parlor, which is not terribly interesting – let's go upstairs." I hadn't seen her so alive since I had come to New Franklin; now I realized that I had grown used to another Augusta, maybe resigned to her never being this way again, and only now did I feel how much grieving that had required of me. "I'll bet you never even got upstairs when you were here."

"I don't think I did."

"This is where the serious business goes on," she said, indicating the living room, "you know, reading and watching ball games."

"Still one of those poor, misguided Cardinal fans," Allan said in a mock-sympathetic voice.

"Yes, and if you mention any of those New York teams in this house you may end up sleeping in the garage."

"Oh yeah? I've switched to the Orioles. At least they win something once in a while."

She pointed a finger at him. "Watch yourself." As she looked away, Allan slid me an amused glance; but I was still getting used to him, and I wasn't ready to return it as I should have. Augusta opened the door to the third bedroom, the one no one used, and said, "On the other hand, this might be punishment enough." I hadn't looked in this room in several years, and it appeared that no one else had, either. The shades were drawn, and it was dim and smelled of age and sealed-up air. Two dusty chests of drawers stood in the way of getting into the room; behind them were several armchairs with sheets over them, a couple of floor lamps, a bed with tall ornate bedposts. Boxes covered most of the floor. "Looks like you're not going to sleep in here," she said. "Unless this sort of thing appeals to you."

"Well . . ."

"When I moved in I shoved this stuff in here and pretty much forgot about it, and ever since then it's seemed like too much trouble to fiddle with."

"What's in all those boxes?" Allan asked.

"Oh – books, mostly. My parents' books. The ones out there on the shelves are mine. Old *National Geographics*, *Life* magazines, I don't know why I couldn't throw them away. You could probably relive the Fifties week by week if you dug through those boxes long enough."

"Wouldn't be any shortage of stuff to read in bed," Allan said.

"Assuming you could get in it in the first place."

"So what about moving some of those boxes?"

"Uh . . . if you want to carry two tons of old magazines up the attic stairs, please be my guest. In fact, I'll lie on the couch and watch you do it and say 'Nice job' every few minutes, just to help you out."

"Fair enough," he said in an offhand way, as if lugging boxes had been what he had in mind all along.

Augusta looked at me. "Think he means it?" she asked, as if he couldn't hear.

Allan looked at me too. "I'm a pushover," he said.

"You must be," I replied, but I had a distinct feeling that was only true when the right person pushed. Allan took hold of one of the chests of drawers and wrestled it back a few inches, as far as it could go before it ran into an armchair; then he turned the other one so it was backed up against the first instead of at right angles to it, the way Augusta had pushed it into the room. That made a bit of a corridor toward the boxes. Already I could see that he was probably as strong as both of us put together.

"So where's the attic?" he said. I opened the undersized door just outside the bathroom and flipped on the light, and he looked up the cramped, narrow stairs. "Uh-huh," he said. "I'm beginning to get the picture." He had to duck his head slightly to get through the door.

"It's probably about a hundred and twenty up there," Augusta said. "You might want to wait a while." Like till the winter, I thought.

"Oh, not to worry. It's always best to do crazy things right away, before you have time to change your mind."

Augusta got a considering look on her face, as if she intended to say something and then thought better of it. "Far be it from me to stop you," she said. "I'll do my half." She lay down on the couch, hands behind her head, and gave him an expectant look. "Okay, go."

"I'm nuts," Allan said, shaking his head, and went into the room. In a moment he reappeared with a box in his hands, fitted himself through the attic door, and we heard his footsteps slowly mount the stairs. "Where do you want me to put this?" he called from above.

"I don't care," Augusta called back, and gave me a highly amused look. "I haven't even been up there in about three years," she said to me in an undertone. "If he actually does this, it'll be too good to be true."

"Usually you at least let people unpack before you make them start working."

"Hey, he asked for it."

Allan came down the stairs, much faster. "You weren't kidding about the temperature up there." But he headed straight for the bedroom and came out this time with two boxes, one on top of the other, which made me realize that he really might do it.

"Nice work," Augusta said from the couch; in passing, he gave her a look compounded of sarcasm and amusement. He's still in love with her, I thought, and felt that I was in the way.

"I think I'll go get some iced tea," I said. "You want some?"

"Sure. Bring some for the help, too."

But downstairs I found that there was only enough iced tea for the two of them. I brought two glasses up and went back down. Ice water would do just as well; it wasn't that that was bothering me. Look, I lectured myself, standing in the kitchen with a glass in my hand, I do want her to be happy, don't I? So what the hell is my problem?

It took a minute, drinking down the cold water, to reach the obvious: if I was suffocating, it had nothing to do with Augusta at all.

I went into Augusta's study and closed both doors. From above I could still hear Allan carrying boxes, and Augusta's voice occasionally, but I couldn't make out the words. The windows were raised, and the shutters were closed, so that air could come in but not sun. Brightness leaked around the slats of the shutters; their dark green seemed black by contrast. There was one missing slat – enough to keep the room from being dark, though it looked dark if I let my eyes rest for a moment on that strip of glare. In the dimness I sat down on the daybed and propped a cushion behind me. Too hot. I got up and turned on the fan that sat on the floor, moved it so that it would blow toward me, sat back down and pulled up the skirt of my dress to get every bit of breeze on me that I could, let my head rest against the wall.

I had been all wrong to imagine that I didn't want Allan to come – now that he was here, Augusta was taken care of, and I wasn't on duty anymore. At last. I had been on duty ever since she had unwillingly told me her news, the night I arrived. And now, perversely enough, I felt robbed – of distraction – and there was my merciless self waiting for me, it had pounced already and I was in its grasp.

Surely other people handle life better than I do, I thought, surely they don't feel so much like a fraud. The day Will and I met, when he took me out to dinner, I confessed to him I hadn't been able to set foot in the teacher's lounge. I didn't have the nerve to pretend I was one of them. I hardly knew him but I couldn't stop myself from telling him that, and he said something that actually comforted me – what was it? "You're going to be okay, it's the people who cruise in and think they're doing everything fine who turn out to be lousy teachers." He truly was a good person, and what thanks had I given him in the end except to dump him or what was even worse, string him along without even the guts to say it was over. I knew the exact day I should have done it and couldn't. We were at the Arboretum and there were all these families and couples hand in hand, and we were wandering around holding hands like everyone else and saying how beautiful the daffodils were and so on and so on and I was so fake I wanted to throw

up. He even took a picture of me smiling away hating myself inside, and I knew the words on the back of that picture, if he ever got it developed, should be 'Imitation Girlfriend.' Next day I told him we probably shouldn't see each other for a little while, so incredibly namby-pamby, such spineless words when I should have said I couldn't stand it any longer. But I couldn't even do that right, I still saw him sometimes, I even slept with him though I told myself I wouldn't.

Sick of myself, sick of having a personality, having to cater to my own stupid contradictory feelings as if my desires made such an enormous difference in the world. What did it matter if I ever understood what I wanted or got it, who cared, would it mean anything to anyone in a hundred years? Of course not. Shut up and want what you're given.

Other people knew that was how to live a life. Liz got married right after we graduated and no one seemed to think that was so absurd, not even me. She was made of different stuff than I was, running a church day camp the summer before our senior year, taking busloads of eight-year-olds to Walden Pond, keeping them from drowning or killing each other, things I could never do. I was busy having an affair with an older man that I worked for.

Memory always circled back to the same moment. Senior year of high school, coming back from a weekend with MJ at her family's cabin by a lake – and supposedly a couple of other girls, but that was a lie, our boyfriends met us there – I walked back into my house, trying to take in what had happened there in secret, and in the front hall, where the mail ought to be, was a note from my father that said that over the weekend her mother had packed her things and left. He was sitting upstairs in the study with the door closed waiting for me to read it and come to him. I tried to say it would be okay, knowing it couldn't be for him, I tried not to notice that he had been crying, and afterwards I lay on my bed and gnawed over the guilt of knowing I had helped drive her away. My mother and I could no longer be in the same room for more than five minutes, it was never going to work for my parents no matter what they tried, and what I could never tell my dad I felt was relief.

None of that ever happened in Liz's house. And when the Will in Liz's life asked her to marry him, of course she didn't hesitate to say yes.

How could I have let myself get pregnant with Will? That was the worst. What was I, asleep? I took biology, I knew the sperm fertilized the egg, but even when I realized how careless I was being, I didn't stop. I squirmed remembering how I would say "I'm not protected" when he was already inside me, but he knew and I knew I didn't want him to stop and at the last moment he would come against my stomach. "This is dangerous," one of us would say later, but he'd be rubbing his semen over me, coating my breasts with it, and "this is dangerous" meant nothing. Or else maybe it meant "I love you" at the time. Words we'd said over and over that I was embarrassed to remember now. And then when my period was two weeks late he asked me to marry him and I was so horrified, I felt so trapped I almost ran out of the room. I'd pulled the oldest trick in the book, and it worked, and I hid the whole thing from my own self all the time. And it was just luck, dumb luck, not one speck of courage or decision on my part, that one day I was taking a walk and I started to cramp and bleed, heavier than I ever bled before, and that was the end of it. All I could do was go on the pill as soon as I could to keep myself from pulling that again. And he still wanted to marry me, and I still didn't. But I didn't want to be alone, either, or to live Augusta's life, from lover to lover, with long empty stretches in between, and end up thinking what she had told me a long time ago, that people are born to have needs that can't be fulfilled.

I sat there, curled up, knees against my chest, feeling dark and empty inside, a vacancy in the region of the heart that seemed to draw me down into itself, into a place where I deserved nothing. My eyes were fixed on the missing slat, seeing nothing but the burning blur where the light of afternoon leaked through. This was my start in life, and it was not a good one.

The door from the study to the back sitting-room opened, and Augusta said, "What are you doing hiding in here?"

I seemed to swim up from deep underwater. "Not much," I managed to say.

"You don't have to stay out of the way, you know," she said. That reminded me of what it had been like in college when a roommate had a date; it was strange to connect that with Augusta and me. "Want to help me cook?"

I didn't care about dinner at all, but I made the effort. "Sure." It would save me from being alone with my thoughts. "Is Allan still up there building the pyramids, or did you give him time off?"

"You wouldn't believe how much he got done. He's taking a shower right now, actually."

"He's earned one."

I followed Augusta into the kitchen, still feeling as if I was coming out of a bad dream, clearing it aside like vines as I followed her, trying to climb back to the everyday. "So what are we making?"

"Oh – just basic stuff. Grill those steaks I got yesterday; I thought maybe we'd eat some of the zucchini before they get too big."

"Did you pick them already?"

"No, would you?"

Outside the day was starting to end; the sun was just over the roofs of the houses down the block, its heat still beating at me, pulsating, but gently now, as though the sun itself held its breath before going down. I stood watching it from the garden, forgetting why I was there. The low sun hung in a heavy, hazy sky, an orange disk that the eye could bear to look at through the thickness of the air, and contemplating it there in its perfect roundness I could actually see for one instant that it was an inconceivably enormous ball of flame an immense distance away; for a moment the majesty of the real situation, of this star in unthinkable space and the tiny planet orbiting it, leaked in through a rent in the fabric of my habitual thoughts, and entering, expanded instantly, irresistibly, until it exploded them. I stood there empty, without a self, unaware of separateness; then I came to and was Karen again, standing in the garden with a paring knife in my hand, a green after-image of the sun floating on my vision as I bent down to cut a zucchini. But some part of me still saw from somewhere much farther away than Boston how minute the garden was, and the house, and Augusta and me and Allan; I could still feel on my back the strangeness of the other, the world outside this world, and it made everything around me seem provisional.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sitting at our table, eating the dinner we'd cooked, Allan seemed too big for our kitchen – at least for my idea of it, which somehow just fit me and Augusta. He was solid, even portly; he felt like too much of a presence across from me. He made me realize how old Augusta was when I remembered that they were exactly the same age; somehow she was never something as simple as a number of years, could never be summed up as middle-aged – whatever that meant was not enough to describe her. But Allan was exactly that; not dumpy and out of shape – definitely not, if he could carry all those boxes up the stairs – but thick through the middle, and in some other, less obvious way heavy – a heaviness of soul perhaps. He looked as if his body was denser than other bodies, certainly than mine or Augusta's; it was an undeniably male body, out of place in this house that belonged to us. I could feel how uncomfortable I would be in his body, and unreasonably that made me wonder if he was, too.

He sat solidly planted and addressed himself to his dinner as if to a piece of work, placing the tines of his fork squarely on the meat and bearing down as if it might get away, cutting with a care that was almost carpenter-like. Perhaps he had been taught by his mother to chew every bite twenty times and had never forgotten it; or perhaps eating with us made him as uneasy as it made me, and he was concentrating unnaturally on every move he made. "This is excellent," he said solemnly, looking up at Augusta and then me; I could see him remember that I had something to do with the dinner too. "Excellent," he repeated, for my benefit. For a moment the sounds of knives and forks clinking against plates seemed amplified, mockingly loud, wordlessly announcing our inability to think of what to say; embarrassment for all three of us made me want to get up and run

away. I remembered that he was married, that he had a wife at home and presumably had eaten dinner with her the night before. What did she imagine Allan was up to? Surely she didn't know what was going on here.

"You can cook for us tomorrow," Augusta said to him.

"Okay. I could make my world-famous ratatouille." He cut another bite of his steak and ate it, looking a bit less uncomfortable. Could a few words from her do that? I was not ready to give him a place at our table, even if she was. He used his napkin, fastidiously – making me think again that he had had manners drilled into him as a child – took another bite and a swallow of wine. Holding it by its stem between thumb and two fingers, he twirled the glass, watching the wine swirl slightly.

"Don't tell me you're done already," Augusta said. "Karen's going to be insulted."

"Don't worry, I'm not done. Certainly not. I have to make up for Thanksgiving," he said, with a slight smile, watching his wine glass. A look passed between them that was too complicated for me to guess at. I knew more than anyone else on earth, except the two of them, about what was going on here, and even so I couldn't begin to put it into words.

"I had no idea it was so much fun here," he said. "If I'd known you were going to let me carry those boxes up to the attic I'd have come to visit a long time ago."

"Aerobic fitness plan," Augusta said. "We charge extra for that."

"We have some other really fabulous chores that need doing, if you feel like it," I said. "Like how do you feel about heights? The gutters could really use some help."

"Thrilling," he said. "Does she make you do this stuff, too?" I could see him sizing me up, still trying to decide how to be around me; I was hiding behind myself, watching him in return. I had the distinct feeling that he wasn't sure whether I was an adult or not, and that made me want to ambush him somehow.

"Make me?" I asked, drawing out the word "make" as if I hadn't quite understood it. "No."

Instantly he looked uncomfortable again, and I realized how sensitive he was, and felt ashamed of myself. This had to be an impossible situation for him – hard enough to be with Augusta after all these years, but to have an audience besides . . . "Actually, I hate to admit it, but I've gotten like Augusta, I really can't imagine being here

without working on something all the time." That was as close as I could get to an apology.

"You should see the spare room," Augusta said, "it actually looks like it's fit to stay in."

"It'll be better when I get some of those old armchairs out of there."

"You've done enough for today," she said, putting her hand on his arm for a moment. "Save something in case you get bored tomorrow." She touched him as if without thinking, and then I saw both of them look self-conscious for a moment.

"I don't think boredom's going to be a problem," Allan said. Maybe it didn't matter after all if I was there or not. I drew myself down into myself and ate some of the zucchini I had made – it was good, in fact.

Allan started telling Augusta about his law practice in the Maryland suburbs, and I ate slowly and watched the two of them, paying no attention to what he was saying. He could have been telling her anything, I thought; all that mattered was that they were sitting together in her kitchen talking, sharing food. I thought they were proud of being able to do it at all, to act as though it hadn't been a third of their lives since they'd seen each other last, as though whatever had gone wrong hadn't mattered. Perhaps it didn't anymore – perhaps somehow, during all those years, it had mysteriously healed itself. The way she had touched him certainly made it look that way for a moment. Fourteen years: I couldn't even imagine that far ahead – myself almost thirty-seven years old – who in the world would I be? And how did being in love with someone survive all those changes? Maybe that was what was so outlandish about the idea of getting married; wouldn't both people become someone else, over and over again, and who knew if they would even want to be there in five years, much less ten? But I remembered my father saying that he had become convinced people don't change – that I had been born myself and stayed that way. He told me more than once that the first thing he said about me when he saw me after I was born was, "She's a cheerful baby." I didn't feel very cheerful, that was for sure, and I wondered if he saw more clearly because he didn't have to be me, or if he was all wrong. Or if all he could really see, from the start, was that he wanted me to be happy.

But if there was something that never changed, then it might be possible after all to stay together – if two people could learn to love that part of each other – or even see it. With most of the boyfriends I'd

had, once it was over, their inner life seemed to me like a dark network of unmapped tunnels, full of dead ends and booby traps, and what I saw inside myself wasn't much better: my needs and dreams and idiosyncrasies heaped up like a campfire, and myself crouched next to it, aware of trackless woods at my back. How much could ever come of that?

Augusta touched my arm. "Want some ice cream?"

"Sure."

"You're pretty quiet tonight," she said, starting to get up.

"I'll get it," I said, "why don't you just stay there?"

"It's okay," Augusta said. My eyes met Allan's, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing, not sure what to do. Even while I knew every minute what was wrong inside Augusta I somehow forgot about it over and over and had to be reminded, each time with the same little guilty start – how had I let myself slip? But it was almost as if she made me do it, cast a sort of spell over me that forbade me to think she was any different.

There was certainly something in her that never changed – that was as clear to me as I myself was dark and impenetrable. Was it only possible to see it from the outside? But that seemed crazy – that would mean that you would always have to ask someone else who you really were – and who would you trust to answer that? Or was *that* what love was?

Augusta, putting a dish of chocolate ice cream in front of me, said, "Boy, you are really somewhere else."

"Don't take it personally," I said, but with one look at her I saw that she was hardly noticing me at all.

As I washed the dishes Augusta was telling Allan about the classes she taught, and the wonderful and unbearable students she had. Outside the kitchen windows the back yard was starting to get dark. Fireflies lit up randomly, drawing silent dashes on the air; I could still make out the poles and trellises in the garden, sticking up black against a western sky that hadn't quite ceased to be purple. For a moment the cicadas abruptly fell silent, making a gap in the air around us where their loudness had been; just as abruptly they started again, and went on sending out their sound that seemed to skip the ear and press directly against the mind, as unchanging as if they could never really have stopped, as if time didn't exist around them. All they said all the time was Now. I felt a pull from outside that drew me out into the dark as soon as I had put the last dish in the drainer and dried my

hands. As I left, Augusta barely glanced my way to say “Going for a walk?” and Allan didn’t look up at all.

I stepped off the back porch, out into the back yard, where I could look up and see a half-moon overhead; but I wanted to get farther away, into the dark. I went through the back gate into the alley – a way we never went on foot – and wandered slowly over the uneven gravel, between sheds and garages and the overgrown brush that lined it in some places. It was dark and private there, and I felt like an invisible animal – relieved of the obligation of being my human self. Coming to the streetlight at the end of the alley was a disappointment; I turned and headed up the street, out of that pool of light where everything looked dusty and mundane.

For a while I walked feeling as if something were pulling me from in front, some force that acted upon my chest, gently drawing me toward it, so that I didn’t need to tell my feet where to go. I tried to think of nothing but that feeling, as if it were telling me some kind of an answer – turning corners without asking myself whether to go right or left, wandering with no need for a goal. No, that wasn’t true. It felt as if there were somewhere new to go in New Franklin, an undiscovered territory I might cross into if I didn’t watch myself too closely – but that was the last thing I’d find in this little town I’d known all my life, wasn’t it? And besides, I was watching, and the secret was out: I wanted to arrive somewhere, to encounter someone; but there was no one on the sidewalks I passed down – the children had gone inside, some people sat on dark porches and talked among themselves, and from inside houses I could see the flicker of TV, but no one spoke to me or crossed my path, and what was I imagining anyway?

The night air was intimate, not clinging unbearably as it often did during the day, but brushing against me and reminding me I needed to be touched. It reminded me of tenderness, the thing no one could ever demand, only long for and sometimes accept, but from whom, and when, and what I would have to go through to earn the right to that moment, there was no telling. If I had still been thirteen or fourteen I would have known how to dream it so hard it would feel like he was right around the corner, or even beside me, just outside my field of vision, but I was too old for that, I looked and of course no one was there. The gentle force that had been drawing me forward had evaporated; maybe my own impatience and loneliness had driven it away. I wandered back toward Augusta’s; all I could feel now was that there was nowhere in particular to go.

I came around the corner of Washington Street that was down by the little store and walked up the slight slope of the hill toward the house, thinking I'd go in and find something to read, try not to bother Allan and Augusta, but as I got close to the house and was about to start up the front walk I realized that they were sitting on the front porch swing in the dark, talking. I had sat there on the porch with George, wondering if he would reach over and take my hand or try to kiss me, and Augusta had kept out of the way, seven years before. Of course she had also thrown a firecracker out her bedroom window and nearly scared me to death while I was kissing him – but I thought I wouldn't do that just now. I kept going, around the block, up the alley again, thinking of how Augusta must have felt when I had been fifteen and started dating George – how she must have been keeping her fingers crossed for days, so to speak, in hopes that it would work. She had done everything she could, providing us with a place to be alone together, and her approval, and giving me some advice on birth control which I didn't appreciate one bit at the time. But of course only George and I could make anything happen. There was even less I could do for her now, except hope. I knew I shouldn't because Allan was married; but the truth was I didn't care about that. I didn't know his wife, I didn't know their marriage, and whatever was going on between them didn't matter to me compared to Augusta and what seemed clear enough: she and Allan were probably still in love. Which made me a pretty selfish person, I thought.

I went in the back way and up the back stairs toward my room, only realizing as I reached the top of the stairs that I was going to do something nonsensical and about three years too late: try to call George.

It was that letter that made me want to – I knew I could talk to him about Augusta. He had always seemed like someone who wanted to get straight to the serious stuff in life, and there was plenty of that around here. Besides, we had written to each other for several years – he must have had some reason to keep it up that long. Maybe he got mad when I didn't know how to answer his letter about the emptiness, but under the circumstances he wouldn't be able to hold it against me – would he? If he didn't want to talk to me he wouldn't have to. That was simple enough. Anyway, there was no reason to assume he was in St. Louis, or anywhere I could reach him. It would be like George to be in the Peace Corps in Uganda, two hundred miles from a telephone.

I went through the letters until I found the one with his mother's phone number in St. Louis; for a moment I listened at my

window until I heard Allan and Augusta's voices from the porch swing below. They sounded as though they'd be there for a while. I could have used the phone in Augusta's room, but that room seemed sacred to her now, a privacy I shouldn't intrude on; I went back down to the kitchen.

Here goes nothing, I thought. I remembered George telling me many times how difficult his mother was, and steeled myself to be snapped at, but a surprisingly pleasant voice said "Hello?"

"Hello, is this Ms. Short?"

"I'm Virginia Cleary now." That stumped me for a moment. Then the light bulb went on. Remarried.

"Are you George Short's mother?"

"Yes, I certainly am."

"My name's Karen Moss, I'm an old friend of George's, I haven't seen him in quite a while and um, I was wondering if you could help me get in touch with him?"

"Well – you can try. He doesn't seem to be home a lot. It's 726-0422."

I repeated the number to make sure I had it right. "Would you mind telling me where that is?"

"It's U. City, near the Loop."

"I'm sorry, I'm from out of town, I don't know what that means."

"Oh – where are you from, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Chicago – Evanston, actually."

"Evanston? My younger brother is a professor at Northwestern – what did you say your name was?"

"Karen Moss." I pictured her asking the brother if he recognized my name, as if I were some sort of local celebrity.

"Karen Moss. Where were we? Oh yes. University City. Just west of the city limits. Used to be a much nicer neighborhood than it is today. So many people moved further west. Those who could afford to."

"I see," I said, though I didn't. I half-suspected I knew what she meant and might not like it if I understood.

"I live in South St. Louis myself. The old German neighborhood. Well of course it isn't German any more, at least not since the war, but nothing has really changed and I'm very thankful for that. Did you ever come and visit us here?"

"Um, no, actually," I said, wondering what she could have meant about the Germans – were they deported? Rounded up and shot?

"Well, I always love to see George's friends, on those rare occasions when he finds time to bring them over. I'm sure he could manage it if he cared to, but that's barking up the wrong tree. I know what my limitations are. Do give him my love when you speak to him, won't you?"

"Of course," I mumbled, wondering what I had stepped into, but George's mother didn't slow down.

"He's always been exceptional, it's a blessing and a curse. His father used to say he'd either go to the moon or blow it up, though I don't believe that for a minute. And of course he died when George was at an impressionable age. Well" – she paused, to take a breath, I thought – "I can't chat any longer, but thank you for calling. I hope you can find George. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," I said, but it sounded as though she had hung up before the word was out of my mouth. I pulled down the hook of the wall phone and let out the breath I'd been half-holding as she gathered momentum. So that was George's mother. I just hoped she had given me the right phone number.

It seemed necessary to sit for a moment and let my head clear after talking to her. To think that George had grown up with that – or had she gradually gotten that way?

I took a deep breath and dialled George's number, conscious of not knowing what to say to him, but there was no point in worrying about that. The phone rang, once, twice, three times, I was beginning to resign myself to not getting him when a male voice answered the phone. "Hello?" It sounded irritated, as if the call interrupted something, and I didn't know if it was George or not.

"Hello, is George there?"

"Jus' second." The phone was put down with a loud clank and I heard "Hey George! For you!" So he had a roommate – with some sort of accent. Was he black? Faintly I could hear George's voice ask "Who is it?" There was no reply; the phone was picked up. "Hello?"

"Hello, George?"

"Yes?" He sounded impatient.

"This is Karen Moss, I don't know if you remember me but –"

"Karen Moss," he said slowly – but it was a statement, not a question. "Well well. No kidding. You really don't know if I remember? Of course I do."

"Good."

"Where are you?"

"New Franklin." He sounded older, like someone his age, which must be twenty-four by now, I realized. "Visiting my aunt Augusta, as usual."

"You still go there?"

"I like it better than you, remember?" At seventeen, George had been staying there with his grandparents, and he and his grandfather had been at war.

"If you go back at all, you must." That almost hurt my feelings – didn't he have any fondness left for what had happened between us? It was a long time ago, I reminded myself. But still.

"So what are you doing in St. Louis? I thought you couldn't wait to get out of there."

There was a brief silence and I wondered if I had offended him. "Lack of imagination, I guess," he said. "Misplaced loyalty. You name it."

"Oh, I don't mean it like that. I come here all the time. Every summer, I mean."

"Where do you live now?"

"Boston." Actually I lived in Cambridge in a rent-controlled studio apartment the size of Augusta's parlor, which Liz had passed on to me when she moved to California, but there was no point in getting technical. "I'm just like everyone else who goes to college there, I didn't leave, so I guess that doesn't show much imagination either." That sounded wrong. "I mean – I don't mean –"

"Don't worry about it," George said; he sounded dryly amused. "What do you do all day, now that you're out wandering around loose?"

"Teach ninth-grade English at Brookline High."

"Whoa – that sounds like a job."

"It is, I promise. What about you?"

"Day care."

"What?" I thought I heard him but couldn't quite believe what I heard.

"Day care. Eight and a half hours a day with the toddlers. Twelve of them. That's work too, let me tell you."

"God, I'll bet it is," I said, wondering what in the world could have led him to that. "You actually spend every day with twelve two-year-olds?"

"Strange but true. Yours sound worse to me – how old are they? Fourteen?"

"Yeah."

"I'd rather change diapers," George said, and I wasn't sure whether to be offended or not. There had always been something prickly about George, and it hadn't gone away.

"Well, I wouldn't."

"Oh, you get used to it. A little poop is not a problem between friends."

That made me chuckle. And were George and I still friends?

"I wasn't expecting to hear from you," George said, as if reading my mind.

"I know – it's my fault – I still have that letter of yours I never answered. In fact I just read it again a couple of days ago."

"Really? What was it about?"

"The void."

"Ah yes – the void. One of the greatest hits of all time. What's the letter like? Unbelievably sophomoric?"

"I'm just starting to figure it out now."

"Oh, come on, I'm sure you knew what I was saying, it probably just bored you to death. Terminal existentialism. It's a disease you catch from going to college. The symptoms are wearing black and smoking French cigarettes."

All right, be that way, I thought. Maybe he was embarrassed by having been so serious? Or had he changed after all? "Did you end up majoring in philosophy?"

"Yeah, that's why I work day care, it was the most philosophical job I could get." It was impossible to tell how much of a joke that was meant to be. "Anyway – I like two-year-olds. We get along well. I like it when they climb on me. I don't have much trouble with toddlers, it's their parents who get on my nerves."

"I know the feeling."

"Hey, how'd you get my number, anyway?"

"I called your mother. Her number was in one of your letters."

"Ah, Virginia. Was it a unique experience?"

"Yeah – she told me you were exceptional."

"She should talk. She's about as exceptional as they come. I imagine she told you more than you bargained for."

"Well, we had a nice little chat, or maybe I should say she did."

"That's my mom. We used to have nice little chats like that every time I was dumb enough to answer the phone."

"What happened?"

"She hangs up whenever Clifton answers – that's my roommate. The guy saved my life by moving in. Of course, he has to answer the phone a lot and he's getting kind of sick of it."

"She hangs up on your roommate?" So was that why she'd claimed that George was hard to find?

"Yeah, she doesn't like the color of his skin. Her son should only live with pale people. You know what I mean?"

"Ohh – I thought I picked up something like that. Something about how where you live used to be a much better neighborhood."

"Yeah, isn't it great? Let me tell you something – if the American public thinks like my mom, we're in big trouble." It was refreshing to be reminded that other people had complicated lives, completely separate from anything obsessing me here. "I'll bet you didn't call me to talk about her," George said.

"Well, no."

"I know – you were going to ask me out on a date." Now that was the George I remembered; he loved to catch me off guard. I was as flustered as he might have hoped; sure, it had crossed my mind, but I hadn't seen George since we were both high-school kids and I had no idea, really, how I'd like him if I did. Not to mention that I hadn't managed to officially end things with Will. "Well," he said when my silence began to get awkward, "maybe that wasn't your plan after all."

"Do I have to have a plan?"

"Sorry," he said. "I do these things. Even though I should know better by now." That was George, too – quick to apologize. It was hard to stay mad at him, as I recalled.

"I really called because of Augusta," I said, and realized suddenly how hard it must have been for her to tell Allan. I didn't even want to say the words to George. "She has cancer."

"She does?" He sounded taken aback – I knew he had been fond of her, years before. "How bad is it? Is she in the hospital?"

"It's breast cancer, they're going to operate next week."

"Shit, I can't believe it."

"Me neither." For a few moments there was nothing to say.

"You know, I remember her pretty well," he said. "I would have thought she was too tough to get sick. Or maybe she'd just order the cancer to go away and it would."

"I'm sure that's what she thought, too, until this happened."

George sighed. "After you left New Franklin," he said after a moment – I left the morning after we slept together but didn't make

love, because my parents' troubles had finally come out into the open and they wanted me at home – "I was a wreck. You have never seen a more frustrated person in your life. I went over to Augusta's the next day, to get your address, I couldn't stay away. It was the closest I could get to you. She was wonderful. She was watching a ball game. She offered me a beer and I sat with her and watched for a couple of innings. Then she said, 'You miss her, don't you?' I said yes, and she said, 'I do too.' That was it. There really wasn't much else to say, and she didn't try. I liked that a lot."

There was another little stretch of quiet, while I listened to the cicada sounds outside and let myself sink back into that time, when I was just on the verge of taking my life into my hands. I had made a lot of promises to myself then – and had they been kept? "That was quite a summer," I said.

"Tell me – did you really think I might not remember?"

"I guess not."

"Good," George said. "Well look, how about if we get together?"

"You're asking me on a date?"

"A date? Haven't we already done that? Let's just get together."

"Okay. Have you got a car?"

"Of sorts. I imagine it'll go that far if I top up the oil first."

"Well, why don't you come tomorrow around dinnertime? There's someone visiting Augusta and I think she'd just as soon I stayed out of the way."

"Okay. Far out. Now tell me, how will I recognize you?"

"Right, George. What about you? Are you six feet tall by now?" That wasn't very nice, I told myself. He had always been sensitive about his height and how it matched his name.

"Well, give or take a few inches," he said. I reminded him of the directions to Augusta's and we hung up; I sat wondering what would come of this impulse of mine, and half-curiously listening for sounds of Augusta and Allan from the front porch, but there were none.

They were somewhere else, as I found out when I went up to bed. The sound of their voices from Augusta's room scandalized and gladdened me, and I envied them.

A L L A N

CHAPTER NINE

"Orange what?" Augusta says to me.

"Julius. Don't tell me you don't remember." We're sitting on the porch swing, Augusta to my left, next to me so my arm and hers are touching. I'm not sure if she means for us to touch or not, but that contact distracts me and I have to make a conscious effort to talk.

"Remember what?"

"We ate a hot dog at one the day after we got to New York. You really don't remember? We were starving and there was no food in my apartment, so we went out to a restaurant, but on the way to it we passed an Orange Julius and we stopped and had a hot dog because we were so hungry."

"Yes." I can hear a smile in her voice. "And then we went anyway. To the restaurant I mean."

"The hot dog was better, as I recall."

"Was that what your mind was on? Food?"

I look over at her; it's almost dark on the porch but I can see the teasing gleam in her eye. "My mind was on things you can't do in a restaurant."

I forgot how loud the bugs are at night in the Midwest – even louder than in the Maryland suburbs.

"We had to take time out sometime."

"Well, we certainly managed that," I say, but without the bitterness I would have expected. For years I've been storing up reproaches for this moment, and now there's no point in them.

"Who was I then? Can you remember?"

"We were both pretty damn young. I was still bent on making partner in a big firm. You – I don't know. You were beautiful, I remember that. You haven't changed much in that regard."

"Oh, give me a break. I didn't ask you what I looked like."

I know what she asked, but answering it isn't easy. "You thought you knew exactly what you wanted."

"But," she says, and doesn't go on.

"But what?"

"Come on. I was there. Just say what you mean."

"I did," I say, but I can tell that isn't enough. I start to say something about how love the way we had it is not easily replaced, but think better of it. I'm not here to blame her. "Your mind had to be on something else, or you wouldn't have gone away. I've never understood what it could have been."

"My will was very strong."

"So is it any different now?"

Augusta makes a sound halfway between a chuckle and a snort.

"I suppose I can't get away with that."

But will to do what? I still don't know. "There was something about you and freedom. You had more of it than most people, but you couldn't take hold of it and use it. Or wouldn't. I don't know which."

"Couldn't, I think," she says quietly – with humility, which I've hardly ever heard from her. She interlaces her fingers with mine. Touching on purpose. It no longer feels as strange as it did in the car.

We sit for a while saying nothing, looking out at the night, the swing slightly in motion though neither of us is pushing with our feet. I feel as though we're breathing into each other through that hand. A firefly gives out its light – once, twice – moving across the dark front yard, going somewhere, looking for a mate. Good luck. When did I last sit with Augusta like this? Perhaps never – we were too impatient; we wanted this but we always rushed past it, without knowing. I remember the night before she left New York, after she told me she was going to go the next day, I stood at the window of my apartment naked, looking down into the street. She was sitting on the bed behind me, also naked, brushing her hair. We made love and then she told me she'd be leaving in the morning, and I remember standing there thinking, How am I going to face that out there? I already knew that if she didn't return, walking down the block and looking into the passing faces might become unbearable. And I almost knew she wouldn't be coming back, even while I stood there trying to sound like I assumed that she would.

I spent a long time blaming her, and writing the occasional tortured midnight letter. But I waited fourteen years to pay her a return visit. All that time it was my move.

I let go of her hand and put my arm around her, pull her closer to me, thinking, Will she let me do this? But she doesn't resist. She lays her hand on my leg as if we're used to touching like this every day; I feel her eyes on me and when I look she's giving me a look that I know, ironic and self-deprecating and at the same time open and without guile. The young Augusta looks out at me, the way she did when we were twenty years old, and I know the right answer is to kiss her. When I do, the moment seems to join seamlessly to the last time we were together, and time doesn't mean a thing. It is as though I've always known that this would come. I kiss her until it's clear she isn't going to make me stop, and then I draw back and look her over. "Hello," I say.

"Now, don't get sentimental on me," she says. "I can't stand it."

That makes me laugh. "I promise," I say, knowing I'll break it. "You've got gray hair, you know that?"

"I'm a middle-aged lady, I've earned it."

"Oh, come on. You were never a lady and you never will be."

"Ain't it the truth. If I were, I wouldn't be out here necking with you in front of God and everybody."

"Necking'? I haven't heard that word in twenty years."

Augusta is abruptly silent, her eyes on mine but seeming to look inward. "Of course, out here in the provinces," I say—

She jabs me in the side with her finger in a place where she knows I'm ticklish, and makes me jump. "Hey."

"Stop talking," she says, a don't-argue-with-me look on her face.

Okay, I think, and put my arms around her, to kiss her again, but she holds me back, her hands on my shoulders, as if she is going to correct me for something. "What is it?" I ask.

"Shut up," she says. For a moment I think she's going to cry, something I've only seen her do once, in anger, the night of the Thanksgiving that wasn't. The memory of what's going to happen to her, what is already happening, comes back; I lost track of it completely in kissing her, and I think perhaps she lost it for a moment too, and now she has to feel it returning. You're going to live, I think out of pure selfishness. She has to live, that's all. She stops resisting, and I put my arms around her and hold her to me, her head against my shoulder. A powerful trembling goes through her, as if some force that is almost too much for the body to contain has her in its grip. Holding back tears. I'm certain after a moment. Go ahead, I think to her, but as I hold her she stays clenched in a silent struggle with herself, one hand

clutching my upper arm so hard it hurts. I stroke her hair and try to breathe with her, feeling it's not enough to do for her. Finally she exhales like someone after a hard run, and leans her forehead against my collarbone, and rubs her eyes.

"Don't even try to say anything," she orders me. "There isn't anything, anyway."

But I have to say something. "Am I allowed to tell you that you're still beautiful?"

She gives me an almost angry look. "Even if I am, which I'm not, I won't be after Tuesday. I don't want to think about that. I don't want to think tonight, period."

"All right," I say, but I'm not convinced that we will manage that.

"Let's go inside," Augusta says.

"I like it out here; it's dark, the neighbors won't see us."

"The hell with the neighbors," she says, "but I still want to go inside." She disentangles herself from me and stands up, tossing her head to throw her hair back away from her face in a gesture I seem always to have known. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

She gives me an impatient look and goes into the house; I follow her, in the front door, up the stairs. Halfway up I catch up with her and take her hand. There is a knot in my stomach and a picture of Amy at home, betrayed, flits through my mind. Augusta holds on to my hand but doesn't look at me, and slowly, as if we have to be formal now, we climb the stairs in silence. I watch my foot reach each step, thinking that whatever happens between us now can never be taken back. It crosses my mind that Karen might be watching us – where is she? – but I glance up and the upstairs is empty and quiet. Something in a far-off recess of the house creaks, and the distance of that sound seems to say that Augusta and I are being left alone.

I've imagined a hundred different versions of this moment, but it never crossed my mind that when I walked with her toward her bedroom I wouldn't be able to tell if we were going toward joy or sorrow. I'm not even sure I will turn out to be the lover she remembers. Maybe there's no competing with a memory. I'm still married, I think – but how married am I if I'm here at all? We go into her room and I close the door and turn, and holding her is easier than looking her in the eye. For a long time we hold each other and breathe, rocking slightly from side to side. I can't help remembering that the cancer is there in the room with us, an unwanted *menage à trois* that neither of

us ever imagined. Desire drains out of me, sucked away by that awareness; maybe nothing is possible after all, maybe it's too late. Maybe we made love for the last time fourteen years ago in my cramped apartment on 110th Street, and this is only the ghost of that time, kept alive by fantasy all these years and now exposed for what it is. But I can't stop holding her, can't be the first to admit it's over, even if it's true, and so gradually I become more and more aware of her against me, the body beneath her clothing, the breath in her, alive now and in my arms – I turn her face to me and kiss her, and as we kiss I begin to touch her, my hand on her waist, her side, wanting to caress her breasts but not knowing. "Is it all right if I touch you there?" I ask, my fingertips barely resting on her shirt. Part of me draws back from touching, I can feel that too. "You have to," she says.

I unbutton her shirt as she stands before me stock-still, hands at her sides, saying nothing, only looking at me in all willingness to be naked, to be seen and touched, and desire makes me even more awkward; the buttonholes seem too small for the buttons to go through and I mutter over them half-embarrassed as she watches me, tempted to rip them out, send buttons flying across the room – and would she mind if I did? I doubt it. She's wearing a bra – something she with her small breasts did not do, to my surprise, that week we spent in New York. A concession to getting older? Or is it a kind of protection she needs now? I unfasten it, with difficulty; there is a brown fabric hospital-type bandage on the underside of her left breast. She sees me notice it but doesn't say anything. Something in my gut reacts instantly; and if the thought of her being cut there violates me, what did it do to her?

"Does it hurt?"

"A little. But I don't care. Don't think about that."

The years have hardly changed the shape of her, but each time I touch her I can feel the depth of her being herself now, how solitary she is, and strong. I can't help thinking of the lovers she's had – she told me about them all. I was a fool, insane, not to have been, for that many years, her lover myself.

Augusta still stands watching me, as I take in the sight of her, silently saying "here I am," it seems to me – as if she has been waiting for a time to come when instead of taking over she could surrender. I feel I have to take great care as I caress her and kiss her, turn her around with her back to me so I can hold her breasts in my two hands and bend down to kiss her neck, too aware of the rough texture of the Band-Aid under my hand, the thing that does not belong, and what it

means. When I look up I see us reflected in the mirror over her dresser; she is watching all of it happen, avidly. I don't think of her as a woman who spends much time looking in the mirror.

What am I doing with my clothes on? In the mirror I look as if I were trying to hold myself apart from her when nothing could be more untrue, and I undress as fast as I can, even though it means having to take my hands off her to untie shoes and take off socks. I can't meet her eyes until I'm naked too and standing in front of her again, with no defenses, to offer up what I am and my desire for her, for whatever it means.

She kisses me, familiarly, as if this happened every night, and kicks off her shoes and lies down on the bed, on top of the bedclothes. It's an old bed, high and by the looks of it soft; everything in the room is old-fashioned, and all of this would seem to be taking place in some simpler past except that she's wearing blue jeans, and we aren't married to each other, and I'm married to someone else. Legally speaking. I unzip her jeans and tug them off, taking her underpants with them, and then I lie down with her and we are together in nakedness at last. She is the woman I desire, maybe the only woman I really desire or ever have.

Augusta takes my hand and lays it on her left breast. "Can you feel it?" Her eyes are dark, she can hold me with them at any moment. "It" is just what I have been trying to avoid, wondering if I'm hurting her by touching her at all; she presses my fingers into her breast and says, "There. Can you feel that?"

I nod; yes, there is a presence, some firmness that does not belong. Scar tissue from taking out the lump? Feeling it makes me close my eyes. What is it like from the inside? That I do not want to know.

"Doesn't seem like that much, does it?" she says. "Not enough to kill you."

"Then let's believe it won't." I take my hand away, put my arms around her and hold her, as close as we can get. Why did this happen to her body and not mine, what sense does it make that the cancer should choose her, or me, or anyone else who hasn't even begun to get old? I remember her saying she doesn't want to think tonight, period, and now it's hard for me to stop letting that thing drive us apart. But her naked presence, her leg between mine, the length of her touching me overwhelms everything else. When I'm inside her I become her; there is no separateness, I know without words what she feels, how the thought that she may die is still there, but submerged, and the moment is like a river whose current carries off those thoughts as soon as they

arise; I know in my own body when she is flooded with the tingling certainty that she is about to come.

CHAPTER TEN

We lie there, just breathing; my hand is on the back of her neck, my nose is being tickled by her hair. It's a hot night; for a moment a slight breeze cools my back and blows over my legs. I wonder if Augusta wants me to move, if she is too hot, but she seems perfectly content, and it's amazing to be next to her and feel how our bodies take it for granted.

"Are you squashed?" I say.

"Feels good. It's been a long time."

"I'll say."

"You and Amy don't have sex?"

"Not a whole lot, but I meant you and me."

"So why didn't you come visit me?"

"I don't know. You never invited me."

"I didn't invite you the first time, either, and look what happened." That's true; I was in St. Louis on some business, after not seeing her for seven years, and having dinner with her ended in her coming back to New York with me.

"So I wasn't pushy enough? I certainly wrote you enough love letters."

"It's not about letters," she says.

I kiss her, breathing in the taste of her that is as natural to me as the smell of my own skin. That hasn't changed either. "If I'd known, I'd have come to visit you a long time ago."

"Really?"

"How could I not have?" But if I had let it happen, there would have been nothing to do afterwards but leave Amy.

"How long can you stay?"

"A week." Instantly I see by her face that that's not enough. "Ten days, maximum. All of my explanations will run out before then."

"Are you going to feel guilty about this?" she says, with what I think is impatience, and of course I am, what else can she expect? But she doesn't wait for me to answer. "I guess I don't have much conscience when it comes to this. Especially not now. But I never did have enough to stop me."

Especially not now. It's hard for me to imagine, after our love-making, that there is anything wrong with her, much less something that might be fatal; she's too alive for that. And even if I could imagine, I can't accept it.

"I'm not as honorable as you," Augusta says. "I have a feeling you wouldn't have come to visit me before, not really."

Honorable? I don't think that's what I've been all this time. "It isn't very honorable of me to be here right now. Not that I'd take it back."

"Too late," she says, her eyes teasing. I'm still inside her, and I can feel her tighten around me momentarily. "I've got you now."

"Yes," I say, and kiss her, and as we kiss I begin to get hard again and to move inside her, at first only thinking about moving, and then when it becomes definite penetrating her as deeply as I can; she stops kissing me and breathes in, a gasp and then a sigh, and closing her eyes rolls her head to the side and then back, exposing her throat to my kiss.

"You feel so big right now," she murmurs.

"I love you."

"I know," she says, and then we can't say anything more.

After we have come back to the world, and are lying on our sides looking at each other by the light of her bedside lamp, Augusta says, "If your marriage is the way you say it is, what's there to cheat on?"

"It wouldn't make Amy happy to know about this."

"It doesn't sound like being married to you makes her terribly happy either."

I turn over onto my back to look up at the ceiling and think; my left hand rests on the curve of Augusta's hip. "It's not that simple. We've been married for ten years, we had a lot of hopes once."

"So does everybody." She must mean herself, she must mean us, but I wasn't the one who threw it away.

"I never told you, but – the reason Amy and I never had children was because we couldn't." I don't like the way that sounds so neat and final, the past all wrapped up unambiguously, as it can never be.

"Ah," she says; I look over at her. Her eyes are on mine, considering. "I always wondered about that."

"We wanted to; I think maybe that was why we got together, really, and then it was, you know, just us. I don't think we were ready for that. We always assumed that after a couple of years the just-us phase would be over. Or at least I did. I'm not sure Amy ever told me exactly what she was thinking."

"Was it you or she who . . . ?"

"Couldn't? Oh – they thought it was Amy. But who knows." I don't like having to answer that flatly, to label it her fault. Too easy.

Augusta and I are still for a moment; I go back to tracing the cracks in the ceiling with my eyes, and she turns on her back so that we lie there side by side, touching at the shoulder and hip. She takes my hand in hers, raises it to her mouth, gnaws on my finger until I say "Ouch."

"So that was when things started to go bad?" she says.

"I guess so. Through the miracle of hindsight. Probably it's a lot more complicated than that."

I've come up with plenty of reasons over the years, trying to find the answer to why everything changed, but they all feel like excuses in the end. Augusta bites my finger again. "Go on," she says.

"It's like this. I don't know how much sense this'll make to you, because you've never been married" – "I've noticed," Augusta mutters – "but it's like we're professional married people now. We know how to stay out of each other's hair, we know how the other person works, what not to mention. There's a certain irony to everything. Even in bed. Especially then. We can even go on a vacation together and like it, most of the time anyway, which is more than a lot of couples who've been married ten years can say."

"A lot of couples who've been married ten years aren't married anymore," Augusta says.

"If you're a pro you don't let things get messy. If you want to do something messy, you do it on your own time. That's called having an affair. But you keep that stuff away from the office. So to speak."

"It sounds like hell," Augusta says.

"But it's an incredibly civilized hell. It's hell with the amenities. It's a real achievement." That's what she'll never understand, she has

no idea what the words “married ten years” really mean, no idea what it took to get through the first few.

“It’s not enough,” she says.

Of course it isn’t enough; why else did I write her all those letters for so many years? That’s out in the open with Augusta – a thing Amy and I can never, by definition, acknowledge to each other. Not as long as we intend to keep up the game.

“If I told her about this I know what she’d say. Or I know how she’d sound anyway. ‘Why the big production, sweetie? Is it just because she was your college heartthrob and she dumped you, or can’t you resist being the guy who rides into town and saves the damsel tied to the tracks? I think you’re running a temperature, you’d better stay home from school today.’” For a moment it’s as if Amy were in the room with us, and I know something else she’d say which I can’t repeat to Augusta: do I think that by swearing undying love I can cure her of cancer?

“Gawd,” Augusta says, sounding half-amused despite herself.

“She would. It would be something like that. One thing she would not do is throw things and scream at me about how could I do such a thing after everything I said to her once and the moments of eternal passion we shared and all that. I really don’t think she would. You have to be in love with somebody to do that.”

“I would think pride would be enough,” Augusta says.

“That’s not how she works. Her pride is in being a pro. Especially when it’s hard to do.”

“Stop it, you’re making me feel sorry for her.”

And shouldn’t I feel sorry too? I know better than Augusta ever could that Amy lost a part of herself when she found out she wouldn’t have children; I know her life isn’t a whole life; don’t I owe her more compassion than this?

But you can’t owe someone love. That’s what I’ve come to find out. “The thing was this. When we found out we couldn’t have children, if it was going to work, it would have had to be because that brought us closer to each other. But that wasn’t what happened. I don’t think we really had been close in the right way to let that happen.”

“Why not?”

“Oh . . . fear. I think. Too risky. Or else we just didn’t want to. Maybe we thought we could be married without going through all the trouble of . . . no, it was fear. Of course it was. We never really knew what to do except keep our fingers crossed. So when actual trouble

came along we ended up – turning pro. We were amateurs at the beginning, but that’s ancient history now.”

For a moment Augusta and I are silent. I feel as though I’ve been waiting years to say this to someone, all at once as I just did, but there has been no one to hear it the way Augusta could.

“Why didn’t you adopt a child?”

“Because of what I just told you. Because by the time it might have happened the truth was out. It takes something for two people to become parents. I mean between the two of them. Or so we both imagined. Anyway, we didn’t have it.”

“Lots of people don’t.”

“Yeah, but they don’t have to go to an adoption agency and present themselves as potential heads of the perfect family. Actually, we never really discussed it. I read her mind, she read mine, we never tried.”

From Augusta’s bed in New Franklin, after making love to her, I finally admire Amy for being as strong as she is, for carrying her life in the lonely way she does without complaining. As if we never tried to be married in more than law, and failed. Of course I’m half of the problem, I have no business blaming her, I am not blaming her, but there is nowhere to go from where we are and I’m sure she knows that as well as I do. “It’s a sad story,” Augusta says.

“I know.”

“I’m sick of sad stories, you’ve used up your quota. No more.”

We lie there for a while and I listen to the night sounds. “Do you know that this relationship of ours is old enough to buy a drink?” I say.

“Oh, ugh – ‘relationship’ – I hate that word. Can’t you call it something better than that?”

“Love affair.”

“That’s better.” Augusta sounds like a strict teacher.

“It wouldn’t have looked much like a love affair to the average observer for ninety-nine percent of its career.”

“Yeah, but that’s only so far, and besides, who cares about the average observer?”

I turn to hold her, wanting her body’s length along mine. “Come here.” We fit our legs together, I caress her back. “I am here,” she says.

I don’t want to think about Amy but I can’t help it; somehow the presence of Augusta next to me makes me feel as though I can finally admit everything – even the hopes we had at the beginning. But

their time is gone. "I guess there really isn't much left to cheat on by now," I say before I quite realize I'm talking out loud.

"Will you stop talking about her? If you don't stop telling me new reasons why this is right or wrong, I'm going to put a pillow over your head."

"I owe her that much, don't I?"

"Please God, spare me. This is what's happening, that's all there is to it. Do you want to sleep in there with the extra furniture?"

"Okay, okay, I'll stop."

"And if you ever start owing me things, just don't bother to show up."

"Yes, ma'am," I say, trying to sound henpecked, though she's right, of course, I know that's how it works. But I'm not used to acting on what I know.

"Let's play mailbox," Augusta says. "Anything you want can come in the mail. What do you get?"

"One letter?"

"However many you want."

"Um . . . I get a letter from Amy telling me she's fallen in love with a doctor from Johns Hopkins, she's truly happy for the first time in her life, and she wants a divorce."

"And what else?"

"It's your turn."

"A note from the lab telling me that they examined the wrong tissue sample and my biopsy actually came back benign."

"I want that one in my mailbox too," I say, wishing I'd said that first. I keep forgetting, blocking the cancer out, only able to imagine her unchanged and permanent.

"Allan, I don't want some surgeon to cut my breast off," she says, her breath warm against my neck. For once she sounds like a little girl.

"I don't either," I say. "Also I don't want you to die."

"Are you still going to want me?" she says, in a small voice, but perfectly clear.

"Of course I am."

She pulls herself away from me abruptly and sits up, in one motion, pushing her hair back from her face, her eyes flashing at me. "Don't give me of course, damn it! This is serious, this is my fucking life."

"I've wanted you ever since I was twenty, and I'm still going to."

"Ever since I was twenty I've been all here. Look at me." She's kneeling on the bed next to me, arms at her sides; she seems very tall because I'm lying down, and I look her over, taking in every part of her body and especially her breasts. I have imagined her this way countless times and now that she is naked in front of me I cannot imagine not wanting her. She covers her left breast with both hands, angrily pressing it flat. "This doesn't exist. There's nothing under my hand. Only a scar. Nothing there. That'll never change. It won't grow back. Now tell me the truth, I've got to know."

"I will still want you," I say, aware of trying to sound like I mean it, but not because I don't. It will be strange, I will miss the way she was, I will be sorry we weren't lovers all along, but I will still want her.

For a long moment Augusta is motionless, seeming not even to breathe, her hands still covering her left breast and her eyes locked on mine as if she'll get the truth out of me by force; then she drops her hands and looks away. The pressure has left a red mark. "Aah," she says disgustedly, shaking her head, "what the hell can you say, anyway? You're in an impossible position."

"I love you, I will still want you, why not let that be the truth?"

"I don't want to make something up and call it the truth, I want to *know*."

I look up at her, baffled by how to give her that. "I don't know what to say."

Her eyes relent. "Just hold me, okay?"

I pull her down next to me, hold her against me for a moment, smoothing her hair; then she turns over so her back is to me, and curls in on herself. I hold her tight, as if she needs to be kept from falling away.

"In my mailbox," I say, "I have a note addressed to you, from you, age sixty-two. It says, Dear Self, I want you to know that he still wants me. And that the cancer is 100% cured."

"Thank you," she mumbles.

We lie there for a long time in silence. I think about being sixty-two and what will happen on the way there, what will become of Augusta and me, trying to read that letter from the future. After a while I realize I'm falling asleep, and I try not to until I'm sure that she is, too; then I let myself drift off.

When I wake up we're still in spoon position; Augusta is still asleep, her body curled inside mine. I am aware of our having been touching for however long it has been, even in the depths of sleep; I

can hardly feel a boundary between my body and hers. Apparently, from the way that it feels, I was expecting all along to resume sleeping with Augusta, and now that it has happened it is no more than natural. I raise my head cautiously, trying not to disturb her, and look at the clock on her night table. Just past eleven. We must not have been sleeping long. It's still warm, but cooler than it was. I hear a car or two go by in the middle distance. Augusta stirs, straightens her legs, then turns over, her eyes still closed, pulls a strand of hair out of her mouth, and settles herself again. With one finger I stroke her hair back, rearranging it away from her face. "Hi," I say.

"Fell asleep," she says without opening her eyes.

"Me too."

Distantly I hear a screen door slam; I'm not sure if the sound comes from Augusta's house or not. Then there are footsteps on the stairs, quietly, and the sound of the bathroom door closing. I forgot that we're not alone.

"What do you suppose Karen's going to think about this?"

Augusta opens her eyes a little and looks amused. "Probably something like 'What took you so long?'"

"So she approves?" She may as well, I don't intend to give her a choice.

"When she was fifteen – remember when you took to writing me those letters in the middle of the night, one summer?"

"Of course."

"She read one of those. I had them pretty well hidden, but she found them somehow."

"What did it say?"

"Oh, God – everything. They were all the same, weren't they? I think she's been wondering ever since why we didn't get together a long time ago."

"What'd you tell her?" It's strange to think of Karen, who I don't know, having read – at age fifteen, yet – a letter like that from me. I remember them well – written at 3 a.m. in a state of desperation, a feeling that I was trapped, that I might die without having lived. I feel exposed, but it's too late to do anything about it, and Augusta doesn't seem to mind.

"I don't think she's ever been satisfied with whatever answer I gave her."

"Funny, neither have I."

"Some things take a while," Augusta says, and kisses me, to shut me up I think. But I don't feel like shutting up about that.

"Tell me again," I say.

"What?"

"Why you left New York that time."

"Fish and guests stink after three days, and I'd already been there a week."

"You can do better than that."

"What difference does it make anymore? It was shortly after the Peloponnesian Wars."

"It matters to me. I've been trying to understand ever since how you could walk away from that."

"Allan. We're here, we're together tonight, what more do you need to know?"

Together tonight. Does that mean that tomorrow night we might not be – even if I leave Amy? But I can't ask for guarantees now, when nothing at all is guaranteed for Augusta. I can't stand the thought that this might end again, and the end be no one's choice. "I'm sorry," I say.

Augusta looks quizzical. "For what?"

"There's no point in dwelling on it."

"How much time do you put in thinking about this, anyway?"

"Oh – not so much in the grand scheme of things, I suppose. Enough. I used to believe I'd stop caring what happened with you, but I couldn't. Even though I wanted to."

"How come?"

Isn't it obvious? "I got married, remember? And I was – ashamed of it, I guess. You don't want to think of yourself as being the pawn of some obsession."

"Do you always have to watch yourself and judge everything you do?" Augusta asks, almost in an offhand way.

"Not always." I try not to sound defensive, but I'm aware of not succeeding. "Anyway, somebody else in this bed is pretty good at that, to judge from your letters."

"You don't expect me to take my own advice, do you?"

That makes me smile. "I've never known you to take anyone's."

"Just imagine if I had – I'd probably be married to Jerry Reese right now."

"Which one is he?"

"The plumbing and heating guy. My first real boyfriend, back when. Before I even went to college. Come on, don't you remember about him? He was the one who came back from the war and got so mad at me when he found out I was going out with you."

"Him? Does he still live here?"

"People don't leave this town," she says.

"You were going to marry this guy?"

"You don't have to look so jealous, for God's sake," she says, her eyes laughing at me. "There were sure people who thought I should. Mainly my sister." Her advice I can do without. "Even I almost thought so at one time. Well – no, not as close as that sounds. But I tried."

"Somehow I can't picture you trying to marry someone."

"And why shouldn't I, if I wanted to?"

"Did you want to?" That would be all we'd need, for her to be married too.

"No. But for a while I thought it might be a good idea, or something like that. It was the same summer I had the affair with that guy Jim, the father of a kid I taught. He was married."

"I remember." It bothered me more than her other affairs, flings, whatever they were. If she was going to have an affair with a married man, it should have been me.

"It was stupid, but we were too attracted to each other not to. So after that blew up in my face I really tried to like the idea of leading a respectable life, and here was Jerry, he'd been interested in me forever, when my furnace would break down he used to fix it for free."

"Sounds like a great reason to marry somebody."

"Oh, give up, would you?" She gives me a good poke in the ribs, making me jump. "I can't believe you're this possessive. Is this what happens after ten years of marriage, or were you always like this?"

"All I'm doing is giving you an honest answer."

"Right," she says, unconvinced. "Well, I thought for about two weeks that maybe I should do what you're supposed to and get married, but when I tried to go to bed with him . . . I couldn't."

"You've never been any good at doing what you were supposed to do, you should have known it wouldn't work."

"Oh, I did. I knew. I just didn't want to admit it to myself."

"Respectability has never been your strong suit."

"Hey, I keep this place up, don't I? Speaking of which, if you're any good at fixing gutters – "

"I'm not talking about the gutters, I'm talking about your love life."

"Well, that's none of their damn business. Though of course everybody thinks it is, in a town like this."

"What do they think of you around here, anyway?"

"Oh, they think I'm cuckoo and stuck up. They've thought that for years. They still imagine I'm rich because I inherited this house. God knows what they think about my love life."

"Did people find out about you and Jim?"

"Well, Jerry sure did. Yeah, people knew. Some, anyway. Before that they probably called me an old maid – around here you can be one when you're twenty-five. By now, I hate to imagine what they say."

"How come you never got married, all this time?" In bed with her, I can finally ask.

Augusta thinks for a while, her eyes scanning the ceiling. "I never wanted to, I guess. Maybe the right person never asked."

"Well, I certainly did." It was a long time ago but surely she could not have forgotten.

"I'm sorry," she says, turning her dark eyes on me. "I didn't mean you."

We lie for a while and think; I take her hand, play with her fingers while I remember back to when I asked Augusta to marry me – in a letter, like a damn fool. It seems to me now that I should have shown up uninvited, walked into her place, and told her that she was marrying me whether she liked it or not. That might actually have worked.

"I used to dread coming home at night when I first started teaching," she says. "I was living in that little apartment in St. Louis by myself and I didn't know anybody. It seemed like everybody I worked with was married and had two kids already. Hell, it seemed like everybody in the whole city was married if they were out of high school, unless they were unbelievably ugly or peculiar, and half of those people were married too. All of a sudden it was like – okay, this is it, either you can deal with this or you can't, and if you can't what the hell are you going to do?"

"I had to be able to live alone. Really alone. Just in case. And I learned how. But maybe I did too good of a job. You start to like it after a while and then you get so accustomed to having everything your way you start to wonder how you could live any other way. Or why anybody else would want to put up with you."

"Karen seems to do it all right."

"Yeah, but – she's different. She's known me all her life."

"I practically feel as though I have, myself."

"Ah, but you don't know how impossible I can be to live with."

"Are you trying to scare me off?"

"No." There is another silence, open-ended; it seems neither of us is in a hurry to break it. I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss her fingertips.

"I don't compromise very well," Augusta says. "Some things I can't compromise about at all."

"Some things shouldn't be compromised," I say, sure that we're both thinking of what we share tonight.

"There's a price to be paid for that," she says.

"Maybe we've already done that."

"Maybe."

"Did you think it would compromise you somehow to marry me?"

"Listen," she says. "The past is over. Think about now."

K A R E N

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I pulled the pillow over my head to block out the morning light, thinking I'd try to sleep some more, but in a couple of minutes having it there made me too hot. I took the pillow away, rolled over and looked at the clock: seven-thirty. If it was this warm already, it would be hot today, even by New Franklin's standards. The shutters on the east window were not entirely closed, and a stripe of bright sun crossed the bed and me as I lay there listening to the morning sounds, always the same: the faint calls of mourning doves and the screech of a blue jay who patrolled our block, every morning, proclaiming his territory. In the distance there was the "chfff" of a truck releasing its air brakes, and the sound of its engine as it rolled away; I could picture it, at the intersection down by the little store, heading in the direction of Highway 50. There was no sound from inside the house; they would sleep late, I imagined. At least I knew I would have if I had spent the night with someone I was in love with.

I felt as itchy and superfluous as if I had inadvertently found myself going along on Augusta's honeymoon. I wanted her to be happy, all right, and it looked as though for once she was going to be, for a little while anyway; but wouldn't I be in the way?

Come on, I thought, you're an adult, you can find something to do. It seemed to me that ever since I'd come out to New Franklin the only time I had left the house and yard was to go to the store, we'd been so consumed with what was happening to Augusta. I could always take the car keys and go off by myself and . . . do what? Go swimming in the town pool, only it was so chlorinated it hurt my eyes – or go look at the buffalo an eccentric farmer kept on his land outside of town – drive twenty miles to hang around a mall? No. That I definitely would not do. They didn't even have a decent bookstore.

Signs I had seen downtown crossed my mind – the Homecoming parade was happening some time this week – possibly today? I hadn't seen that in a couple of years; it would be worth an hour or two.

I got up, and was about to head to the bathroom to take a shower when it occurred to me that I might run into Allan. All I was wearing was a T-shirt that said "Boston Red Sox" on it; it came to about mid-thigh if I pulled it down. I thought about putting on my nightgown, which was a good deal longer – and hotter – but that seemed absurd. I was decent, and anyway, I had been around this house a lot longer than he had.

But there was no one else up, and no sound from Augusta's room on my way to the bathroom. On the way back I thought I heard them stirring around, saying muffled words – I tried not to hear, or picture them together, feeling as though I was invading their privacy. I got dressed and went downstairs, ignored the cicada killers while I picked up the St. Louis paper that lay at the end of the front walk. Now that New Franklin had become sort of an outlying suburb, Augusta could get the paper delivered, which meant she could read about the Cardinals game she'd already listened to the night before, without first having to walk down to the little store to buy the *Globe-Democrat*. As I picked it up I noticed the date: July was half over already. I had lost track. The sun was already hot; there were tall fair-weather clouds, but nothing that promised more than a moment's shade. It occurred to me that I had better water the garden before it got any later; I went around to the back, threw the paper on the porch outside the kitchen door, and turned on the hose at the spigot on the side of the house. It spurted and sprayed in the grass, making a little muddy trench in front of the nozzle, before I could pick it up.

I was standing there, hypnotized as usual by watering, watching the arc of spray fall on each part of the garden in turn, imagining water running off the leaves, dampening and then soaking the ground beneath, reaching the roots, disturbing the caterpillars and moon bugs and white flies we constantly had to contend with, when from behind me I heard Augusta's voice say "How are you doing?"

She was crossing the lawn toward me in her nightgown, an old cotton thing, ankle-length, and faded until the pattern was almost invisible. She was barefoot; she seemed to have come outside forgetting she wasn't dressed. "Not bad," I said, "how are you?"

All she did was smile, her lips pressed together as if she were trying to keep it to herself but couldn't help letting it show. She looked

away for an instant, then back at me; I felt as if we were teenagers and she was bringing me a secret she was half-embarrassed to share.

She stood by me and watched the water arc away. "So are you satisfied?" she said, as if she had spent the night with him to please me, but the low warm tone of her voice said otherwise.

"Are you?"

"Um . . . yes." But the hesitation was only for show. Augusta laid her hand on my shoulder, and I reached up to touch it with my own.

"Where is he?"

"Making some pancakes, do you want some?"

"Well, sure, but – "

"What?"

"Maybe you two would rather eat breakfast by yourselves?"

Augusta made a "tsk" sound with her tongue. "No, I wouldn't," she said, in an I'm-being-patient sort of voice.

"Well, what about Allan?"

"Hey, it's my house; if he wants me, he'll have to take me the way I come, and that includes you."

"Okay," I said, though I still wasn't sure; I wasn't going to argue with her about it.

For a moment we stood and watched water fall on the garden. "Did you do the canteloupes?" Augusta said. They were always her prize crop.

"Yes."

"Well, why don't you turn the water off and come inside, then?"

I handed her the hose and turned away to go shut it off; when I was halfway to the spigot a splash of cold water hit me square in the back. "Hey!" I yelled, jumping aside and looking around. Augusta was laughing at me, turning the nozzle to make it squirt harder. I made a dash for the spigot and turned it off just before the stream reached me.

"Thanks a million," I said, reaching behind me and pulling my wet shirt away from my back.

"That was too good to resist. Anyway, it woke you up, didn't it?"

"I already was awake. And I already took a shower, too."

"You're cute when you're mad," she said.

"That does it," I said, pulling the hose toward me hand over hand; I grabbed the nozzle and turned on the spigot at the same moment, thinking I'd get Augusta in her nightgown and have my

revenge, but before I could she disappeared around the corner of the house, laughing to herself. "Nice try," she called, when she was out of sight.

I turned the water off again and laid the hose down on the walk. If one night with him can do this, I thought, following her toward the house, what's next?

In the moment of walking around the back and up on the porch I had time to feel uncomfortable again about being part of this little threesome. Fine for Augusta, but what about me, or him? Perhaps I was paying off the debt for what my mother had done, when she tried to jinx their relationship by serving that ham, and I wasn't thrilled with having drawn that task. But better me than her. Imagine the two of them trying to have an affair with her around. When were we going to tell her any of this? In three days Augusta would have her operation, I thought, stepping into the shade of the back porch.

Allan was standing at the stove, turning over a pancake, when I came in; it was jarring to see him cooking in our kitchen, where he didn't belong, too male and out of place in my imagination of this house where ever since my grandparents had died Augusta had lived alone. Her other lovers hadn't counted for me – I knew they'd been here, but in my mind they came and slept with her and went away, knowing their place was not in this house. And certainly not when I was here.

The sound of the screen door made him look around; "Morning," he said, and went back to what he was doing. Augusta was setting the table.

"Good morning."

"How many pancakes do you want?" he asked. I wasn't sure whether that was addressed to me or her.

There was a short hiatus. "He means you," Augusta said.

"Um – three, I guess."

He put three pancakes on a plate for me, three for Augusta, the last two for himself, and sat down, picking up his knife to take some butter.

"You got shortchanged," Augusta said to him.

"I'll make some more in a minute." She and I sat down too, and I began to eat, but I hardly noticed that the pancakes were good, it was so odd to sit there across from Allan, with Augusta to my left still in her nightgown, fresh from sleeping with him. What could it have been like – him so big and bear-like, bearded, a virtual stranger after all, and I couldn't help thinking he looked so old. We'd talked about him many

times, for years I'd wanted her to find someone to be with, but that had only been an idea; now Allan dropped from the sky and I remembered Will telling me, "Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it."

Augusta started talking to Allan about some place where they ate pancakes in the middle of the night when they were in college, and I recalled when Will had said that – we had arrived at his parents' country place in Connecticut on a freezing moonless night in March, and were standing outside looking up at the sky. There were more stars than anyone in Boston, blinded by the lights of the city, would ever guess; I had almost forgotten about them. We had stood there in silence for some time when he said that, apropos of nothing. "What's your wish?" I said, but Will didn't answer. "I wish my students' papers would grade themselves," I said.

"Come on – is that the best you can do?" he replied.

"What's yours, then?"

"I'm not sure yet. I have to work on it."

"In case it comes true?"

"Oh . . . I wish somebody would deliver us a Chinese dinner." But I knew that wasn't what it had been, and I couldn't get the real wish out of him. I was pretty sure it had been about us – and had he been afraid that I might say yes? Of course he wouldn't have been able to tell me that, if that was what he meant. Not that he had much to fear in that direction.

"Some more pancakes?" Allan said to me, getting up.

"Um – sure."

"Augusta?" He stirred his bowl of batter.

"No thanks."

"That's all you're going to eat? There's tons more of this stuff, somebody's got to finish it."

"I have confidence in both of you," she said, picking up her coffee cup and getting up. "I'm going to go get dressed." She gave him a kiss, holding out her cup with one hand so it wouldn't spill, and left the kitchen. Wait a minute, I wanted to object, you can't just leave like that, I hardly know this man.

"Well, I guess it's up to us," Allan said, ladling batter out onto the griddle. "I hope you like pancakes."

"I do, but there's a limit to how many I ought to eat."

For a minute he had his back to me, fiddling with the heat under the griddle, lifting pancakes with the spatula to see how done they were, and I could almost hear both of us asking ourselves what to say next. He flipped all the pancakes and turned to me.

"How do you – " I began, and at the same he said "So tell me"; we both stopped, traded a look of admitting to the awkwardness of the moment. "You go first," he said.

"Oh – I was just going to say this isn't the place to go if you want to get away from heat."

"No," he said. What a dumb remark, I told myself, he didn't come here on a vacation. "But I'm used to it. It's just as bad in Maryland. It must be a lot cooler in Boston."

"It is – whenever it gets to be anything like real summer everyone starts complaining."

"Let me have your plate." He put four thick pancakes on my plate – more than I'd ever finish – and handed it back to me, poured himself some coffee and sat back down with four on his own plate.

"Take one of these, would you?" I said.

"Haven't I got enough?" he answered, but he reached over and took a pancake from my stack. "It seems to me I'm sufficiently fat already."

"You can work it off in no time carrying those boxes up to the attic."

"God, that's the truth," he said. "It ought to be nice and warm up there today."

"I wouldn't even go up there. I can't believe she roped you into doing that the minute you arrived."

"I'm sure you must know how it is. She's not a person you want to say no to."

No, I thought, that's true. But I was surprised that it worked even with Allan, forty-two years old and a lawyer at that. "I used to be a little scared of her, when I was younger," I said.

Allan chuckled. "Me too."

"You were?" Maybe we were going to be able to skip the small talk after all.

"I was afraid I wouldn't live up to her standards. One slip and I'd be demoted to the ranks of the mediocre, along with everyone else in the world. Almost everyone. The worst part was I wasn't sure what the slip would be."

"Imagine how you'd have felt if you were twenty years younger than she is."

"Luckily," he said, "she never lives up to her own standards either. If it weren't for that, she'd probably be unbearable."

We shared a look of recognition; yes, it was the same Augusta we both knew, despite the difference in how we knew her. I was

actually beginning to imagine her and Allan as college students, the age I had just been, going out on a date for the first time – Augusta feeling as I had felt, the same uncertainty, the same hesitation, the moments of relief and almost relaxing and then becoming self-conscious again – could all of that have been like my own life? When she told about it, it seemed as though a different set of emotions had been at work, but perhaps that wasn't true.

"Does she seem different to you?" I said, thinking of course she must.

Allan looked at his coffee cup as if he'd find the answer in there. "Well – she was twenty-eight, the last time I saw her . . . I don't know. I've only been here a day. Not even that yet."

It's been a pretty eventful day, I thought. What I wanted to ask him was what it had been like for them to take up where they had left off after so many years. "Did you miss her all this time?" I said, and immediately I knew I'd gone too far.

He looked up at me with an unwavering gaze that confirmed my fears. "You really do know all my secrets, don't you?"

The look he was giving me seemed to pin me in place, made it hard for me to speak. I remembered that he was a lawyer. "I'm sorry, I – I'm sure I really don't, it's just that Augusta and I talk about everything." I could feel myself turning red. Just because I knew that didn't mean he wanted me to bring it up.

"Tell me more," Allan said, and sat waiting as if he really thought I could; I couldn't meet his eyes. He let me squirm until I was almost ready to bolt from the kitchen with some shamefaced apology. Then let me off. "Yes, I missed her. Not all the time, obviously. But I did." He sounded as if I had made him admit something he had hoped to hide.

"It's none of my business, I'm sorry."

We sat for a moment, not looking at each other. Great, I thought to myself. Why didn't you make yourself scarce when you had the chance? "I don't know why I should mind, to tell you the truth," Allan said after a while. "But it's not something I'm accustomed to talking about."

I glanced up for an instant, but he so much looked the part of the solid citizen, not just lawyer but judge, that I had to pretend intense interest in my uneaten pancakes.

"This *is* my number one secret, you know," he said. "It's a little disconcerting to realize that someone I've never even met before has

known about it for years." But he didn't sound angry; I began to feel a little less shaky.

"I don't know what I thought I was – Harriet Vane, or somebody. I never would have found out if I hadn't been such a little snoop." It seemed as though I had to confess to him, even though I'd done my snooping at fifteen; it was his secret I'd violated.

"You found a letter, is that right?" What else had she told him?

"There was a shoe box full of them in the basement, in amongst some old junk. I was down there hanging around my boyfriend George, I had nothing to do . . . even so, I shouldn't have read it."

"What did you think?"

The more we talked about this, the more embarrassing it got, but there was no going back. "It was really a shock, I had no idea things were like that."

"Like what?"

"The way you felt about her." I couldn't bring myself to describe Allan's own emotions to him, but I remembered exactly how violently they had stirred up mine. I had had no idea that her life was so far from what it ought to have been. Welcome to reality, take that. "The way she talked about it before that, I thought you were sort of old friends and pen pals. I mean, she told me about going to New York with you, but after that all she said was that you still wrote to each other."

"Well, that was one way of putting it," he said.

"Yeah."

"What was she like when she found out?"

"Talk about being scared of her – I wanted to crawl under something. She'd never told anybody about you and her, and I guess she wasn't planning to, ever."

"Well, I wasn't planning to, either. But it's too late for that." He gave me a wry smile. "So was it like watching a soap opera?"

"It was frustrating – I kept wanting it to work out somehow and there didn't seem to be any way it could."

"You think you were frustrated," he said. He was silent for a few moments, examining the tablecloth. "I was angry at her a lot, too," he said, reflectively, and that made me think of Will. He must be mad at me, whether he would admit it or not, and I deserved it. "For letting it all go to waste. That was the way I thought about it. Though apparently I may have been wrong. Depending on what happens."

"Yes," I said; our eyes met. About that, there was too much to say for us to say anything.

After a moment I got up and began to clear away the dishes. Allan had eaten the rest of his pancakes; I had fortunately managed not to finish mine. As I was running water into the dishpan, I said to him, "What are you going to do today?" Hearing myself say it, I realized "you" could mean "you and Augusta," that she might be part of a couple.

"Me? I have no idea. Whatever Augusta wants me to do, I suppose."

"I think the Homecoming parade's today. You might want to go to that – really, it's a lot of fun."

"Wait, don't let him off that easy," Augusta said, coming down the back stairs with her freshly washed hair knotted up in a towel on the top of her head. "There's so much left to be taken up to the attic."

"And it's such a nice day for some heavy moving," Allan said.

"Of course, if you're not going to sleep in there . . . then the hell with it." She sat down at the kitchen table where I had been, across from Allan, and held out her hand for his. I went back to washing up. "Actually, we should go to the parade, if it's today."

"What is this Homecoming? How can you have football when it's this hot?" Allan said.

"No, no, no," Augusta said, as if anyone old enough to talk ought to know what the Homecoming was. "It's a holiday."

"It is? How come I've never heard of it?"

"Oh, you Easterners think you know everything. It's a New Franklin holiday, and don't ask me why it's called the Homecoming, it just is."

"It's an excuse for a parade," I said. "And then you go the park and eat barbecue and ride on the Tilt-a-Whirl. If you can stand it. A couple of years ago they had a balloon launching. Now that was class."

"And to think I've been missing this every year," Allan said.

"You're so culturally deprived you don't even realize it," Augusta said, and made Allan snicker. "So what have you two been talking about all this time?"

There was a pause, long enough for me to feel hesitant and think that there was no point in trying to hide anything. "You," I said.

"Me?"

"Us," Allan said. "You and me. We only got started, though. Karen was just telling me how frustrating she thought the whole thing was."

"Now, would you refer to last night as frustrating?" Augusta said, surprising even me a little.

"Do you have to ask?" he said.

The Homecoming parade started as usual: people lining St. Clair Street, little kids sitting on the curb, adults quietly talking among themselves. Older people brought folding chairs. Some families had thermoses of lemonade with them; kids kept running into the drugstore to buy popsicles. Even Augusta greeted other people, talked to them like the native she was; they looked at me curiously for a moment, then remembered who I was and passed along to Allan. Who was this man standing next to Augusta Streeter as if he belonged there? She introduced him to a couple of acquaintances who stopped to talk, and it was clear that that left them only more mystified; his name was Kirstein, he lived outside Washington – what to make of that?

A stirring in the crowd announced that something was happening down the street; a few blocks away, some American flags turned the corner, leading the high school band. Two uniformed kids were holding up a big banner that said "New Franklin Homecoming"; it bellied out in the slight breeze, looking as if it might get away from them. The band leader blew his whistle and the band began to march, stomping raggedly into "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy," the music floating down the street to where we were, pretty thin in some of the crucial parts and not exactly together, but making up for that with determination. As they got closer they began to home in on the beat, so that they sounded more like a real band by the time they drew even with us and finished the tune. They marched in place for a few bars, and I thought how hot they must be in their uniforms; then the leader blew his whistle again, and they attacked the "Colonel Bogey March." Behind them came a flatbed truck carrying what I realized after a moment was supposed to be a cornucopia, pouring out bushel baskets of corn; a banner spiraling around it from its top read "4-H Club." Lined up among the baskets were kids of various sizes, waving, saying "Hi" to their friends as they passed; one girl of about eleven or twelve was holding a crazed-looking goat on a very short tether. The spectators applauded, pointed out kids they knew – "Look, there's Trudy Schapenhorst, see?" "Hi Jane!"

Next came the old cars, the same beautifully polished antiques, it seemed to me, that drove slowly down the street in every year's parade, including my favorite, the ancient delivery wagon with the wooden-spoked wheels, and after them a Cadillac convertible with the Homecoming queen perched on the top of the back seat, her four maids of honor below her on the seat proper – girls in white dresses,

waving self-consciously with a motion of the wrist only, hand at shoulder height, aware that the whole thing was a good joke, but proud nevertheless. The queen was not the prettiest of them, I thought, and I wondered why – no doubt there was a reason, that New Franklin High School girls would discuss among themselves in detail, but I'd never know what it was.

After the queen came another high school band, this one from Collinsville, where Augusta taught; she pointed out to Allan some of the students she'd told him about the night before at dinner. They had gotten from somewhere a marching band arrangement of "My Heart Belongs to Daddy"; it was one of those pieces where the saxophone and trombone players are supposed to wag their horns up and down, and the band ought to do tricky hesitation steps as they go down the street, but the Collinsville kids marched through it, all business, as if it didn't matter what they were playing as long as it was in 4/4 – except for the drummers; they were having a good time, whamming the downbeats for all they were worth.

There was a gap in the parade for a moment, after the Collinsville band had passed us; then a sound like a swarm of lawnmowers came around the corner a few blocks down. It was the Shriners – I always wondered where they came from, and how in the world they got to be one more part of the New Franklin parade, but there they were again, middle-aged men riding motorcycles just big enough for ten-year-olds, their knees up around their chests, red fezzes on their heads, zooming in circles and figure-eights on the street, honking rubber bulb horns at the crowd. They did their best to look as if they were going to collide, cutting each other off like kids in Dodgem cars and swerving at the last minute; the whole performance was one long swerve, done with a furious concentration that struck me funnier than any amount of mugging could have. In their wake came three more on go-karts decked out with American flags, even bunting on their tiny wheels, and then a man sitting in a motorized bathtub with a pipe sticking up out of it and a shower head that rained real water down on the rider, wearing a red shower cap instead of a fez, soaping himself with one hand as he rode along waving to the crowd. "Now you see?" Augusta said to Allan. "You don't get this everywhere."

"Thank heavens."

But they weren't through; there was still the Shriners Oriental Band, eight men in maroon tail coats and silver shoes with turned-up toes, playing nothing I could recognize on oboe-sounding instruments. Up ahead, one of those unaccountable delays that afflict parades

stopped everything in place. The Oriental Band, in front of us, finished their number, decided nothing was going to happen soon, put their instruments under their arms, and lit cigarettes; ignoring everyone watching them, they stood in a little clump in the middle of the street like workmen on break, smoking and chatting – discussing parades they had known? What were these guys in real life? Before they could finish their cigarettes, the parade started to move again; they ground out their butts, put their peculiar horns back in their mouths, and strolled on making more of the same mournful tune.

After the Shriners, as if to let everyone get over them, the New Franklin police department, tooling by at five miles an hour – two cars, one motorcycle, officers in reflector shades, but smiling instead of acting like cops, waving to people, occasionally making their sirens emit barks and squeals to startle the crowd.

Down at the corner where the parade turned onto St. Clair, a mass of black uniforms with silver trim came into view, and I remembered them too – the Black Knights. Once drum and bugle corps champions of Illinois, or the United States, or for all I knew, the world. Maybe still champs. I knew nothing about drum and bugle corps except the Black Knights in the Homecoming parade, but perhaps there was nothing more to know. I could hear them go into their cadence as they came around the corner – Dum ticka-ticka Boom tink whop ding POW ka WHAM BLAM, and then the silver horns went up and a wall of sound seemed to push everyone a step back from the street. They went by fast like a train, fifty of them at least, black outfits defying the heat, every horn and button and chrome rim on a drum polished and glittering, in step, in tune, and loud beyond loud. I could hear Allan murmur “Wow” to himself as they passed, and I knew he meant it. I felt close to him for a moment, to know he could be swept away, as I was, by something that was so much a part of our world.

The parade always ended the same way: the fire truck came last, making its siren grumble and groan and tick, and ringing its bell, the firemen calling out to little kids to come ride with them; only a few bold ones did.

After the fire truck had passed, the people on the sidewalks drifted into the street and followed along, ambling slowly down the middle of the high-centered street. There was already a pretty good crowd coming along by the time the parade had passed us; they had a particular satisfied look on their faces, a look that people only get when they’re walking in the middle of the street, as if they owned the whole town.

"Shall we go along?" Augusta asked.

"Along where?" Allan replied.

"To the park. They'll probably have a band concert and there'll be a barbecue. It's what one does."

"Great, a barbecue," Allan said, patting his stomach. "Just what I need."

"I offered you a chance to work off some of those pancakes and you didn't take it." We joined the people on the street, Allan on one side of Augusta and me on the other.

"Please – I spent the whole morning trying to fix your lawnmower – just because I didn't succeed doesn't mean I was doing nothing."

"You spent the whole morning reading the paper and half an hour fiddling with the mower," she said.

"Same difference."

The parade route went past the downtown businesses, including the clothing store that had once been my grandfather's but no longer bore his name, then turned off the main streets and wound through town; I wondered if there was some reason for the route that I couldn't fathom, like having to pass certain churches, or the mayor's house. New Franklin was a town of porches, and this was a chance to inspect them at leisure, to look at front gardens and remark on the height of their zinnias and the color of their morning glories; I was sure that some people along the route had spent the morning weeding and picking the dead leaves and spent flowers off their hanging plants.

"Karen?" a female voice said next to me. I turned to see a young woman pushing a baby in a stroller. "Is your name Karen?" she said.

"Yes. Karen Moss." Who could she be?

"I'm Doreen Krupnick. Used to be Doreen Schatz. We met years ago, I was sure it was you as soon as I saw you."

Doreen Schatz – I remembered the name, but . . . "Oh, we went to the pool together, didn't we?"

A wonderfully gratified smile came over her face, and I remembered exactly who she had been – a town girl I met by chance one day who decided to make an overture to me, the out-of-towner, by taking me to the pool and introducing me to her friends. It had seemed to me then that she collected people, the more the better, and now I could see that she was thrilled with her own success: I remembered. "You went out with a boy named George, isn't that right?" she said.

"Mm-hm." To think of having such a retentive mind for gossip. She'd be in heaven if she knew I was going to see George this very day.

But don't be a snob, I thought; my own memories worked their way to the surface. "And yours was called – wait, don't tell me, I'll get it . . . Benny."

"Yes! Benny Alvis." She laughed as if Benny were a good old joke that we shared. "I came that close to marrying Benny," she said, holding up her thumb and finger a quarter inch apart and squinting at the gap, pushing her lips out. "But I married Mike Krupnick instead. Thank God. This is my daughter, her name's Kimberley. Six months old in a week."

I leaned over to take a look at Kimberley in the stroller; she was sound asleep, leaning against one side of the stroller and jouncing slightly. To me she looked like any baby, in a little sun suit and a white tie-on hat. "Cute," I said.

"They're always cute when they're asleep," Doreen said. "And a ride in the stroller never fails with her. Sometimes I've been tempted to take her out at three in the morning, just to get her back to sleep. So are you visiting again?"

"Yes – you know my aunt Augusta?" I was sure she must; it seemed unlikely there was anyone in New Franklin Doreen didn't know, and Augusta was more noticeable than a lot of people. We had wandered off a little ways from Augusta and Allan, so she either didn't hear me mention her or paid no attention.

"Oh, of course. But I can't remember where you live."

"Well, I used to live in Evanston, outside Chicago, that's where I grew up, but now I live in Boston."

"Really." I had a feeling that I became still more collectable because I had moved farther away – maybe even exotic. "What do you do there?"

"Teach high school."

"Oh, that's wonderful – what subject?"

"English."

"Uh oh. I better watch myself. English was never my greatest class. So how do you like it?"

"Oh, it's great. It's really exhausting, too, but . . ." I went on making my how-do-you-like-teaching speech, automatically, checking her out as we walked along. So she had had a baby six months before. It hardly showed, as far as I could tell; she was a little plump, but then she always had been, and she looked extraordinarily pleased with herself. She and Kimberley seemed to form a parade all by themselves. "And you? What are you up to these days?"

"Oh – I just started back to work. I work for Dr. Nolan, the dentist out by the plaza. Keep his appointment books, send out bills and stuff. He's training me to be a hygienist, though if you ask me, looking at teeth all day is pretty depressing. My mom takes care of Kimberley part of the day and then there's a lady on my street who runs a playgroup. It's sort of complicated. You're not married, are you?" she said, meaning she'd looked for a wedding ring and hadn't found one.

"No."

"Well, you'll see. But anyway. It's worth it. Isn't it, sweetie?" she said, leaning forward over the stroller to peer at Kimberley. "I have a feeling when she wakes up she's going to be one hungry kid, and I forgot to bring a bottle. I'm going to have to stop by home and get one."

"It's so nice to see you," I said, quickly, before she could invite me over, and held out my hand. She took it with only the slightest hint of disappointment in me for cutting short a perfectly satisfactory conversation.

"I was so surprised to run into you, but you know, I was sure it was you. Are you going to the barbecue?"

"I guess so."

"Well, have a good time. If you ever want to look me up, my name's Krupnick now, okay?"

"Okay."

"Do you visit every summer still?"

"Just about."

"Well, I'm sure I'll be seeing you then." She seemed to file that thought comfortably, turning away toward a cross street. "Bye."

"Bye," I replied. I watched her head off, saying "Hi" to a couple of people as she went, tilting the stroller up onto the sidewalk. I suddenly remembered that when we met I had been going into the eleventh grade, and she had been going into tenth. Younger than me. But older now: she had a child. Or in a different world. How did she ever get there, except by taking it all for granted? For a moment I wanted to go after her and ask her how she felt about her husband; she was too open not to answer. But that was her life, not mine.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We got to the park eventually, ate some very sticky and delicious barbecued chicken, with potato salad and cole slaw, as ever, wandered around watching grade-school kids playing softball and older ones showing off their acrobatic frisbee catches, drank beer, looked at the carnival rides that were set up and waiting for customers; most of those would come later, when it started to get dark. The hot-air balloonist had not come back, but that was all right; the sky was hot enough already, without another man-made fire going up into it. Everyone, including us, looked somewhat longingly at the swimming pool, but only somewhat; it was standing room only with yelling kids.

"I could go for a nap," Allan said. "Especially if it happened right in front of a fan."

"That's about the only way it can happen, believe me."

We headed back to the house, no longer walking in the middle of the street: back to normal life, I thought, only what was normal life anymore? If I told Doreen Schatz – no, Krupnick – what was going on at our house it might be the greatest piece of gossip she'd heard all year.

And how would she react? Actually, I had a feeling she wouldn't judge – just take it in – but I knew that the park was full of people who would disapprove. And sympathize. Both of which Augusta would hate.

Halfway home I remembered I hadn't told Augusta George was coming over. "I've got a surprise for you later," I said. "Somebody else you haven't seen in quite a while."

"Oh yeah? I hope it's someone I want to see." I knew without her having to say it that she wouldn't take kindly to anything that might spoil her time with Allan.

"It's George."

"George?" She really was surprised. "Where did you dig him up from?"

"He lives in St. Louis."

"He does? Did you know this all along?"

"No, I just discovered it last night."

"Ah, you've been busy." She gave me a mischievous look, as if she had caught me in a clever plan to take advantage of being here by having an affair with George – but that was overshooting the mark.

"Just thought I'd try to find some way to stay out of your hair."

"Is this the same George I heard about last night in the study?" Allan asked.

"The very same," Augusta said. "I can't wait to see how he turned out."

"You and me both," I said. What if I didn't like him anymore and the evening turned out to be one of those awkward situations that no one knows how to end?

When we got back to the house Augusta said "Let's go this way," and went through the side yard, Allan and I straggling after her. She picked up the hose and handed it to me. "Okay," she said. "Now's your chance."

"Huh?"

"Squirt me. You wanted to get me back, remember? Go on, it's hot enough to hatch lizards out here."

"Anything you say." I turned on the hose; Augusta held her arms out to the sides and smiled expectantly. The spray of water made her hoot; she turned around, getting wet front and back. I moved the hose away.

"More," she said.

"More?"

She nodded, and I made the water arc up and come down on her head like rain. "Get Allan!" she said, her eyes shut.

He looked at me and I at him – would I do it? "Squirt him, quick, before he gets away."

"Now just a minute here," Allan said, sidling toward the back of the house.

"Okay, if you won't, I will," Augusta said, coming over to me and grabbing the hose. She twisted the nozzle to make it squirt farther and splattered Allan as he was trying to get away. "All right, that does it," he said, turning around and coming back, getting soaked as he approached and ignoring it. He and Augusta wrestled over the hose – for a moment she almost managed to stick it down his pants – and then

they both started laughing too much to keep on, too wet to care anymore. Allan reached in his back pocket, took out his wallet and threw it to a drier spot, unscrewed the nozzle to make the stream less violent, and let the hose run right down his back. "Ah," he sighed. "I haven't done this since I was about six."

"Me either," said Augusta, taking the hose from him and letting it run over her throat and down the front of her body. Her soaked shirt clung to her breasts and hardly concealed them, but she seemed not to care – seemed to have forgotten, though it was completely out of character, that there were such things as neighbors, or rules. I stood there fascinated; then she put her thumb over the hose and turned the spray on me before I could even duck. "You don't think you're going to stay out of this, do you?" she said, chasing me across the side yard until I gave up and let her soak me too. So I got wet; did it matter? "You're cheating," she said. "You're wearing a bra."

"Excuse *me*," I said, suddenly very aware of Allan's presence, his eyes on me, and glad that George wasn't there yet. "Are you done? Am I wet enough for you yet?"

"Oh, admit it – it feels good." She took a drink out of the hose and turned it off. "Well. I suppose we'd better take these clothes off." For a wild moment, the offhand tone of her voice made me think she might start right there, in the side yard, but she only pulled off her squishy tennis shoes and headed for the back door, Allan following her, picking up his wallet on the way, me bringing up the rear.

"Is this a regulation part of the Homecoming too?" he said.

"Only for the most distinguished participants."

I stayed behind when they went in, thinking I'd stand on the porch and drip while they got themselves dried off. I could hear them going upstairs. They'd go in the bathroom and get towels, leave their wet clothes on the floor, dry themselves off, go to her room – make love, I hoped. Had she wanted to show us her breasts? Or maybe show the world – of course. You're so slow sometimes, I thought to myself. But I couldn't get over her actually doing it.

And why get me involved? Safety in numbers, perhaps. If it was going to be my job to be as outrageous as she was . . . maybe I didn't have a choice.

About six-thirty we were in the kitchen, poking around for things to eat. Having a real dinner seemed excessive, but Augusta and I were making a salad while Allan was out buying wine. From the look of both of them before he went out, their nap had been a success;

something about the way they shared a space said that being together had already become natural. And if it was that simple, why had it been so complicated?

"So are you glad he came?" I asked her as I peeled a cucumber.

"What do you think, silly," Augusta said. She sounded gentle for once.

"I like seeing you like this."

She smiled to herself. "What made you call George, anyway?"

"I just needed someone to talk to. I had his mom's phone number in one of his old letters. She's completely nuts, it turns out. But she gave me his number."

"Are you thinking of, uh . . ." She gave me a sly look of unmistakable meaning and I could feel my face getting a little hot.

"No."

"No?" She sounded unconvinced.

"No."

"Ah," she said. "I might have guessed. Now where do you suppose Allan has gotten to? Do you think he managed to get lost in Fairview Heights?"

The doorbell rang, I put down my knife and all at once I felt nervous. I hope this wasn't a stupid idea, I said to myself inwardly as I hurried through the front hall, trying to make out what I could from the silhouette of George in the frosted glass of the front door. Of course I couldn't tell anything from that. I opened it and there was a person I recognized – that was a relief – but just barely at first. It took a moment for the image to come into focus with my memories. "Hello," he said after a moment; he looked amused. I could feel him inspecting me, too.

"George, what happened to your hair?" It was all gone; he had a crew cut.

He laughed. "I got it done like this special to see you."

I couldn't get over it. He had had floppy straight hair that got in his eyes, the last time I saw him.

"You've changed a little yourself," he said. I should hope so, I thought, I was fifteen. "Do you think I could come in?"

"Sorry. Did you have trouble finding the house?"

"No, it sort of came back. Does anything ever change in this town?"

"You *have* gotten taller," I said. He had been exactly my height but that was no longer true. His face had changed a little, too; it was longer, his nose was more prominent. At the mention of getting taller

he gave me a one-sided piratical grin, as if it were a neat trick he had played on the world.

The smile faded as quickly as it had come. "How's Augusta?"

"Great, you'd never know she had anything wrong with her."

"I have no idea what to say to her."

"Say anything, don't think about it. Pretend you don't know. She hates to talk about it anyway."

"Can't blame her."

We were standing in the front hall indecisively – in the confusion of seeing each other at the front door we had missed our chance to shake hands, or make contact somehow, and now it seemed we were trying to find a way to do that but not knowing how.

"Is that George?" Augusta called from the kitchen.

"Yes," I said.

"Bring him in here."

"After you," George said, and touched me lightly on the shoulder to make me go before him. I was very aware of him behind me as I entered the kitchen.

"George!" Augusta said, looking delighted. She put down the dish towel she was holding and held out her hand for his; as he took it I seemed to see all of him for the first time – compact, solid, bullet-headed with his crew cut, giving her the same crooked smile. He looked very male, unpredictable, as if he were hiding something.

"It's good to see you," George said to her.

"You too. Want a beer? Glass of wine? No, we don't have any wine. It'll be here in a moment. Have a beer. Or is that too decadent for you?" I knew what she meant – he looked as though he might have become someone who lived on whole grains and fruit juice.

"I think I could handle it," George said in the same opaque tone he had used on the phone the night before. He might equally well have meant that one was his limit or that he drank six-packs without noticing them. Though to judge from the way he was built, he didn't spend his life drinking beer.

"What are you up to these days?" she said, searching in the refrigerator.

"Oh – I work day care at a place in U. City. Two-year-olds. It's a lot of fun – and of course it's incredibly well-paid."

"I always figured you for the kind of guy who'd have a high-powered career." She handed him a beer. "Want a glass?"

He waved that offer away. "Are you still a Cardinal fan?"

"Is the Pope still Catholic?"

"You know, this still might be an okay year," George said. "If Templeton keeps hitting the way he has been."

"Did you catch last night's game?"

"No, what happened?" It was probably the first game all season she paid no attention to, I thought. Otherwise occupied.

"They had Cruz on first and Brock on second, Simmons was up and they decided to try the double steal – "

There were footsteps on the back porch and Allan came in the kitchen door, his arms full of bags; he paused at the sight of George and for an instant I could see them look at each other as if to say, *Who the hell are you?*

Augusta took one of the bags from Allan with a sound of clinking bottles and said, "This is George Short." George extended his hand. "Allan Kirstein," Allan said.

"How do you do?" George said in a punctilious way, as if Allan's arrival required the utmost correctness.

"This is Karen's former-ex-previous boyfriend," Augusta said, getting a little smirk out of George, "and this is mine," she added, touching Allan's arm. "Except I don't think he's so ex anymore."

"You don't think?" Allan said, looking a little self-conscious. George seemed unsure of what to do with himself, and for that matter, so was I.

"What'd you get?" Augusta said to Allan.

"Well – I got some red wine" – he pulled out a bottle – "some white, a little cheese, um – some crackers, a bottle of champagne . . ."

"You really went all out, didn't this cost you a fortune?"

"Not to worry. It seemed appropriate, you know?" I could tell, though, that he wished George and I weren't there.

"Hey George," I said, "want me to give you the tour? You haven't seen this place in a long time." That sounded phony even to me, but at least it was a way to get us out of the kitchen.

"Sure," he said.

"Of course, the first thing you really ought to notice is the ceiling in here – a real work of art." He looked up, then at me, puzzled. "I spent three days painting that thing last summer when it was about a hundred and two degrees – talk about beyond the call of duty – "

"Yeah, and I've never heard the last of it," Augusta said.

"Come on out back, I'll show you the garden. It's the only one in New Franklin that has land mines around it to keep the groundhogs away." The screen door closed behind us.

"So the summerhouse never got built?" George sounded disappointed. After the old one collapsed Augusta had designed a replacement and George had built a scale model of it to her specifications – which kept him at our house day after day and made it possible for us to fall in love – if the word applied at the age of fifteen and a half. Suddenly it occurred to me to wonder what had become of that model; I had never seen it since.

"No, she was going to get Jerry to build it, but you know – things didn't work out between them." I wondered how much of that George had noticed at the time. Beside me he seemed very different from the boy I'd spent hot summer evenings making out with – he was formed now, and there was something about him that said, Don't try to push me. I wondered what he was like with the kids – was he strict and scary, or did a whole different side of him come out then?

"Who is that guy, anyway?" George said. He sounded as if Allan's presence personally offended him, and I caught an unexpected glimpse of myself. Somehow it was nice to know George felt so proprietary about Augusta's house.

"They fell in love a zillion years ago, in college, but then, I don't know. He's married. The last time they saw each other was fourteen years ago."

"Fourteen years? And he's married? How did he get here, then?"

"It's my fault, I made her call him after she found out she had cancer. I had no idea he'd come out here. He lives in Maryland. But he showed up yesterday. They slept together last night."

"Not wasting any time, are they?" George said.

"The operation's on Tuesday."

He shook his head, stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered toward the garden.

"My dad had cancer, you know," he said, contemplating the cabbages. "Lung cancer. It's pretty horrible stuff. I'll never forget the sound of him coughing. But then any kind's horrible, I'm sure."

"Not fair," I said.

"But who ever said it would be?" George sounded like he had accepted that, which made him, I supposed, more grown-up than me, or more fatalistic.

"Do you want some dinner or not?" That was Augusta calling us from the back porch.

"Sure," he said, turning around. I followed him back toward the house. He was wearing white pants and a purple knit shirt, and from

behind, with his crew cut, he hardly looked like someone I knew or would know. I couldn't tell if I should be comfortable with him or not.

We ate bread and cheese and salad and drank wine. For a while Allan quizzed George on what he did and what it was like to work in day care; George answered as if his answers might incriminate him. That made him sound like a teenager, but he got over it when Augusta started in on the various reasons why the Baltimore Orioles were doomed to an inevitable decline. George and I ate while she and Allan traded obscurely damning facts about each other's teams.

"Yum," George said, scraping the last forkful of salad out of the bowl.

Augusta took a drink of wine. "What say we go down to the park and try some of the rides?"

I thought for a moment. Let them go alone. "I got enough of that last year. I told you I'd never go on the Tilt-a-Whirl again, don't you remember?"

"How about the Ferris wheel?"

"You ride it for me."

"George?"

"No, thanks."

"Well, I'm sure you'll find better things to do here," Augusta said, which made me glance at George to see how he took that and if he thought I had put Augusta up to saying it. His watchful look didn't waver.

"So Allan," she said, "don't tell me you're above it all, too."

"I can't wait," he said. "Maybe I can find out if I still have the touch at Skee-Ball."

Allan and Augusta went out the front door, and there we were, George and I, facing each other at the kitchen table. "She sure hasn't changed," he said. "I feel as if it's been about a week since I last saw her."

"I just hope it stays that way," I said. But I knew what was about to happen to her, and how could it not alter everything?

I had hoped it would feel like about a week since I'd seen George, but it didn't. We were twenty-two and twenty-four – a different world. Was he thinking about what almost happened, imagining I wanted to complete it now?

"How've you been, anyway?" George said. "All I've heard about since I got here is Augusta."

"You mean, like, for the last four years?"

"I'm not in a hurry." He looked at me, leaning his chin on his hand, and in fact he seemed amazingly settled in. Just a few minutes ago, Allan had seemed to put him on edge, but there was no trace of that left. Had his moods always shifted so fast?

"How have I been." There seemed to be nothing to do but try to answer; I had invited him here, hadn't I? Presumably it wasn't just for aimless chit-chat. "Well, teaching the ninth grade is no pushover. I really don't know how Augusta's managed to keep going for twenty years. She says the first year's the hardest – that better be true. Wasn't it hard when you started your job?" He nodded. "About once a month I was afraid the whole thing was just going to fall apart on me. Like I was going to have to go in there and say Okay, I admit it, I can't do it, I don't have what it takes. But you know. You have to face the next day even when you can't. You know what I mean – don't you?"

"Yes." It was his hair that threw me off – I kept having to remind myself that he must be able to deal with little kids' feelings, and if so that must mean I could still talk to him. His voice was kinder than he looked.

"George, why did you cut your hair off?"

"I guess because I was broke. It began to seem crazy spending all that money on haircuts. This way I can do it myself. And, you know, I got used to it."

"Is that really all there is to it?"

He gave me his one-sided smile, which I was sure was not the smile I recalled. "We were talking about you, remember?"

"Oh, all right. But it'll be your turn later on. Anyway, it was a really long year. In the spring my favorite student got busted for smoking pot in the boys' john, suspended for a week, after that he never turned anything in and flunked the final marking period. It just killed me to have to give him an F. That was just one thing that happened. Kids have tough lives – you find out after a while. Especially from what they write. Some of their families are so screwed up – and what the hell can you do about it? I hate that. Feeling helpless."

"Yeah," George said, scanning the table top as if he were reading it. "There was this kid this year at the day care center, a preschooler – according to the teacher, he knew way too much about sex, after a while she figured there had to be something bad going on in his life. Thank God it wasn't in my room. It was an awful situation, as soon as she tried to talk about it with his parents they started

blaming her . . . it was nasty. Can you imagine dealing with cases like that every day? I wouldn't be a social worker for a million bucks."

"What happened?"

"They pulled their kid out and we never saw them again. I don't know what happened. Maybe the teacher was wrong. I hope she was, for the kid's sake."

"Think what the parents went through for nothing if she was."

"I know. But what do you do, keep quiet about it?"

I could imagine too well the position that teacher had been in. "I didn't have anything as hard as that," I said. "Thank God. But it was hard enough. I mean, I think I did teach them something, don't get me wrong. It's a good school, good kids, I'm lucky to work there."

"Don't you have all sorts of trouble over busing?"

"I'm not in Boston, I'm in Brookline. Things are easier where we are."

George poured a little more wine in his glass; he seemed to be waiting for me to go on.

"So that's what it's been like, more or less," I said, when he didn't speak.

George took a sip and didn't respond for a moment; then he said, "Part of it, anyway." He gave me a look that seemed to say Come on, let's get to the good stuff.

"You know what I remember about you, George? The very first day I met you, you wanted me to tell you one of my secrets."

"The very first day you met me, you got a bunch of New Franklin kids to throw me in the swimming pool."

"Try to, you mean – it didn't work."

"No fault of yours. Anyway, you didn't tell me anything, you made me tell you. And besides, this is not the first time we've met." How true that was; I had been half-naked with George – or his former incarnation – and that was something I couldn't forget as we sat across the table from each other.

"All right," I said. Why not? I might never see George again, and who would he pass it on to, in any case? All of a sudden it seemed to me I could tell him anything I felt like. "Last fall I got involved with one of the other teachers, a guy named Will, he wants me to marry him."

"Congratulations," George said dryly, with an utterly skeptical look on his face. "When's the date?"

"Date? Please." Did he really imagine that I planned to get married in the next few months?

"You're not buying your trousseau?"

I shook my head. "But I haven't really managed to end it, either. I should have, but I haven't."

"Why not?"

"I can't seem to do it." I didn't know what to say. "He's a wonderful guy, that's the problem, I guess."

"Yeah?" George said, unhelpfully.

"Yeah."

"I guess you'd better tell me how wonderful he is," George sighed, as if he knew better, and that made me mad.

"He's a better teacher than I'll ever be," I said. "To him it's a fun challenge when they sit in the back row and pick zits and won't look at him. They say he works their butts off, but you know what? They're proud of it. He makes them care, I don't know how, nobody else can. He's got maps hanging three and four deep all the way around his room, he goes around the building and borrows them – so *he* calls it, anyway – I've never seen him return one. Half the books in his room are about stuff like women troubadours in the Middle Ages, and the dialect they speak on those islands off the coast of Georgia, and God knows what all – I mean, when they ask him a question, he's ready. He teaches them everything. If it isn't the Black Death it's modernism. The head of the Social Studies department is afraid of him, because she knows he's smarter than she is and he doesn't really give a damn what the curriculum guide says. He can get away with it as long as his kids do okay on tests, and they always do."

Enough already, I thought, embarrassed by my own insistence. Will would be proud to hear all that, if he could. "This guy sounds incredibly admirable so far," George said, deadpan. What was he, jealous? Of course, I was leaving him no choice but to agree, and maybe he didn't like that. I wouldn't have.

"He is, I couldn't have made it through the year without him."

"Really?"

"Really."

"It didn't have anything to do with you?"

"You have no idea how much help a person needs."

"Okay." His tone was like a shrug of the shoulders.

"I never would have known what to say to some of the kids' parents if it hadn't been for Will."

"I get the picture."

Why should I have anything to prove to George, anyway? The more he gave me his skeptical look, the more he irritated me. "I don't

understand why I'm even telling you all this, George, I mean, why should you care?"

"Why shouldn't I? You were my girlfriend, once upon a time."

Don't go there. "So who's the lucky girl now?" George looked away. "Come on, it's your turn."

"No, it's not. It's somebody else's turn, believe me."

"What does that mean?"

"I had a girlfriend, for like three years, up until last November, then she dumped me for some grad student in political science."

"Oh." Already I felt bad for getting irritated with him.

"He was just an excuse. She's moved on since. The truth is, she had enough time with me, thank you very much, she had other fish to fry. The fact that I loved her had no particular relevance. Or should I say that's my problem." George said that with his face as close to expressionless as he could manage; he seemed to be addressing the door to the back hall, not me.

"Oh," I said. I wondered if he'd go on, if he felt there was any reason for him to tell me secrets anymore.

"You wanna hear this?" He still didn't look at me.

"Yeah."

"I used to wake up every night around two or three and go out and wander around the neighborhood. Look at the houses and think about other people's lives. Couldn't stand to be in my apartment. I was behind plate glass the whole time, even with the kids." He spoke almost diffidently, as if it were presumptuous to mention his hard time.

"Is it still that way?"

He looked at me for the first time. "Not always. There are good days and bad. This is a good one. I was glad you called me."

For a moment I had a vision of George's world – stark, like a painting of harsh light and shadow – simple, hard-edged, unforgiving. It dictated certain terms and you either could bear them or you couldn't, but if you couldn't, nothing changed. Too hard a world for me; I thought even the good days must be a sort of test.

"I cut my hair off in the middle of the night one night. Better that than something else. Then I decided I'd keep it this way."

It had struck me before that women cut their hair off when they have bad troubles in life, but I'd never known a man to do the same; that made me feel a certain kinship with George – it brought me back, for the first time, to the way we had been before. His defenses were better now, but he was still the same George underneath.

"Actually, I'm getting used to it," I said. I wanted to reach over and feel it, more out of curiosity than anything else, but I restrained myself.

"Go back to Will," George said. "Broken hearts are a drag."

George's story gave me a sinking feeling that Will would have the exact same thing to tell someone else about me. I wasn't sure what else to say. "Well, here's a story," I said after a moment. "He took me to meet his parents at their country place in Connecticut, in the spring – I was petrified. He kept telling me it wasn't a big deal and every time he said that, I was more sure it was. They're called Eileen and Joe – he calls them by their first name. Anyway, the morning after we got there, we're in bed, and it's raining, and Eileen comes and knocks on the door and says her raincoat's in the closet in our room and would we mind if she came in and got it. So she did. And there I was in bed with her son. She said good morning, got the raincoat, and left – that was it. Never said a word about it afterwards. I couldn't believe it. I'm sure she just wanted an excuse to see us in bed together."

George gave me a wry smile. "My mom wouldn't even have knocked." That made me, for an instant, picture myself waking up with George; I wasn't sure if he intended me to think of that, or not. "So," he said, expectantly.

"So?"

"What's wrong with this picture?"

I had thought perhaps if I talked enough I wouldn't have to explain that, though why I should pretend with George I couldn't say.

"I don't know, things sort of – went downhill. When he asked me to marry him." That seemed to perk George up a bit; he was jealous of Will, I thought.

"How?" he said, which was a perfectly reasonable question, but I was in a struggle within myself over whether to say the rest of it; maybe George was safe to tell. I wouldn't have to face him after tonight. And after all we were both adults, weren't we?

"This is so embarrassing, but – it started because I didn't use birth control. I mean, for a while. It was really stupid, I don't know what I was thinking. Then my period was late for two whole weeks and every time I thought I might have to have an abortion it made me wish I were dead."

"Mm." George was giving me every bit of his attention, the skeptical look gone.

"That was what made him start talking about marrying me in the first place."

"You didn't mean to get pregnant?"

"God, no." That, of all things, I couldn't admit to, even if it was true, must be true, what else could it have been?

"Really?"

"He could have thought some about birth control himself – he was there too." I couldn't look at George, knowing I must sound like the queen of self-deception. "I don't know what I wanted. That's the truth. But he wants to marry me. As soon as he said it I knew it was impossible."

"Even though he's such a wonderful guy," George said, and that made me angry.

"He is, damn it. And he wouldn't sit there and sneer like that if I told him something so personal."

George leaned forward over the table at me, his eyes fixed on mine. "I am not sneering at anything, least of all you," he said; he seemed as offended as I felt. "Don't be defensive." Was that what I was? I regretted ever having started this conversation, but it was too late to back out of it without seeming like a coward.

"You don't understand, George. You do not understand at all. Guys like Will are not hiding behind every lamppost. Most guys his age are out there just trying to figure out how they can make a hundred thousand a year and couldn't give a damn about public education, much less become teachers, their dream in life is to drive a Porsche and go out with somebody who looks like Farrah Fawcett and that's it. That's as high as they go. They don't even know what it's like to be serious about something or care about somebody, that's the way it is."

George sat in silence, absorbing that, looking at me and then away and then back at me. I didn't know what to do with myself after that outburst.

"That's probably true," George said, "but so what?"

His voice was quiet and so was the house around us. So what? What did he mean, so what? And hadn't I let him push me far enough? Some of the things I'd already told him surprised me, as it was. I took a deep breath. Just get through the rest of the evening and that would be the end of it. "Could we talk about something else?"

"Of course," he said, and I was grateful to him for backing off, but it was too late to unsay what had passed between us, even if this would be the last time I had to be grilled by George. So what indeed, so what if Will scored one million points for virtue? And so what if I admitted out loud that it didn't make me love him, would that mean I

was sunk in a state of depravity? I wished George would say something. We had to get out of the moment somehow, and I could see he didn't know the way, he just looked guilty for getting me upset.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"You know that model of the summerhouse you made?" I said, though it seemed too transparently a distraction. "Do you have any idea where it went?"

"No."

"Feel like looking for it?"

George opened his hands out to the sides, palms up, relieved. "Why not?"

The insect sounds seemed especially loud as I got up from the kitchen table; for a moment I thought of Allan and Augusta and wondered how they were doing at the carnival. "Where do you think we should start?"

"You know her better than I do," George said. Actually I was surprised I hadn't seen it around in the years since – it was a big thing about the size of a bread box, incredibly well made, and I suddenly remembered that George had painted a tiny heart with "GS + KM" in it on one of the posts holding up its roof. If Augusta saved letters she had gotten in college, surely she couldn't throw something like that away.

"Let's try the basement," I said. Now that I'd thought of it, I wanted to find it. "Watch the stairs," I said, "I think they're made to give you turned ankles." The wooden treads of the old stairs had been worn away in the center like soup bowls; they were nothing if not treacherous.

"The wood was too soft," George said.

"What?"

"They should have made the steps out of harder wood. But it's only the basement, so they decided to cut corners." I had forgotten that George really knew how buildings were built. That had been his hobby at one time.

"Do you still build models?"

"No – I did get to build a climbing structure at the day care center, though. That was a lot of fun."

The basement was chaos, as ever. I couldn't tell if anything had changed since George had set foot in it last, or ever in my life – it had always been a case of wading through old furniture and rusted bicycles, boxes of dented pots and pans and empty bottles clouded with the iridescence of age.

"Augusta hasn't been putting away the tools," George said. He had spent many hours at the workbench which had once been my grandfather's, while I hung around, reading books, waiting for him to look up so I could flirt with him, daydreaming about what we'd done the evening before and what I hoped we'd do later on.

The basement was dark, lit here and there by bare bulbs that didn't do much to dispel the gloom; it smelled the way it always had and, I imagined, always would. "I don't know," George said, "you could probably put the Taj Mahal down here and not find it."

"Much less a scale model of it."

George picked up a flashlight from the workbench and set off into the tangled undergrowth of cast-off stuff; gingerly I followed him.

"I don't think anybody's disturbed this mess in years," I said. Perhaps not since I had found the letters from Allan that Augusta had so carefully hidden amidst the junk.

"You know," George said, "the way that thing was painted, I think we'd see it if it was here." He was right – it was yellow with red trim and a green roof. Nothing like that showed up in the flashlight's beam. George made a circular sweep of the entire space, then shined the light right in my face and muttered, "Well, not there either."

"Thanks a lot," I said, thinking how unattractive I must look squinting into that glare.

George clicked off the flashlight. "Let's turn around," he said. We were face to face in the dim basement and I felt hemmed in by things I might trip over or bang my shins on; for a second I was very aware of how close he was – close enough to touch me. He was watching me intently. I caught myself holding my breath, let the air out of my lungs and turned around. We threaded our way back through dusty boxes and seatless chairs, past the workbench and up the creaking steps. When we came out into the back hall I felt we were emerging into a world of order and freshness and space – a beauty I took for granted every day.

"Well, where now?" George said.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

We went into the back sitting-room – it wasn't clear who was leading – and I clicked on the light, but I knew nothing interesting was in there – nothing ever was. I glanced into the stuffy, unused little conservatory that was off that room and found nothing but the usual boxes of Christmas ornaments; George went into the study and stopped, waiting for me without turning on a light. In the doorway I paused, acutely aware that he and I had kissed there for hours, and at the limit of my daring at fifteen I had let him unhook my bra and caress me – expected him to, every evening. He had always touched me in a cautious way, as if I might stop him if I noticed what he was up to, but I had felt everything he did with almost unbearable vividness, poised on the knife-edge between self-consciousness and desire.

"I remember this place," George said.

If I went up to him and just touched his shoulder – stood next to him, anything – I knew what could happen. There was nothing to stop it now. Did he think that was what I was after?

Part of me wanted to; that startled me but it was the truth. And yet I hadn't thought about him in ages up until a few days ago, hadn't heard from him in years; was there really anything between us?

"Let's try upstairs," I said, not stepping into the room.

George looked around, a dim figure in the darkness of the study. He didn't move at once, or speak – just stood, looking me over in silence. I couldn't read his expression but I didn't have to guess what he was remembering. How did he feel about all that now? Was it consigned to the realm of childishness?

He seemed to be questioning me or waiting for something as he stood looking me over and all at once I couldn't take that; I had to turn away. Back through the back sitting-room I went, and up the back stairs, George following me. He didn't catch up to me until I was at the attic door. "What's this?" he said.

"You've never been up here? Only other place I can think of where it might be." I clicked on the light and we ascended a narrow set of stairs, not so worn away. With each step the air became hotter and dustier, and I thought of Allan carrying all those boxes of books – Augusta wouldn't catch me volunteering for a job like that. At the top sat the iron cistern that had once been the house's water supply, as big across as a small room; then there was a doorway into the attic itself. I could hardly breathe; the air seemed to have been there for a hundred years and the temperature had to be over ninety. Allan had piled the boxes neatly, forming a wall to our right, in the highest part of the

attic. "What if there are bats up here?" I said, trying not to panic at the thought.

"They won't bother you," George said.

"How do you know?"

"Ever been in a cave where there are bats?"

"I've never been in a cave, period."

"Really? You should try it. Sometimes I go caving down in the Ozarks. If you go into one where there's bats and wake them up, they always fly to the outside, and since you're coming from the outside they fly right past you – nothing ever happens. You hear them rustling around up ahead, then they zip by you and that's it."

"That sounds absolutely horrible."

"There it is," George said. In his flashlight beam sat the model of the summerhouse. He had to duck down to pull it out from where it sat tucked away beneath the rafters; he stuck the flashlight in his back pocket, picked up the model in both hands, and blew dust off it. "I can't believe this thing still exists," he said, turning it from side to side and admiring it.

"Let's go downstairs, I'm suffocating," I said, leading the way. By contrast, it seemed deliciously cool on the second floor. George set the model on the library table and turned on a lamp. "Awfully dusty," he muttered, making a clean streak on the tin roof with his thumb. "I really did a job on this thing."

That was certainly true; the sides were lattice-work, the posts holding up the roof were like those on the back porch of the house, it had gingerbread woodwork and even the interior was painted. "A real labor of love," he said.

"You wanted to impress Augusta."

"I don't think that was my primary motive," George said with a half-smile, but no longer a crooked one. Bent over his creation he reminded me of the boy I had known, almost to the life – except for his hair. "I just wanted it to take as long as it could. That way I always had an excuse to see you."

"I don't think you needed one."

"Ah, you never know," George said. "Look at this – I even made little plant shelves inside the thing."

"Where?"

I bent down to peer in the door of the summerhouse and our heads almost touched; I was close enough to feel the warmth of his body. Yes, I could see the shelves. Knowing George, I was surprised he hadn't made miniature pots of plants to put on them. Covertly I stole a

glance at him beside me. His hair looked especially spiky under the light of the lamp and without thinking of anything except that I had permission to touch him left over from years before, I ran my hand over his head to see how it would feel; it was prickly, but not quite as prickly as I had thought it would be. Then I was surprised at myself, and embarrassed. "Excuse me," I said, straightening up. "I didn't really mean to do that."

Slowly George looked up. "Are you sure?" He was still leaning on the table, bent over, looking up at me from below. I could feel myself turning red; my neck and face were warm. I didn't have being fifteen to hide behind anymore, or inexperience, or the blind naiveté that had gotten me through a few sticky situations I didn't even recognize at the time. "My curiosity got the better of me," I said, but that didn't stand up any better than what I'd said before.

George straightened up and faced me; he examined me from head to toe, taking his time. I was wearing a T-shirt and shorts, and I felt his eyes linger on each part of me as if I had nothing on. "I, too, am curious," he said, slowly, as if to make sure I heard each word. "Terribly. I have been ever since I walked into this house."

His face was such a definite shape now, his eyes and his whole self focused on me in a way that almost felt intimidating. I could see how much he needed, maybe more than anyone could give. And if I let him begin, which I wasn't going to, would he still be able to be gentle with me, would he still let me tell him when to stop? He reached his hand up and touched my hair as I had touched his; when I felt that he wanted to pull me toward him and kiss me, I moved away.

"George, don't."

I could feel a hot wave of frustration flash out from him, beating at me, almost visibly disturbing the air between us. Instinctively, I drew back and almost at the same instant he caught my wrist in his right hand. "Please don't say that," he said, more like a command than a request.

We were frozen there like two people in the middle of a fight, neither one of us yielding. "Let go," I said. "You scare me."

He released my wrist. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, and turned his back to me. He picked up the model and hefted it as if guessing its weight – for one moment I thought he might throw it in the direction of the back stairs – turned it upside down and looked at its bottom, but I was sure he was only trying to find something to occupy his hands. I remembered the way he had looked, years ago, when my fear that things might get beyond my control made me refuse for a few days to

let him touch me – the way he had tried to hide his own fear of being hurt and hadn't been able to.

His body looked athletic and solid under his knit shirt, and I knew I could touch him, could want to, but I didn't want to want that – what would it say about me if I did? Did I even know him anymore?

George put down the model and looked at me over his shoulder. He sighed and turned around to face me, leaning back against the table with his arms crossed. "I really didn't have any idea what was going to happen," he said. "I didn't know if we'd still like each other, even. But when you opened the door and I saw you all grown up . . ." He wasn't quite meeting my eyes.

"What?" I said. I had felt the same way, but unreasonably I was offended that he hadn't been sure he'd still like me.

"It wasn't a trip down Memory Lane."

"So what was it?" My own voice, when I heard it, surprised me with how unfriendly it sounded. Who was doing the sneering now?

George gave me a look that said he wasn't going to back down. "I'm so attracted to you I don't know what to do with myself."

To be told that point-blank made me jump inside; it startled me in a way I tried not to show, it jarred something loose. That was the way George was, I remembered, the effect he always had on me. I couldn't get any words out, under his searching gaze, but I shook my head No. It was as if my body spoke for me. He took a deep breath, his breath hissing a little over his teeth, he blinked a few times rapidly, he wouldn't look at me. He turned his back on me, picked up the model again in both hands, with care, and disappeared up the attic stairs with it. I heard his footsteps cross the floor above me to the place where we had found it. He came back down, closed the door, wiped sweat off his forehead, stuck his hands in his pants pockets, leaned against the wall studying the floorboards while I wondered what to do or say. Finally he looked up and met my eyes. "Maybe I should go," he said in a monotone. "Now that I've royally screwed things up."

"Oh come on, George, please don't be dramatic. I can't stand it, I've had all the drama I can take in the last week."

Again he wouldn't look at me, but the barest hint of a smile crept across his somber face. "I suppose you have," he said, half to himself. "All right," he sighed. "No drama. Utterly bland. That's me."

"Right, that's the way I remember you, all right. I could barely stay awake."

"You didn't," he said, and it was true, we had fallen asleep together after we didn't make love, but I hadn't meant to bring that up

and it put me on my guard again. There was another protracted moment of awkwardness. "So, um, now that everything is perfectly clear," he said, "then . . . ?"

"What?"

"Mr. Dull is at your command."

I felt as awkward as I had at fifteen, the first time he came over to our house – as inexperienced, as unknown to myself. As if in seven years I'd learned nothing. "Let's go out on the porch roof, it's always nice at night."

"Okay."

I led the way out onto the gently sloping roof and we sat down with our backs to the house, under the windows of my room. George sat about five feet away from me, as if I forbade him to come closer, and for a while we said nothing.

I sat looking out over the dark roofs, very aware of him to my left. Not many lights were on in the upper stories of houses I could see, and as I watched one went out. Cars motored by now and then on St. Clair, one street over, coming from Highway 50 into town. I thought about how no one in the world would be likely to guess, at that moment, exactly where I was, or with whom; it was a little like being on a train, loose on the face of the earth, neither here nor there and free in the between. If I watched the stars long enough, I thought, I'd be able to see them move. Below me a car drove up Washington Street and for some reason that made me imagine a neighbor looking out the window and seeing us and thinking, Now who could that be on Augusta's porch roof at this time of night? What in the world are they up to?

Not that I had the answer. Except we weren't going to do what George had in mind – if he still did. The truth was, I wanted him to want me. But I didn't want to do anything about it, and that was pretty unfair, wasn't it? Of course George thought life was unfair anyway, and maybe he was used to it, but that didn't exactly excuse me for adding to his list of reasons why it was. And what was so horrendous about his thinking I might like him to kiss me? Must be plenty of women who would, and it wasn't like we never had before. More man than boy now. I was the one who seemed not to have progressed.

To my left George sighed, shifted his feet on the asphalt shingles. "Sorry about what happened inside," he muttered.

"Oh, don't be." I didn't seem to have control of my voice, it came out sounding bitter, and that wasn't what I meant, was it? Try

again. "There's no need," I said. My chest felt tight from the effort to speak gently.

"I didn't mean to scare you, that was the last thing I wanted to do."

"I'm a big girl," I said, leaving myself no excuses.

"Look, I understand you're pissed at me – "

"I'm not."

"Well, you definitely sound like you are, so fine, I earned it. Just—"

"I'm not mad at you, George." Damn it.

He sighed again, and we were silent, waiting for the space between us to stop vibrating like a plucked string.

"I still can't believe it about Augusta," he said after a while.

"Me neither."

"To look at her, it doesn't seem possible."

"Was it like that with your dad?"

He was quiet, and almost at once I felt I shouldn't have said that. "I'm sorry, you don't have to – "

"It's all right," he said, in an irritated voice, and I knew better than to contradict him. "Yes. It was. I mean, at first. Like he couldn't really have cancer, and even if he did, there was no way he was going to die. No possibility. No reason to even mention it."

I wondered what his mother had been like then, if she had tried to chatter the cancer to death, cover it up with so much talk it would just go away by magic, or what . . . at least Augusta wouldn't try to do that.

"There's a time, all of a sudden, when you go from being sure it can't happen to knowing it will. At the end it was just a question of when. He suffered a lot. We all wanted it to end. Seemed like it never would." He was silent for a while. "It's hard for people to die. Harder than you'd think."

"Maybe I shouldn't have brought that up."

"What are you gonna do?" he said, and I understood him: it wasn't my fault that what might happen to Augusta was on my mind. I told myself to keep quiet and wait for whatever he might choose to say. It took a while for him to speak, and when he did it seemed to be to the night as much as to me. "I felt completely lost when he died. I could hardly keep my eyes open. My mother got a lot crazier afterwards, she talked for two weeks straight. She only stopped talking when she fell asleep. I felt like I had to do everything I'd ever do immediately, I was the most impatient person in the world. I thought

everybody and everything should get the hell out of my way or else do exactly what I wanted instantly. You'd never guess that I could act like that, now would you?" he said, and I could picture the look he would be giving me if we were facing each other.

"You, George? Impatient?"

He gave a little grunt that wasn't exactly a laugh, but wanted to be one. "God forbid," he said. "I always mess up the same way. Too much too soon."

"Jeez, it must be tough not being perfect."

"Yeah, you wouldn't know about that, would you?" He sounded amused, unburdened, for just a moment. "What really gets me is that I know better, but it doesn't make any difference."

"You're ahead of me, I don't even know better."

"Than what?" he said, and I didn't know the answer. If it was impatience that made George fall on his face every time, what did it to me? I should know this, I thought. At least this. By now.

"Two needy people collide," George said in an undertone. "And that's if you're lucky."

"What?" Did he mean him and me? Me and Will? I felt vaguely offended.

"It's what you get for being impatient. Instead of what you're actually looking for, you just get – two needy people collide. Of course, you never see it that way till afterwards, when you have to clean up the mess."

"Is that why you like two-year-olds?"

He didn't answer right away, and I thought that instead of making a joke I'd insulted him into speechlessness.

"God, you are really smart," he said, in a surprised tone I didn't exactly appreciate. Not that I thought I was so brilliant, either. "You're absolutely right, that is the fuckin' reason. I've been working with them for almost a year and all this time I never clued in, that is exactly why, thank you."

I couldn't tell if he was for real or if a truckload of sarcasm was being dumped on my head, but when I looked over at him he seemed lost in thought and didn't even notice me. If what I had said was right about him, it was just luck.

"You teach what you're trying to learn," George said to himself.

How serious he was; I remembered that about him. It drove me nuts sometimes, but it had made me fall in love with him, too. "What's that?" I said.

"Use your words."

“‘Use your words’?”

“That’s what we say when they start grabbing things away from each other. And pushing and hitting and all the rest. You know. Acting like toddlers. Oh, you’re mad, aren’t you? But don’t hit Brendan with that fire truck, use your words.”

“And do they?”

“Not usually.”

“Neither do mine.” And mine were fourteen, they didn’t have as good an excuse.

Allan and Augusta were walking up Washington Street, hand in hand, not talking, and I silently pointed them out to George. He nodded; we were quiet, enjoying our clandestine presence above them, as they came to the front walk and disappeared below us. The front door opened and closed, and their footsteps mounted the stairs.

“Please don’t try to change my mind,” I heard Augusta say; she sounded exhausted. “At least not now. I want to at least have tonight with you, the way it should have been.”

“Life is more than tonight,” Allan said.

“Not now. Please.”

Her bedroom door closed, and I could hear their voices say a few more indistinguishable words; I felt like a spy again. Change her mind about what? George and I looked at each other – guiltily, I thought. “Come on,” I whispered, getting up. I held the screen door open for him, and closed it behind me as quietly as I could on its creaky spring. Without speaking we headed straight downstairs, and found ourselves standing awkwardly in the front hall. Again.

“This must be really hard for you,” George said in a low voice, as if they might overhear.

I nodded.

“I guess I should get going. Gotta get up tomorrow and deal with the tots.” Probably easier than dealing with me, I thought. A lot of driving he’d had to do for a pretty strange evening, and would I ever see him again? I didn’t really want him to leave yet, but that was nonsense, of course he had to.

“Thanks for coming all the way over here,” I said.

He shrugged. “Thanks for putting up with me.”

“No, George, come on . . .”

“Want me to give you a call? Or should I just go away and disappear?”

I wanted him to give me a hug, to hold me for a minute, to leave me with something that would fortify me against the situation. "You're getting dramatic again."

He smiled crookedly and for an instant I thought he was going to kiss me goodnight, and I was going to let him, but he kept his distance. "God forbid," he said. "I'll talk to you, okay? I'm really glad you called me."

"Yeah," I said, and heard myself sound grudging. "Your turn next."

"I won't wait as long as you did."

But was he just trying to get out the door? Boys who said they would call hardly ever did. "Okay," I said.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Then he was out the door and down the steps and he seemed to be in all too much of a hurry to get back to his car, to end this tangled evening with a girl he would have been better off remembering fondly and never seeing again. I went into Augusta's study, which was right off the front hall, closed the door behind me and sat down in the dark, crossed my arms and hunched my shoulders as if it were cold, banged the heels of my sneakers on the floor a few times, stared at the yellow-lit crack under the door as if something might yet happen out there in the hall.

"Damn," I said to the crack under the door.

A L L A N

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Every moment of not being alone with Augusta makes me more impatient, and then Karen's friend George arrives, and the last thing I need is to spend half the evening making small talk with a person I'll probably never see again. It's a relief to get outside; I take Augusta's hand. The twilight is fading into darkness; in the distance I can hear the sound of amplified music, the motors of carnival rides, people's voices. I try to imagine what it would have been like to live here as long as she has, to think of this evening as one marker on an unchanging circle of days. She talks about things that way, but surely even here they change. And of course if I had been here, it would have been because we were married; I'd still be a lawyer, but where? St. Louis? I never pictured any of that from the distance I kept for so long. Maybe the whole secret is imagination.

"It was dumb of me to ask you to marry me in a letter," I say, as we walk down a quiet side street. "For that matter, it was dumb of me to let you leave New York at all."

"What else were you going to do, kidnap me?"

"Well, what *was* I supposed to do?"

"There wasn't a whole lot you could do." Exactly what I've never liked about the whole damn situation. "Or anybody," she says, as if trying to soften it. "Except me."

"I've always wondered if I made some kind of mistake, what the hell it could have been, what I could have done differently, but I never came up with anything that made sense."

"Well, of course you didn't. Do you really think that's how I work? One strike and you're out?"

"No," I say. "But for a long time I didn't know what to think."

We walk in silence for half a block. Some of the old anger, that I've lived with for years, is still there inside me, but now, when I could mention it, now that we're together again – I can't.

"I could see the way your life was going," Augusta says. "You were all dug in. You were so proud of New York it was like you had built the whole thing yourself."

"I was?"

"Sure – why not? You were making money, you were a success – but it was funny to look at. New York was your hobby. No, it was your second job. You scored points with yourself just for knowing which subway would get somewhere the fastest. All you needed was a provincial like me for an audience."

"Wait a minute," I say, irritated in spite of myself; what really rankles is that she isn't entirely wrong. I remember when the glamor wore off New York – wasn't that why Amy and I left? Or was it supposed to help out our marriage?

"But I wasn't part of all that. It was okay with me if you were, but I wasn't."

"I didn't want you for an audience, I was in love with you," I say, hearing my voice start to rise. "I wanted you in my life."

"I know, but – that was your life, you were in love with that too, there wasn't any place for me there."

"How do you know what would have happened? You never even gave it a chance."

"Think about it from my end, if I had quit my job and moved to New York to be with you – what if it hadn't worked? Where would I have been then?"

"Sometimes you have to stop thinking what if and jump, otherwise life isn't worth living."

"Would you have done it for me?"

That stops me, and I know Augusta can feel that it does. "Would you have quit your job, and moved to St. Louis, and moved in with me?" she says, pressing her advantage.

"You never asked me," I say, but that's weak and we both know it.

"You never offered."

There is another silence, humming with thoughts. I try to remember how I thought about my work at the time. "I don't know if I could have," I say finally, hating to admit it. "But that was a long time ago. Was that what I should have done?"

"Please stop talking about should have, okay? Should has nothing to do with it."

"I'll try," I say. Perhaps if I had understood the choice I was making . . . but at the time I didn't even feel I had a choice in the matter. "Somebody had to make the leap," I say.

"Why not both?" Augusta says.

"What – we could have met in Indianapolis? Cleveland?"

"That is not what I meant," Augusta says, in a tolerating, affectionate way, and what the hell, maybe it doesn't matter – we're together, aren't we?

We turn a corner and there are the lights of the carnival; their brightness makes the approach through the park look especially black. An engine grumbles and then accelerates to full throttle as the Tilt-a-Whirl starts up; above a line of dark bushes separating us from the midway, its arms rise up, carrying lit-up round cars full of people. The arms rotate, speeding up, and begin to rise and fall as they spun; I can hear shrieks. Not for me either, I think, remembering what Karen said. I notice fireflies in the bushes as we cross more dark lawn and then the midway is in full view, lit up by hundreds of naked bulbs, sending a jumble of sounds up into the night – ten tunes playing at once from booths and rides, yelling voices, engines, the dings and bangs of people scoring points at games. We're swallowed up in it, separated from each other by the sound even though we stay together, working our way down the midway, trying to pop balloons with darts – winning a blue bear I don't want – throwing rings onto milk bottles, hitting the round target with a softball and dumping someone into a tank of water. Augusta buys a hot dog as if she hasn't had enough to eat already, but I manage to resist. She makes me try hitting the "Test of Strength" with a sledgehammer; the first time I all but miss and the indicator takes a little bounce up to "Wimp," the second I make it to "Try Again," the third "So-So." "I am now sufficiently embarrassed," I say, moving her along. I remember once, when I was a child, I played about twenty-five games of Skee-Ball at some amusement park until my parents finally dragged me away. We skip the fun house that emits croaking mechanical laughter, and stand for a while watching children ride the carousel and the Wild Mouse. I have my arm around Augusta's shoulders; the blue bear I won at the dart game dangles from her hand.

At the end of the midway, on the edge of the dark, is the Ferris wheel, surprising me with how high it is; it seems stately and antique,

older than everything around it except the carousel, different in kind. "How many rides can we take in a row?" Augusta asks the ticket seller.

"Three's the limit. There's a line."

"Then I'll take six tickets, please." We go to stand in line. "You have to be serious about the Ferris wheel," she says. "After all, they don't come to town every day." Ponderously the wheel revolves above us, first in one direction, then the other, the riders passing briefly at eye level on each revolution and then rising up away from us into another world. Finally it stops; those on the bottom car get out, and are replaced by people standing in line. We move forward. I begin counting how many spaces are left, trying to figure out if we'll get on this time, but I lose track. It seems important that we get on, for some reason, and finally we do.

Augusta gets in first, and I follow her; the operator closes the metal bar across us, latches it in place. With a motion of the control lever and a brief rumble from the engine he moves us up a notch; already I feel removed from the burdens of being on the ground. One more carful of passengers gets on; then he starts it going. We move forward, out and up, making me hold my breath for an instant because there is nothing visibly supporting us, as if taking off to fly somewhere; then we're pulled up and back, but higher still, up into the night, above the lights and the noise – the midway seems hunkered down, crouched on the ground below us. As we rise, the town opens out around us, a loosely-woven net of lights flung down upon the dark earth. I turn to look around in the direction of Augusta's house but already we're going down, the upturned faces of the people on the ground swimming up toward us like a picture coming out in developer, becoming real again; we pass the rattle and roar of the engine, the naked lightbulbs of the platform where we got on, and then again we take off, again with an inward gasp, into the dark. It is as if everything that clutches and clings falls away and will not exist until we set foot on the ground again.

The wheel stops and reverses, and this time when we come to the top it's as though we're going to fly forward, sail out through the dark air, but then go down a precipice instead, over the falls magically unharmed. Augusta's lips are parted, her eyes wide, the look I know as her lover.

We slow and come to a stop; a couple of cars behind us, people get out. I'm grateful to Augusta for buying as many tickets as she could; I'm not ready for this to end.

The car goes up a notch and stops again, swinging slightly; it's quiet there in the middle of the air, and a breeze crosses our faces. I feel as though we share a perfect privacy. If we could stay right here for an hour, I would.

We go up again, so that we're halfway to the top, on the outermost front edge of the wheel, dangling in space. "So," I say, "it was all because I was too into New York."

I wonder if she'll object to my bringing that up again, but she says nothing for a while. "No," she answers finally, "it wasn't just that."

"What do you mean?" We move up again.

"I made a plan," she says. "After I agreed to go back to New York with you. I knew how I felt about you – and you about me for that matter. Oh, I know I hadn't seen you in years, but it didn't make any difference. I knew. I went home after the dinner – I knew you wanted me to ask you over, and I wanted to, but I had to think – and I said to myself, Okay, Augusta, this is it, what are you going to do about it? Because I knew this wasn't going to be just some fling. Or if it was, I was wrong about everything anyway, and it didn't matter what happened."

"I already knew I was going to have to decide about us. That was clear as soon as I said I'd go back with you. And we'd spent so long before, in college, being almost there; that was my fault. I was afraid if I slept with you that would be it, I'd be yours, it would be all over for me."

We move up another notch, close to the top but not quite there.

"Would it have been so terrible to be mine?"

"Oh, Allan." Her voice is sad, a tiny bit reproachful, and low, almost shy-sounding. "It wasn't like that. It wasn't even about you – you were wonderful, as far as I was concerned – I was afraid my life wouldn't be my own. Not because you would have meant to take it from me, but . . ."

"What?" I say, when she doesn't go on.

"I was afraid you wouldn't be able to help it. Or I would give it away."

"That doesn't sound much like you," I say.

"But I've spent forever making sure it doesn't. Think about it, I was twenty, if we'd gotten married and I'd been your wife and had your kids it might all have been wonderful and great, but when would I have had *my* life? When would there ever have been a gap, for me?"

"Do you think I never asked myself questions like that?"

"No," she says, in a small voice, but I can tell that makes no difference to her. We move up, and now we are at the very top, looking out over New Franklin spread out under the night sky that we're up in; the air feels cooler at that height. The car we're in swings slightly, creaking in a way that makes me briefly apprehensive, and then comes to rest.

"I wasn't intending to make you my prisoner," I say.

"I know." She lays her hand on top of mine, on the safety bar. "I was ready to do it, anyway, despite all that, the night after that fiasco of a Thanksgiving. And then you wouldn't have me."

We're silent for some moments. "I have never regretted anything more in my entire life," I say at last.

"You did the right thing."

"Are you kidding? I threw away the one thing I wanted most."

"No, you were right, I had too much to prove. I was damned if I'd let anybody tell me who to be with, but that wouldn't have made everything else I was feeling go away. Not in the long run."

The car moves backwards, starting us on the trip down. "Did it ever occur to you that two people might have a life together?" I say. "I mean, really a life? That thing you were afraid of losing?"

"Yes. Over and over. Whenever I'm not thinking it's impossible," she answers. "But I don't know much about how to make it happen."

"Neither do I."

"At least you've tried."

Have I? "Only for a while." We're getting low on the Ferris wheel – people three cars in front of us are getting out. "What did you mean, when you came to New York you had a plan?"

"Not now," Augusta says. I can see what she means; we're coming down out of privacy, too close to other people, to everyone waiting. "Wait a while."

We're quiet as we get to the bottom and hand over another set of tickets; the operator finishes loading up, and we're in motion again, taking off, up into the upper air where I'm beginning to feel we belong. Augusta says nothing; she seems absorbed in the sensation of being lifted up.

"Would you do it again?" Augusta says to me near the bottom of the arc, above the sound of the Ferris wheel's engine. "Get married, I mean?"

"To the right person I might," I say, raising my voice as we sail by the rattling engine and start upwards. It's hard for me to believe that's more than a hypothetical question.

For a whole revolution I wait for her to go on. Is she actually proposing to me, or is this some sort of test? I give her a look but she won't meet my eyes; she seems to be engrossed in her own thoughts.

The Ferris wheel stops and reverses direction, so that we come up over the top going forward, with that feeling that we might sail away, as in a dream where you don't need wings to fly. Out on the horizon, I can see the lights of distant farmhouses here and there in the dark. Everywhere out there are people who are married, or have been, or hope to be. Perhaps it's impossible to give up that dream.

We ride in silence until the wheel gradually comes to a stop again and we start the slow progress around to pick up a new set of passengers. When we're well up, away from the ground, I say to her, "You still haven't told me what your plan was."

She takes a deep breath and sighs it out, and still she waits a few more seconds. "I don't know if you remember, but when you asked me about birth control, I told you I was on the pill. Only I wasn't. That whole week I didn't use anything. And God knows we made love enough. See, I thought and thought about how I was going to decide, and finally I came up with this plan: if I got pregnant, we'd be together, and if I didn't . . ." Her voice has gotten lower and lower until it is only a murmur, dying away.

"My God," I say. How could she do that?

"I'm sorry," she says, softly but distinctly, not looking at me. I have never heard her sound so genuinely sorry.

"And that was your real reason?"

"It was the deal I made with myself."

"Maybe it wasn't Amy after all," I mutter. But what I want to do is shake her, shout at her.

"It was only a week," she says, laying her hand on mine. "Most people try to get pregnant for longer than that before they succeed."

Does she think I don't know that? We move up, one position away from the top.

"Why?" I say.

"Why make this deal, you mean?"

"And stick to it, for God's sake."

She gives a heavy-hearted sigh. "I thought . . . I thought I wouldn't have the courage. Or no. That's wrong. Let me get it right." She bows her head, then looks up at me. "I didn't have enough

courage, but at least I knew that about myself. I knew I couldn't count on myself to have the nerve if I didn't help myself out somehow, force the issue. Or at least give it a chance to happen that way."

"Without even telling me."

"I couldn't."

"And then you went home and waited to see if you were pregnant or not, and when you weren't . . . you mean it was that simple?" I'm conscious of keeping my voice down, holding down rage.

"It wasn't simple at all."

"Have you ever given any thought to what it would have been like for us if you had gotten pregnant?"

"I know. It was the wrong thing to do, Allan. I admit it."

We are at the top now, and I know she is waiting for me to speak. She won't look at me.

"Listen to me," I say, trying to keep control, not to see black and start shouting. "There is something important for you to understand. I wanted to have a child. More than you know. Not having a child is one of the great disappointments of my life. I wanted to do that with you. And you gave us one week – one week out of our whole lifetimes – to settle the question of whether that would ever happen, without even talking about it. By dumb luck, by chance, how could you do that?"

For the first time in my life, I see Augusta cry openly, sobbing not loudly but bitterly. I won't touch her, it would seem too much like forgiving her. I look out into the dark, waiting for her to stop, determined not to bend, but eventually her sobs defeat me. "Oh, for God's sake," I mutter and reach my arm around her and pull her to me; as much as anything, I want to stifle the sound she's making. She cries quietly, her face against my shoulder, and I stare off into the distance, thinking, so it was all for this?

We've moved down a couple of notches before Augusta cries herself out. She snuffles loudly and mumbles, "I wish I had something to blow my nose on."

I disengage myself, reach in my back pocket and take out my handkerchief, hand it to her. "Thank you," she says, blows her nose, wipes her eyes, then sits holding the balled-up handkerchief in her hands, not looking up, like a scolded child. "I'm so ashamed of myself," she says in a low voice, and I can see her try not to start crying again.

I hunch forward and study my hands, folded on the crossbar. We descend closer to the ground and the people waiting to get on; when we're nearly there, Augusta puts the handkerchief down on the

seat and wipes the tears off her face with the heels of both hands, shakes her head sharply as if to clear it. Neither of us says a word as we came under the glaring light bulbs for the third time and hand over our last set of tickets. Anyone could see at a glance that Augusta has been crying, but she's beyond caring about that. We have to wait while the people in the car behind us get out and are replaced by others; then the ride starts again. To think that this was supposed to be a light-hearted, frivolous activity, a moment without cares. Not in this car. But we didn't get out when we had the chance. It feels as if we can't finish what we've started except by going up again into the night.

When we've gone around twice in our separate silences, Augusta puts her hand, palm up, on my knee. Does she deserve to be comforted so soon, after all these years? She seems to know she doesn't. But what would be the point, now, of rejecting her – her and all we might yet share? It would only end in even more of a waste. And yet I have to make myself cover her hand with mine; I can't look at her or speak. She leans her head against me. I close my eyes, feeling her there, struggling with the desire to push her away, and we ride down and up again, stop and reverse direction, up over the top, and down the precipitous fall, even more sudden with my eyes closed, a dive into inner space – and up –

"You will never treat me like that again," I say. "Not about anything."

I can feel Augusta shake her head. "I won't," she says. "I promised myself that a long time ago. That's why I had to tell you. So I never could." She seems to hesitate over her words. "I wouldn't blame you if you just got on a plane and left," she says.

"It's too late for that."

"I don't deserve any better."

"Then it's a damn good thing that deserving is not what it's about," I say, thinking, Don't try to make me say that what you did was okay. But then I remember the cancer and don't know what to think, or say to her.

The Ferris wheel is beginning to slow down; once more it will stop, and begin unloading, and we will make the slow revolution once again. I'm ready to stop now, ready to go home, if "home" is the right word.

All the way up, stage by stage, neither of us speaks. It seems a long ride, longer than the times before, in the silence. After a while she straightens up, and we sit there hand in hand, thinking our thoughts. I'm still trying to take it in – what she did, and why – trying to figure

out how she must have felt, to do something like that, and if I want to be with her after all. Already it seems too late to ask that; my life has spun out of my control.

The buzzing and whirring of the night insects floats up to us from the trees of the park, almost louder, up here, than the sounds of the midway below. All that frantic effort to create noise and light and distraction barely makes itself noticed on the surface of a world that seems enormous, mysterious, from just a little way above.

We come to a stop at the top of the wheel; the car sways, forward and back, but I'm used to that by now. It creaks and comes to rest. "I have something else I've got to tell you," Augusta says, turning to me abruptly, breaking the spell. Her voice sounds determined, as if she's afraid to say this something but she has no choice. "I'm not going to have the operation."

For one second I think she has found out somehow that she's going to be all right. That it wasn't cancer after all, she doesn't need the operation, the whole thing is over like a bad dream. But her lips are set in a look I know: it means no opposition will stop her, and seeing it I know nothing has changed except what she intends to do.

"Not have it?" You could die from this, you've got to have it.

"I can't," she says. "Not after last night. Before last night I might have been able to go through with it, but now I can't do it."

"Augusta –"

"It's been such a long time since someone really touched me, someone who loved me, I think I forgot my body matters. But now I remember."

"You didn't believe me, did you?" I say. "When I told you I would still want you."

Augusta still has hold of my hand, and everything she says seems to invade me as if there are no boundaries anymore. I've already heard too much tonight, too much has been asked of me. We're not done with all this yet; that much I promise myself.

"I think you could bear it," she says dubiously. "I hope you could. But I can't. I can't even imagine it. That's all there is."

I can't believe she's even saying this. "There's such a thing as going too far for the sake of pride."

"And what if you decide I'm damaged goods after all?" she bursts out, her eyes flashing in my face. "What happens then? *You're* fine, there's nothing wrong with *you*, you can always go back to Amy. Or find somebody new. There's lots of women out there looking for an unmarried man your age."

I can feel the hair on my head prickling with fury. "Oh – that's what I can do, is it? Run out on you, leave you to your miserable fate, that's the kind of heartless, untrustworthy bastard you think I am?"

"You don't know what it would be like."

"Fine. I don't know. I don't know a fucking thing, and anything I promise means nothing. Now tell me that I don't love you and I never have, and I will get on a plane, tomorrow."

"Oh God," she says, covering her mouth with her hands as if to hold in words she doesn't want to hear herself say. She rocks back and forth on the seat, making the car rock with her. "I just can't, Allan, I'm too scared to do it, I'm scared I'll lose everything."

"Ever occur to you to be scared you might die?"

She nods with her eyes squeezed shut, grimacing as she tries not to cry. Does she understand what she's doing to me, what she's asking me to do to Amy, what she's doing to Karen, even? To anybody who cares about her?

"Look," I say, trying to control my voice, to stay reasonable at all costs, "get a second opinion. There are a lot of doctors in St. Louis. Good ones. I'm surprised you didn't get one before this. There is such a thing as reconstructive surgery."

She refuses to answer, and in silence we descend stage by stage; I'm trying furiously to think of some argument I can use to her, but I know her too well, I know reasonable doesn't stand a chance.

It's finally time to get off the Ferris wheel – something left behind on the floor of the car catches my eye; it's the blue stuffed bear I won. Let it stay there. Some child will find it who needs a prize.

We walk out across the dark grass of the park, circling around behind the backs of the midway booths. Already the carnival seems small, dwindling away behind us. When we're well out into the darkness, away from the noise, Augusta abruptly stops. "Come here," she says, pulling me into a fierce embrace. "I'm not going to die, damn it," she says, with her face against me, her voice muffled, almost speaking directly into my body.

"Are you so sure?"

"Yes." But how can she promise that?

We stand there for a long moment; it seems to me she wants to draw strength from me, as if the contact of our bodies could overwhelm the cancer. If only it were that simple. If only it had been simpler from the start. In the distance the carnival music goes on, and the locusts continue to whirl and click in the trees. I don't believe either of us can hold her in this life by sheer insistence.

Finally she lets go, with a long outbreath. "Thank you," she says.

We turn and begin walking again. When we've left the park and are back on the dimly lit streets, I say, "When did you make this decision?" I'm still not sure whether to believe it's final, whether she really expects me to give in.

"I've been thinking about it all day. Well, no; I've been thinking about it ever since I found the lump, but not like this. It wasn't a decision, not like something where you weigh the alternatives and all that. I didn't think, I just knew what I was going to do.

"The biopsy was bad enough – it's like turning your body over to a bunch of lab technicians. It's nothing to them. They don't have to go home and live with it. And they expect you to act the same way – like it's all happening to somebody else."

"Yeah, I understand all that, but they just might keep you alive."

"And then again they might not," she says. I've been trying not to think about that ever since she told me the news: it might be that whatever anyone decides won't matter.

"It's too much of a risk." I feel as though she's already slipping away from me.

We walk half a block without speaking; we pass a couple sitting on their porch, and I think of how they must see us – out for a leisurely stroll. If only they knew. "Don't you understand?" Augusta says finally. "It doesn't matter what the odds are, it matters what I am – this is me. This body is me. I'd almost forgotten that. If I could forget about that, I could let them do anything to it. But I can't."

"You could turn that into a nice argument for never having any treatment at all."

"I'm not crazy, Allan, I don't want to die, you know that."

We turn the corner onto her street, a couple of blocks from the house.

"You were the one who told me that sometimes you have to stop thinking about what if and jump," she says. "You should be flattered, it's probably the first time on record I've ever taken a piece of advice."

"God," I say, under my breath. What else is there to say?

"I'll bet that damn doctor is going to love it when I call him up and tell him this," Augusta says, sounding as if she relishes the thought.

"Is that why you're doing this? To pay him back?" Could she really be that self-indulgent a person after all?

"Get serious," Augusta says angrily.

"More serious than this you can't get."

"Then understand that I know what I'm doing."

Our footsteps sound extra loud; we cross the street and reach her block. "I don't want to spend the rest of tonight having a fight with you," I say. "It's too precious to waste on that. But don't imagine I accept what you're saying, either."

"I know," she says quietly, taking my hand, and I wish she'd yell at me instead, because then I might have some hope of changing her mind.

K A R E N

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the morning Augusta and Allan both seemed unnaturally quiet and subdued; there seemed to be something lurking around them that I didn't like, but no one was saying what it was. It fit perfectly with my own discontented brooding over my ineptitude with George. Augusta found me sitting in the kitchen over a late breakfast and asked me how things had gone and all I could do was shrug my shoulders.

"Looked to me like the gods wanted to drop a present in your lap," she said. "If I read the signs right."

"Well – George did, anyway."

"Not interested?"

I made a face. That wasn't exactly it, but . . . "Don't you think it would have been kind of sudden?"

"It's not like it was your first date," Augusta said. But she didn't seem as interested as she usually would have been – and what was I doing stewing over my own confusions when Augusta was facing something I couldn't even imagine? "How are you doing?" I said. "Where's Allan?"

"Oh – reading a *New Yorker* on the front porch, I think." Her eyes clouded over with some thought I couldn't read.

"Did you go on all the rides?"

"Just the Ferris wheel. Three times. Oh – and I made him do the Test of Strength. It was pretty funny." But whatever she was thinking wasn't funny, I could tell that. She got up, took a mug out of the cupboard, and poured what was left of the coffee into it. "I had a long talk with Allan," she said with her back to me, pouring. "I've got to tell you something that I told him."

She sat down again and I waited, searching her face for clues. We had already had the bad news, what could it be?

"What is it?" I said when I couldn't wait any longer.

She took a sip, grimaced a little – the coffee was bitter, it had been sitting a while – and swallowed.

"I'm not going to have the operation," she said.

"You're what?" I knew what she had said, but how could that be? Was she crazy? Didn't she understand that it had to happen, that it wasn't up to her? "You've got cancer, Augusta, what do you mean, not have it?"

"I mean it's not going to happen that way. I've made up my mind."

"Wait a damn minute – I mean – what the hell *are* you going to do? Are you planning to just give up?"

"Give up?" Her eyes were angry. "Giving up is the last thing I intend to do."

"Then what is this all supposed to be about?" I was halfway yelling, but I didn't care.

"I can't do it. Period. I can't let them do that to my body, I couldn't live with that."

"Well, speaking of living, isn't that kind of the point?" I said, but the determined look on her face didn't waver. "I don't want to lose you, Augusta, I'm going to be really mad at you if you die."

The ghost of a wan smile crossed her face. "I'm in no hurry to, believe me. Especially not now."

"Look – " I began, and she knew I was going to object again, and interrupted me.

"Put yourself in my place. Think about it for a while. Would you really be able to say Okay, go ahead, cut it off, just do anything you feel is necessary, it's only my body – would you? Come on, tell me. Would you?"

"Well, I'm not saying I'd want to, but God, Augusta – I mean – " A nasty thought struck me. "Is this Allan's idea?"

She grimaced. "He hates it."

"He's right."

"Don't you understand either? I thought you at least would, even if he didn't."

"What is there to understand? If you die, what does it matter what you look like at your funeral?" I'd never talked to Augusta like that in my life.

"Listen to me: you're twenty-two, you think you'll live forever, you can't even imagine not being young and pretty, you think there'll always be somebody like Will wanting to spend his life with you, you think you'll always have the luxury of saying no – you have no idea

how soon all that ends. You have no idea what it's like to be really alone. And then you want me to let them take a knife and make me into an old woman overnight." Her voice was so cold and angry it felt as if she had hit me; my eyes filled with tears and I wasn't going to let her see me cry, I got up and left the room, ran up the back stairs.

"You don't know what it's like when you're not here!" Augusta yelled after me, and I don't want to know either, I almost yelled back. I shut myself in my room, flung myself face down on the bed. Selfish bitch. One of us was. I wanted to slap somebody, probably me, she was right God damn her, I didn't know a thing, and I hated her for telling it to me like that, I hated her for not caring if she risked her life, for what? To get a man? When Allan didn't even want her to do it? She was out of her mind.

She was sick, she was scared. Scared half to death. Have some compassion, for God's sake. Not that she had any, but her excuse right now was pretty damn good.

Christ, if she died where would that leave me?

The door opened and I heard her footsteps cross the room, felt her sit down on the bed. She laid her hand on my back. "I'm sorry," she said. "I told you I wouldn't be like that, but I guess I didn't know. How it could get. How I could get. Forget all that stuff I said."

"I can't."

She sighed, and I lay there feeling her touch on my back. I thought neither of us knew what to say. It scared me to have been so angry at her.

I turned over and looked up at her; had she been crying? "So maybe I am only twenty-two. But ever since I was fifteen, you brought me up." The strangest thing – I almost thought she was afraid of me when I said that. "Don't you know that?"

Her dark eyes were heavy upon me and full of sorrow, and I couldn't bear them; I sat up and put my arms around her, and she held me. "I didn't mean to hurt you," she said, and that made me start to cry before I could stifle it.

"You did," I said; it came out with something between a cry and a laugh.

"Okay, I did, but I wish I hadn't."

"Okay, but if you're not going to have the operation, what are you going to do?"

"They'll just have to cure me some other way, that's all there is to it," she said, holding me tight. But I could hear her reaching for certainty, the same certainty I wanted to feel and could not find.

The first thing that crossed my mind after Augusta left my room was that I had to call my father. I could picture him back in Evanston, by himself in the house the three of us had lived in before my parents split up and I went to college – the same sight I saw every time I went to visit him – and it made me feel as though I had abandoned him by growing up. I remembered once taking Liz home with me over spring vacation; I hadn't seen my father so happy in years as when both of us were in his house. He insisted on cooking breakfasts too big for us to eat, took us out to dinner at a restaurant that I had always assumed was too expensive. "What this place needs is a little noise," he had said to me when I asked him if we bothered him by staying up late watching TV and talking, and now the silence of his house felt like my fault. If I were any kind of a decent daughter I would have gone to see him on the way to Augusta's. If only my mother didn't live in Winnetka where there was no excuse not to see her, if only she and I could be in the same room for more than five minutes without putting each other's teeth on edge. Or if only I were stronger – not so self-centered, as my mother would undoubtedly put it. I needed to call him that second and tell him I loved him, but how could I? What would I say when he asked me how my summer was going in Boston? And if I told him everything, swore him to secrecy . . . I couldn't put him in that position. I knew he would feel he had to tell my mother, I knew Augusta didn't want her told.

I wandered around the house thinking frustrated thoughts, more dissatisfied with myself by the minute. Augusta was in the garden, weeding – I thought she was trying to construct a fortification for herself out of keeping on with the everyday. I could call him and just lie, say I was in Boston. And he would ask me when I was coming out to visit. I couldn't do it. But all this was bound to come out anyway, the secrecy had to end sometime, I had promised Augusta but maybe I shouldn't have, maybe this was not a promise I should keep . . . on the front porch I ran into Allan, sitting on the steps darkly contemplating the hornets, looking as frustrated as I felt. He looked up and said, "Did she tell you?"

"Yes." I wondered if he had heard us yelling at each other.

He heaved a sigh; I sat down beside him. The cicada killers circled endlessly in their randomly menacing way; there was something fascinating about them and the seeming danger of being so close to them. "What did she say to you?" I asked him.

"Mostly that she couldn't bear to think about it," Allan said. "I got nowhere. Do you think there's anything that would make her change her mind?"

"I doubt it."

"I don't know what the hell to do," he said. It felt extraordinary to hear that so baldly from a man like Allan, as if there were some rule that his age and even sheer size would exempt him from ever being in a state of helplessness. I wished I had some advice for him, but there was nothing inside.

"It's a good thing you're here. Maybe that's all anybody can do."

"This doctor must have good reasons for wanting to operate. I couldn't even get her to say she'd get a second opinion."

"Augusta's not big on other people's opinions in the first place," I said.

"That is not a justification for her to put herself in even greater danger," Allan said, in a way that made me wonder how she had managed to contradict him. We sat in silence. What he'd said was true, but could either of us make her take back her decision? She was the one who might be in danger of dying – living through things we could only guess at.

In the late afternoon, close to dinnertime, George called and I could hardly believe that we had been together only the night before. Augusta's decision made last night seem like a different era. His not knowing felt unseemly and out of place, and I had to hurry up and tell him what had happened. "She's got her mind made up. I think she's relieved, in a weird way," I said, though I hadn't realized that until the moment I said it.

"How are you doing?" he said.

Tears came to my eyes. "Crummy," I said; he waited for me to go on. I had to make sure I wouldn't cry. "Things looked scary enough before."

"People do survive cancer, you know," George said. "Some of them." But of course his father hadn't.

"No guarantees," I said.

"No."

There was a silence. "Maybe she's been trying to make this decision ever since she heard about the cancer, I don't know. There's nothing I can do about it."

"If you want, I mean, if you need to get away for a little while or anything, you could come over and have dinner with me sometime. I could come get you."

For a moment that pulled me up out of the fog of dread that had been gathering all through the endless afternoon. But I couldn't see myself going anywhere, not with this hanging over Augusta's house. There was a gap in the conversation that became awkward. "Thanks, it's nice of you, but you know. It's not a good time for it. Not around here. I don't know when it will be."

I thought I heard a suppressed sigh from the other end. "Yeah," he said. "Well – " I was sure he was thinking we'd never get together at all – and that was not what I meant either, even if I couldn't see him now.

"I'll call you up, okay?"

"Of course," George said.

"What time do you get home from work?"

"About five-thirty."

"All right."

There was a pause in which I thought George waited for more from me. When it didn't come, he said, "Hang in there, okay?"

"Okay."

I hung up the phone. It was time to start dinner. I had no more than stood up from where I had been sitting as we talked, and it was already as if George were a daydream that came and went in an instant – a forgotten instant in the interminable day that Augusta, and Allan, and I were living through.

Augusta called the doctor the next morning and told him what she had decided; she didn't repeat what he said, but she looked shaken afterwards, and for Augusta to look that way meant something. Even so, she held her ground.

"I'll take one thing back," she said. Allan and I had been sitting in the parlor reading the paper when she came in and told us she had made the call. "Maybe he wasn't so sure I was going to kick the bucket as I thought. But I have a feeling he's starting to be convinced now."

"Doctors don't like to have their patients die, you know," Allan said. "And they don't like to stand around and do nothing to prevent it, either."

"Don't start feeling sorry for him, he can take care of himself. I'm supposed to start radiation and chemotherapy immediately. I mean

immediately. He expects to see me this afternoon, and I suspect if I don't show up he's going to send somebody out to arrest me."

"Oh," Allan said, sounding as if he felt a sinking feeling like mine. So it begins.

"Apparently they're going to make me spend the night in the hospital," she said, not looking at either of us, as if she were ashamed of that.

"What for?" I said.

"Oh, God knows. So they can stick needles in me whenever they feel like it, I guess." She looked up. "Well, don't just sit there and stare at me like that. It's not the end of the world."

"What time are you supposed to be there?" I said.

"Two o'clock."

"So we'll leave right after lunch?" I said.

"There's no need for you to go," she said, looking offended.

"What do you mean, no need?" Allan said, bristling in a way that scared me a little. "Does it occur to you that people are trying to help you?"

"Look, this is not that big of a deal," she said, but if it wasn't, why did she sound angry about it all of a sudden? "Why should you drag yourself all the way over there and back, and then do it all over again tomorrow? I haven't lost the ability to drive a car, you know." She turned around and left the room, and I heard her cross the front hall, open the door, and go out on the porch. Allan and I looked at each other, guardedly: What do we do now? I didn't know the answer, but I knew I couldn't let the conversation end like that, and he looked mad enough that he might only make it worse; I got up and followed her.

She was sitting on the porch swing, holding a sports section that I was sure had been out there for at least a day. I sat down beside her and looked at the dateline on the paper. "That's yesterday's," I said. "Given that it's the sports section, you must have read it at least three times already."

She gave me a tolerant glance and I sat and read along with her – an arcane piece about a pitching coach in which most of the crucial words meant nothing to me. After a while she sighed and put the paper down. "I told you I can't stand to have people look sympathetic at me. I hate to be such a bitch about it, but I can't help it."

"I'll bet you could," I said, thinking that maybe she could get away with acting like that to me, but Allan was another matter. Augusta only looked at me skeptically.

"Did the doctor tell you anything about what it would be like?"

"Oh – some. I don't think it's going to be any fun. But you know how they talk, you can never tell how something's going to feel from the way a doctor describes it." She was staring out at the street, the old scene that hadn't changed in years. "I gather it gets worse afterwards."

"Ugh," I said.

"You know what I really hate about this?"

"What?"

"Allan seeing it happen. I don't want to be sick in front of him. It's too humiliating. He finally shows up, we have two days together, and then I go off to the hospital and when I come back – "

"What?"

"I don't know. We'll have to see what happens."

I put my hand on her shoulder, and we stared out at the street together. I remembered Will taking care of me when I had the flu, wiping my face with a washcloth after I threw up and getting the horrible taste out of my mouth by brushing my teeth for me. I hadn't known that he would do something like that for me, or that anyone would, now that I was grown up; with the memory came momentary dread of having to finally tell him it was over. For the first time it occurred to me I could write him a letter. But the question was whether Augusta would let anyone take care of her. If it got bad enough she wouldn't have a choice; but if she didn't choose what happened to her, she could never bear it, I thought.

"Why did he have to wait until things got like this before he showed up? That's what I'd like to know."

I didn't know what to say. I knew she was saying it might be too late for her, but I refused to believe that, and I didn't want her to believe it, either – even though it might be true, no matter what we wanted, or how hard we wanted it.

"I hope to God my hair doesn't fall out," she said. "If it does, what the hell am I going to do? Hide in the house all the time? And besides, I don't think I could face Allan at all if I were bald."

Was that actually possible? Augusta's hair had always been one of the things I envied most about her looks, along with her thinness and her legs; she had never cut it short, even though no other woman her age in New Franklin would have thought of wearing her hair long, and it had red highlights the deep color of some rare wood – the kind that ads would have you believe you could get out of a bottle. But you never would. The only way to have hair like Augusta's was to be born with it. It was hard for me to imagine any woman being bald, but it was impossible to imagine Augusta.

"What time is it?" Augusta said.

I looked at my watch. "Ten-thirty."

She got up from the swing. "I think I'd better spend some time with Allan while I'm still myself."

Augusta left about one o'clock – got in her car, after not eating lunch on the orders of the doctor, and drove away. She allowed me to give her a hug, and Allan to kiss her, and then glared at us both to keep us from saying anything except "See you tomorrow." The sound of her car went down the alley and disappeared, and there we were, standing in the back yard without her.

I felt completely at a loss for what to do next, especially with Allan there. I had never spent more than a few hours in Augusta's house without her. For a moment I wondered if it was my job to entertain him, play the hostess, but as soon as I thought that I knew better. We'd passed by that stage without even stopping.

"Well," he said, turning around and moving back toward the house, hands in his pockets.

"Well."

"I don't know about you, but I haven't felt this useless in a long time."

"Same here." I was grateful to him for saying it out loud.

"I wish I believed in one of those religions where they turn prayer wheels all day. At least it would give you something to do about a situation like this."

The closest we could come was the never-ending list of chores that always needed doing at Augusta's house; Allan and I were both pulled into that by the sheer emptiness of the time without her. He went back to trying to fix the lawn mower and this time he finally succeeded, and mowed the entire lawn, while I made myself take down one of the shutters that needed repainting and spend the afternoon scraping it – the most discouraging job in the whole place to start on, because I knew from experience it would take the rest of the summer to do them all. But I might as well start; Augusta would have, if this hadn't happened. I remembered her saying that having cancer had made her realize there were more important things in life, and that was true, but I couldn't fix any of those.

Allan cooked dinner, even though I said I would. I remembered that I had told George I'd call, but I didn't have room to think of what to say. Allan and I were both tired as we ate dinner together, and maybe that saved us from feeling we had to make conversation. I

wouldn't have known where to begin; we were too close and too far apart. A few days ago he had only been an idea, a story I'd heard from Augusta, and now he was part of our lives, like a foreign body coming into the solar system and disturbing the planets in their orbits. There wasn't anything new to say, anyway, about what we were both thinking.

But when we'd eaten dinner Allan started asking me about the various boyfriends Augusta had had, and we ended up comparing what she had told us. I'd actually met a couple of them – and Jerry, of course, I almost thought of as a friend. That seemed to surprise Allan; I could tell New Franklin still wasn't real to him. The only people in it who were actually people, as far as he was concerned, were Augusta and me, and I tried to tell him how life there worked for everyone else. But I kept missing the mark, whatever it was that made me love it, and I wondered if that was because Allan wouldn't have been able to hear it, even if I found the words.

I cleaned up, and later we ended up in the living room upstairs, watching a Cardinals game together, as if we had to because that was what Augusta would have done. I wondered if she was in a hospital room watching it too; I didn't want to picture her there. The game went on in the endlessness of baseball, and Allan and I sat without saying more than an occasional few words, and I sank deeper and deeper into the solitary reaches of being me, alone, separate from others, a place I was half afraid of when I thought of what was happening in St. Louis, and what it might mean. Augusta had always been with me, it seemed; in her presence I became myself, and her presence extended to wherever I was, in my knowing she was on the earth. If that were taken away, mightn't I be in danger of losing track, of becoming . . . anything, even a person I didn't especially want to be? It would be like taking away the uppermost layer of cirrus clouds that moved across the zenith of a summer sky.

I had a vision of a long, narrowing corridor of days of hospitals and illness, gray and outside of time, set apart from color and life, apart from all possibility of joy. I can't take that, I thought. But if Augusta needed me to, I would have to. Maybe it would not come to that but no one could deny, anymore, that it was possible. At least my mind knew that, but my body said it couldn't happen as I sat there, whole and as far as I knew unthreatened. Augusta must have thought the same of herself at twenty-two.

The baseball game had not yet ended when Allan got up and said he was going to bed. He disappeared into Augusta's room, and I

turned off the TV and sat in the silent living room, feeling the strangeness of being alone in the house with him. I had to wait until I was sure he was asleep before I could go to bed myself.

When I came out of my room in the morning, the door to Augusta's room was open; Allan was not upstairs. I went into the bathroom and washed my face, did the best I could with my hair. Brushing it reminded me of Augusta saying she hoped hers wouldn't fall out. It was a pleasure to walk barefoot across the floors in the morning while the boards were still cool under the soles of my feet. I went down the back stairs – the railing that had always been a little wobbly at the top had gotten more so over the years – slowly, enjoying the quiet, feeling light inside my body as if I almost wasn't there. Allan was standing in the kitchen, in front of the stove; he didn't notice me, and something about the moment stopped me where I was. I felt as if I saw him for the first time. He was wearing an old bathrobe of Augusta's, one she'd had forever that I always assumed had belonged to some boyfriend of hers, because it was too big for her. It looked as though it had been dark blue once, now faded; it almost fit him. He was standing in front of the stove pouring water from the kettle into the filter on the coffee pot. Or at least that was what he had been doing; he was arrested in that pose, not actually pouring, just watching the steam rise from the filter. I knew he had that bathrobe on because it was hers and he wanted her next to him somehow. The stillness of him was what stopped me; I could see how alone he felt, how out of place, and more awkward than his presence in our house could ever make me. He had left behind everything he was used to, and now, this morning, what was it all traded for?

I entered the kitchen, feeling as if I invaded his privacy, and he noticed me, glanced my way for a second and said "Good morning" before he went back to pouring hot water. I stood next to him, watching the trickle of water fall steaming on the black grounds, and surprised myself by putting my hand up and touching him on the back. He looked down at me, put his arm around me and gave my shoulder a squeeze that reminded me of the way my father touched me, then let go.

"Are you worrying about her?" I said, making an effort.

He nodded. "Yes."

I got two cups and we sat and drank coffee together, not talking. From outside, somewhere down the alley, I could hear the sound of a child throwing a tennis ball against a garage, not a loud

sound but one that carried. Thunk, and then silence; I could picture a small boy catching it in his baseball glove. In the kitchen there was only the low rattle of the refrigerator running, and the sound of the two of us setting down our cups on the metal-topped kitchen table.

"On weekends," Allan said, looking out at the side yard, "if it's nice, I get in my car and drive over to this little town south of Annapolis. I keep a boat there. Just an old Coleman boat with a five-horse outboard. I say I'm going fishing, but really it's to poke around out there on the Bay and be alone. There are little coves there like nothing you've ever seen. Once I get to the mouth of the cove I shut off the motor and row, until I'm under some trees next to the shore, and then I take out my pole and drop my line in the water and sit there."

"And then what?"

"Think."

"What do you think?"

He took a sip of coffee and didn't speak for a while. Then he said: "Now why is it I'm a lawyer? Why am I married to Amy Resnick? Why do I live in this place?"

"Maybe so you can go out in your boat," I said when he didn't go on. It was inadequate but it was all I could come up with.

"Some men are always cheating on their wives," he said after a while, making me wonder if he meant himself, "and they're always thinking about whoever they're doing it with. I used to think about being alone exactly that way. The way you'd think about another woman. Before I came here."

"What's going to happen when you go back?"

He thought for a long time, until I wondered if there was something he wanted to keep from me. Had he changed his mind? Would that be the end of him and Augusta after all?

"It should have happened a long time ago," he said at last, drawing an invisible design on the oilcloth. "Even back when you read that letter of mine. I knew it then. But I didn't have the courage to say our marriage was never going to work. I couldn't hurt her that way."

"No wonder," I said.

He looked up as if I had surprised him. "It only means I'll hurt her worse now. You can't give the years back. She'd be married to someone else by now, she'd be better off."

"You tried to make it work, didn't you?"

"I tried' doesn't count."

I took a swallow of coffee. "It doesn't?"

"If Augusta doesn't make it," he said, "the doctor isn't going to come up to you or me and say, 'Sorry, I tried.'"

"No, I guess not," I said, though it intimidated me to think that I, too, would have to live on those terms.

"I did try," he said. "Or I thought I did. I told myself I did. You'll never know how complicated it is until you get married yourself. How many times over you can tell yourself that now you know better. But that doesn't necessarily mean you do."

It was too grim, too unrelieved, the way he told it; I couldn't accept that. "There must have been a good reason why you got married in the first place," I said, even though I felt naive and young saying it.

He looked at me as if he thought the same for a moment and then changed his mind. "Good reasons aren't always good reasons," he said.

Outside, the ball was still hitting the garage, a low regular beat, and when at the expected interval the sound didn't come, I thought something in both of us sat forward, waiting for it. Nothing. A distant gate opened and closed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When Augusta came home it was almost dinnertime. I was cooking – I had insisted that it was my turn – and Allan was somewhere else in the house; I hadn't heard him in a while. It was good to be immersed in the quiet of the late afternoon and the simplicity of peeling and cutting, making salad dressing, lifting the lids on pots to check on things. Then I heard the front door open and close, and Allan's and Augusta's voices. He must have been sitting on the front porch when she drove up, I thought.

"God, am I glad to be out of that place," I heard her say in the front hall. "I swear being in that damn hospital could kill you all by itself."

I wiped my hands on a dishtowel, half-afraid she'd look different somehow, telling myself that was silly. Then I thought, She'll want something to drink, grabbed a glass and put some ice cubes in it; I was pouring in some iced tea as she came into the kitchen. "Here," I said, handing it to her.

"Thanks, Mom," she said, taking it and sitting down at the table. She took a long drink and set it down, looking around her. "Ahh. God, you have no idea how lucky you are to be here. A person probably ought to spend one night a year in that wretched place, just so they could really appreciate the rest of the world." She had a bandage on her right arm, the kind you get after donating blood; the skin around it was reddish – I tried not to look at it.

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse."

"What was the treatment like?" Allan said. He was standing next to her chair, his hand on her shoulder, as if he couldn't not touch her.

She shrugged and made a face. "I don't want to think about it," she said. "Anyway, what's done is done. They zapped me, they filled me up with some kind of poisonous glop. I felt like I was being embalmed."

But she seemed full of nervous energy; it must be the relief of having the hospital visit over with, I thought. That gave me an idea of how much she had dreaded it.

"Also they gave me about ten kinds of pills." She looked in her purse as if to pull them out and show us. "I must have left them out in the car."

She started to get up, but Allan said, "I'll get them."

"It's not a problem," she said, with a slight edge in her voice – or was I only imagining that, too on guard against offending her in that way?

"I know it's not a problem," he said evenly, "but I'll get them." For one instant I saw him give her what must be his lawyer look, the one that burned holes in people who opposed him. Augusta didn't flinch – I knew I would have – but she didn't talk back.

"Okay."

Allan left the kitchen. "Want some more iced tea?" I asked.

"Sure." I poured her another glass. "So how have you two been?"

"Bored to death, without you. And worried. Of course."

"Worrying isn't going to make me better," she said.

"How do you feel?"

She seemed to slow down for the first time since she had walked in. "Oh – kind of peculiar. Disoriented. You would be too, if you'd just spent twenty-four hours in that hospital. And then, you know, you expect to feel strange, so maybe that makes you feel strange all by itself. I don't know how I feel. I'm waiting for something to happen." I searched her face for a clue: was it already happening and she didn't want to admit it?

"Are you going to want some dinner?"

"What are you making?"

"Chicken with artichoke hearts."

"Artichoke hearts? Aren't you the gourmet," she said, with a half-smile, but not condescendingly.

Allan came in, carrying a white paper bag, and handed it to Augusta; she looked into it, shaking her head. "Jesus," she said disgustedly. "They want to turn me into a walking pharmacy." All at once she looked tired, as if seeing the pills had taken away whatever

energy she had. "I think I'm going to go change," she said. She took the bag of medicines with her; I listened to her footsteps climbing the back stairs, trying to gauge how she felt inside from that sound I'd heard countless times.

"What do you think?" I said to Allan, when she had reached the top.

"I don't know yet," he said. But he seemed hardly to have heard me; he was watching the doorway, the last place she'd been in our sight, as if she were still there. After a moment he got up and climbed the back stairs too. I tried to think how it must be for him to watch this happen. No wonder he couldn't stay away from her, even for a moment; but whether he could do anything for her, or she would let him – that was another question.

We were all on edge, I thought, as we ate dinner together, trying to find things to say that weren't about the one thing on our minds, Allan and I covertly watching Augusta to try to guess how she felt. The doctor had told her not to drink with the medications; she had one glass of wine anyway. She went to bed early, saying she hadn't gotten any sleep the night before in the hospital; I could believe that. If there was ever a person who needed to have things work the way she expected, it was Augusta. But still it bothered me to see her go to bed early; I was accustomed to the sound of her prowling around the downstairs, or just the knowledge that she was still awake, probably reading a murder mystery, as I was in bed falling asleep.

After she had gone upstairs, Allan and I were sitting in the kitchen, telling each other she seemed basically okay, when Augusta reappeared in her nightgown. Usually when she entered a room she changed everything in it, but now she slipped in silently, her bare feet making no sound on the floor, as if anything else would have taken too much energy. "Come upstairs with me," she said quietly to Allan, putting her hand on his shoulder.

He didn't need to be told twice. "Okay," he said, getting up, taking her hand.

"G'night," Augusta said to me, sounding asleep on her feet.

"Goodnight."

In the morning she seemed better; there was a gleam in her eye as she looked at Allan that made me certain they'd just made love. Maybe it wouldn't cure cancer, I thought to myself, but it sure couldn't hurt. I could see that she intended to resume her life as if nothing were

different; as soon as breakfast was over she said, "Well, nobody's looked at the garden in days." She collected her tools from the back porch and stood surveying the situation, choosing where to wade in.

"Want some help?" I said.

"If you feel like it."

For a good while we worked without talking much, weeding, pulling out plants that had gone by or were not going to make it, tying the constantly growing arms of tomato plants to their stakes, carrying on the never-ending war with bugs. One of the squash plants had suddenly gotten infested with what Augusta called moon bugs – peculiar-looking grayish creatures, angular and flattened – I could see why she had given them that name. We gave them a dusting of rotenone that only made them look paler and stranger; it didn't seem to slow them down. After a while, as always, gardening became a world in itself; my mind was completely inside the garden, thinking about each row, each plant, each leaf, all of them to be considered, touched, tended. From the middle of the garden everything that was not garden seemed less than real; the yard and the house were across a moat. I could sink into gardening, submerge myself in it, attending to the prickly texture of tomato plants, the satisfying smell they gave off at any touch, the stiffness of their stems in my fingers that said they were doing well, and if there were other thoughts, about myself, about shouldn't and should, they floated on the surface of my mind, ignored, like water bugs skittering across a pond.

Then I straightened up, turned around, and noticed that Augusta wasn't with me anymore. How long had she been gone? I made my way down the row I was in, being careful not to step on any desirable plants, and left the garden, crossing back into the other world. After a moment I saw Augusta in the shady part of the yard, near the back corner where we had pulled out the hedge, sitting in that unaccustomed spot in one of the old metal lawn chairs, doing nothing.

"Are you all right?" I said, but I knew she wasn't. It was all wrong to see her sitting there like an old lady, her hands empty and unoccupied.

"I thought I'd watch you for a while."

"Pretty exciting, I'll bet. Major league weeding." She gave me a little bit of a smile, but I could tell it was an effort; then she visibly gave up the pretense and shook her head slightly.

"He told me I might feel a little tired on account of the radiation," she said. "But this is not what I call a little."

"Well, just take it easy. You've got two people to work for you anyway, between us we ought to be able to do almost as much as you would."

"I'm not built for taking it easy," Augusta said, standing up slowly.

I wanted to object, but I managed to restrain myself. We walked back toward the garden; I had a feeling Augusta felt imprisoned in her body, betrayed. And of course she would try to overcome it by force of will. "Everything looks pretty good," I said. "The melons are going to be beautiful."

"Any of them getting ripe?"

"Not yet, but they're pretty close."

"Are they all there?"

"As far as I can tell." Augusta's worst enemy was groundhogs; one year they had eaten half of her canteloupes, and she'd been trying to figure out ways to keep them away ever since. For a while, only half jokingly, she had talked about putting a six-inch-high electric fence around the garden, until she remembered they could burrow under it anyway.

I tried not to watch her as she bent down to pick up her trowel again and went back into the part of the garden where she had been at work; if she knew I was checking on her progress, it would only be harder for her. I deliberately turned my back and began collecting the little heaps of pulled weeds I had left behind me, gathering them into one pile we could eventually burn. Then I got the pitchfork out of the garage and turned the compost, taking my time about it; only when I was done did I glance over my shoulder in Augusta's direction. At first I didn't see her; then I spotted her, sitting down, almost hidden by a row of squash plants. Was she all right? I waited a couple of minutes, puttering around unnecessarily with the compost pile, and still she hadn't moved. I stuck the fork in the ground and tried to wander casually in her direction, feeling unconvincing, but when I got there it didn't matter; she was sitting with her knees drawn up and her arms around her knees, staring at the ground.

"How's it going over here?" I said; I thought that might be better than asking again how she was.

She looked up and shook her head. "Who am I kidding," she said, and held up her hand. I took it and helped her up. "I haven't got it." Slowly she walked in the direction of the house. I didn't know whether to follow her or not. But Allan was in the house somewhere; he would do as well as I could.

I tried to go back to gardening, to sink back into the usual trance, but it was impossible. I ended up crouched there, absently digging at the dirt with the point of my trowel, trying to think what to do: hovering around her would drive her nuts, and pretending nothing was wrong would do the same to me; there had to be some path between the two. Which would probably change from hour to hour. I got up to go in the house.

"I felt a hell of a lot better before they started trying to cure me," Augusta said, sitting on the living room couch looking exhausted.

"Why don't you lie down," Allan said, "and I'll get the fan out of the bedroom. It's pretty hot up here."

"And then I suppose I can watch daytime TV," she said disgustedly, "and rot my mind at the same time as the rest of me."

"Want something cold to drink?" I said.

She shook her head and lay down, her head propped against the arm of the couch. I got a throw pillow off an armchair and put it under her head. "Thanks," she muttered, closing her eyes. I had a feeling that any more fuss over her would be trying her patience, that what she really wanted was to be left alone.

After a minute or two Allan came downstairs and into the kitchen where I was drinking a glass of ice water. Our eyes met and I knew he was thinking the same things I was, about taking care of Augusta. "It's not easy, is it?" I said.

He shook his head and said nothing.

"When I first got here she didn't even want to tell me she was waiting on the test results. She was planning to keep the whole thing a secret. I don't know when she would have told anybody if I hadn't happened to show up."

He looked down as if he'd noticed something on the floor, then back at me. "She's always been in control – you know?"

"More and more so, if you ask me."

He sighed and went over to the window, gazed out at the back yard where nothing was happening but sun beating down and a cardinal making his loud call from up in the trees. "Do you think that's why she refused to have the operation?" he said, without looking back at me.

"Just so she'd be in charge?"

He was silent for a few moments. I almost felt I was betraying Augusta by not rejecting that thought at once, but I couldn't. And was

it right to talk about her behind her back like this? Even that seemed to reduce her to something less than a person. "I don't want to think that's the real reason," he said, "but sometimes I can't help it."

"The other reasons are plenty," I said. "From her point of view." I knew he didn't want to hear that.

"She thinks I wouldn't love her anymore," he said, and it jarred me to be talked to like that by him – the way she would.

"Is that what she told you?"

"It's crazy. I've told her twenty times that she's wrong, but she doesn't care. She's willing to risk everything because she doesn't trust me." He intimidated me with the gaze he focused momentarily on me; did he think I was a substitute Augusta he could take out his frustrations on?

"Maybe if she knew for certain it would work . . ." I said.

"Yeah," he said glumly, subsiding into a chair. "If."

I sat down too. "Maybe she's too stubborn to die."

"I hope you're right. Either it's that, or she's just stubborn enough." He withdrew into himself, and the angel passed over; we fell silent for a couple of minutes. When I noticed, I reflexively glanced at the clock; Augusta claimed that it usually happened at twenty past the hour, or twenty of, and this time she was right. And if even something that small could make me think of her, what would I do if she should die?

"I dread having to leave," he said. "And leave you with this. Especially if she gets worse. I called my partner this morning and told him I might not be back for another week. He didn't sound pleased about it."

I didn't care if he was pleased or not – but I knew Allan would have to go eventually, much as I didn't want him to.

"Last night," he said slowly, tracing the design in the tablecloth with his finger, "she fell asleep the minute we got in bed, and I was lying there watching her sleep – I don't suppose you've ever done that –"

"No."

"She's almost a different person. When she stops fighting things. You know what I mean, don't you? You must, you've spent a lot more time around her than I have."

Yes, I knew what he meant. The picture of her at seventeen or eighteen in the photograph album, Augusta letting the hose run over her and soak her to the skin. There had been moments like that with her, all my life. "I do," I said.

"If something is going to keep her alive," Allan said, "it won't be stubbornness. It'll be the other thing."

Augusta got up after a while and came downstairs, read the paper and looked almost like her normal self, except that you hardly ever caught her sitting down on a normal day, and eventually she did some more gardening, half an hour's worth in the middle of the afternoon. I could tell she was determined to do it, but it wore her out again and she had to go lie down. I felt more and more as though I was inventing ways to keep busy – I had started scraping another shutter – so that I wouldn't watch her all the time. Trying to be there but not in the way, to keep track of her without seeming to, telling myself to go on with life in the natural way and feeling more unnatural by the minute. Allan looked as if he was worse off than I was, wandering around restless and uncomfortable trying to decide what to do with himself. I knew he wanted to do something to make her feel better, but there was no such thing. That night she didn't eat much of her dinner; she said her mouth tasted as if she'd been eating tin cans, no matter what she put in it. Again she went to bed early, and Allan went with her; later, when she was asleep, he came downstairs again, and we sat and worried together, but there wasn't much to say.

The next morning, in the middle of breakfast, Augusta abruptly got up and left the kitchen without a word; Allan and I looked at each other, hearing her footsteps on the stairs and the bathroom door slamming. "I'll go," I said. She emerged a few minutes later looking pale and exhausted. "Some of those blasted pills are supposed to keep you from throwing up," she said, "but it looks like they don't work."

"Do you think maybe some ginger ale would settle your stomach?" That was all I could think of; it was what my mother had always given me.

"I don't want to take any chances right now," she said grimly, lying down slowly on the couch, moving joint by joint as if she might upset a delicate balance. When she was stretched out, she closed her eyes and put her arm over them as if to block out the light from the windows. "Tell me this is making me better," she said.

I began pulling down the shades. Was it? "That's what it's supposed to do," I said.

"Great," she muttered. I moved to the next window, thinking, Just tell her it's working, why don't you? "Don't pull them all down," Augusta said, "it's too much like a sickroom that way."

"I thought the light was hurting your eyes."

"It was. But that's enough."

I sat down in an armchair facing the couch and watched her lying there; after a moment I got up and took off her shoes. "Thank you," she said, her eyes still closed.

I sat back down with a vague feeling that I should keep her company. Maybe read to her. But being treated like a sick person was exactly what Augusta objected to.

"Where's Allan?" she said.

"In the kitchen, I guess."

There was a long silence, during which I tried to decide if she wanted me to go get him.

"This is exactly what I didn't want him to see," she said.

"It's okay, you're human, it's just something that happens," I said. Augusta didn't respond; there was another silence, empty, and I began to realize how sick she must feel.

"This stuff had better work," she said finally.

"Yes," I said, but wasn't it a gamble, like everything else? I sat there, waiting for her to speak, but she said nothing; Allan came up the stairs, looked at the two of us. "It's okay," I mouthed to him. If she heard his footsteps, Augusta didn't give any sign of it; he went back down, and in a minute or two I followed.

After that there was nothing to do but admit that she was sick, even if Augusta didn't want to. It was as though the treatment was intended to supply the illness that cancer itself didn't, to make it clear that there really was something wrong. We started holding our breath. Or at least that was how it felt to me. Waiting for a sign of some sort, to tell us if Augusta's decision had been right or wrong. If she'd had the operation, it would have been God, or Fate, or the doctors we were waiting on, but now it was Augusta herself: she had made the decision, and we could only wait and ask ourselves, Was that a sign? Was that? – waiting for the future to tip its hand and tell us what the consequences would be. Bit by bit she got worse; she kept having attacks of nausea, she developed a cough, she couldn't stand the sun on her skin. She tried to garden in long pants and a long-sleeved shirt, but gave up, saying it was too hot to be dressed like that. She was never herself for long at a stretch, and the worse she got, the less she talked, as if she was trying not to be there at all. After a while I understood that for her, the less we noticed her being sick, the less all this was real. Which meant that the only way to take care of her was to pretend to do it by chance. The silence infected everyone until we were all tiptoeing around like shades in an underworld, avoiding each other's eyes.

Everything in the house felt wrong and out of place, me and Allan most of all; without Augusta there was no center. In his search for something useful to do, Allan carried all the rest of the boxes from the spare room, and even some of the extra furniture, up to the attic. George called two or three times and I could barely talk to him, even though I knew he understood what I was going through, I knew he wanted to help me out. I could hear him trying to find words that would make a spark of comradeship jump between us, but the distance from our house to St. Louis might as well have been across an ocean. Every time I went to the store and tried to find something Augusta could eat, it was a shock at first how loud and energetic people were out in the world, how rudely healthy; they made me cringe a little at first, and then they made me guiltily want to escape from our house and what was happening there. But I always went straight back, and as I stepped inside, the grayness descended again. I began to forget that we had lived some other way, to lose track of time, to stop believing in a world where people did things like care about ball games or make love. Even at night, alone in my room, I had to remind myself that there had been a time before this and there would be a time after; someday I'd have to go back to Boston, if only to start school. But for Augusta this would continue – how long? No one had said. Maybe I should wish for it to go on a long time, since that would mean she'd be alive. If you could call this life.

The indefiniteness of that time was broken one night, suddenly punctuated, by Allan telling us he had to go back.

A L L A N

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Karen looks at me as if she's been waiting for this shoe to drop for days; but it's Augusta I'm worried about. She's next to me on the couch; all three of us are watching a ball game. Or sitting in front of it. For a moment she doesn't respond, but I've grown to expect that in the past few days.

"I don't think there's much you can do here anyway," she says, without looking at me. It almost sounds like Good riddance; that stings me.

"I've been away for a week and a half, God knows how much work must have piled up by now. My partner is going to want to kill me when I get back. Not to mention that I've got to tell Amy someday." And I know Augusta has no idea what that's going to be like.

"Not to mention," Augusta says in a flat voice I can't interpret. All of a sudden I feel the way I did when I first got off the plane – separate from her all over again – and that scares me deep inside; I thought that was over for good. "What are you planning to tell her?" she says, in a tone that suggests that maybe there's a lot less to tell than I think.

"Everything," I say, feeling the usual dread, and then on top of that all the uncertainty of Augusta's condition. And if Augusta herself isn't actually with me in this, I'm not sure what I will be able to say.

"Everything? Couldn't you spare her some of the gory details?"

"You know what I mean." But I'm not sure what I mean – how I'll get it out: It's over, I love someone else, I was in love with her before I even met you. One blurted sentence like that? But no matter what leads up to it or what comes after, there will have to be one sentence, or even one word, that will spell the end of our marriage,

which neither of us will ever forget. Taking down a world at one blow. It's barbaric, a crime no matter what the law says, not forgivable even though it has to come.

"Are you sure you really want to do this?" she says, and for the first time in days, I'm not. The abyss of deciding yawns before me again. I can't do it if Augusta's going to be only half there – the last thing I thought possible a few minutes ago. Is everything suddenly lost, is it going to turn out that there was only a charmed moment and now it's over?

"Are you trying to tell me you don't want me to?"

"I'd say you'd better make up your own mind about that," she snaps, in what must be one of her classroom voices – one she only uses in extreme situations, as if she had caught me sitting in the back row looking at pictures of naked women. I'm lost; this is making no sense, and I feel a new fear, different from the fear that she might die. At least that loss is not here and now.

"I'm going to bed," Augusta says, standing up, and marches into her room and shuts the door with more energy than anything she's done in days. I sit there staring at the closed door while the announcer's voice goes on calling balls and strikes, thinking, What the fuck just happened? After a moment I glance at Karen; she's sitting on the floor, looking as frozen in place as I feel, watching me. I can see my own apprehensions on her face.

"What was that all about?" I say, hoping she'll understand after all her years with Augusta.

"Her feelings are hurt," Karen says.

"Doesn't she understand I can't help it? I've got to leave sometime. It's not as though I'm never coming back."

"She's still hurt."

And an Augusta who is hurt is something like a lioness an unlucky hunter has wounded but not killed – twice as likely to kill him. Not that that changes anything about what I should do, if Karen's right. I get up from the couch, saying "Thank you" to Karen; she doesn't reply. I stand for a moment with my hand on the doorknob, trying to collect myself; there is no sound from inside. I turn the knob, enter Augusta's room, and shut the door behind me.

She's lying on the bed, face down, her head turned away from me, and she's pulled a pillow halfway over her head. I go over and sit down on the bed next to her. She doesn't make a sound or respond in any way to my presence. I lay my hand on her shoulder. "Augusta – "

Abruptly she rolls over, away from me, and looks up; there are tears on her face and she looks furious. "Damn you," she says, as if everything that's wrong is my fault.

"Stop," I say. Her gaze is unbearable.

"Damn you," she repeats, leaning extra hard on the "you" as if to say that out of all the people in the world, it's me she wants to damn.

"Stop it," I say, taking her by the shoulders and half-wanting to shake her, "I don't want to leave, I love you, now stop it."

We begin to struggle as if my holding her, or her getting away, would resolve something; she wrestles herself out of my grasp and slaps me in the face, then bursts into tears and falls full length on the bed again, sobbing into a pillow. For a moment the slap makes me so angry I want to tip the bed over and dump her on the floor, yell at her a whole tirade that would start with who the hell does she think she is and is she ever going to understand that other people are human beings too; the anger shoots up through me and seems to take off the top of my head and I half-expect to hear myself begin to shout terrible things but nothing happens. For some reason there is no need. I feel the way the train track must feel after the Metroliner goes over it at a hundred miles an hour, and I'm awake for the first time in days. I watch her cry, calm now, waiting.

Gradually it subsides until she lies there breathing in gulps, turned away, not looking at me. Still I wait until her breathing evens out except for an occasional snuffle; then I lay my hand on her head, feeling the shape of it under her hair, willing her to understand. There is less of her hair than there was a few days ago.

"I'm sorry," she says, softly but distinctly.

I lie down on the bed next to her and turn her over, pull her next to me and hold her in my arms. "I'm such a mess," she mumbles.

"I don't care."

She puts her arms around me and holds on tight for a moment, then lets go. "Wait a minute," she says, sitting up. She pulls a Kleenex out of a box on her night table, wipes off her face and blows her nose, throws the Kleenex on the floor and lies down again, fitting herself next to me. "This whole thing makes me so goddamn mad," she says.

"Don't take it out on me."

"I know. I just couldn't stand it when you said you were going to leave. I feel as though you have no right to do that."

"I'm coming back, remember?"

"When?"

"As soon as I can." But as soon as I think about when, I begin to imagine what will happen first – the consequences of telling Amy. Impossible to add up all that.

"Do you have any idea?"

"You realize we're talking about changing my entire life."

"Is it worth it?" she asks. But she knows that when we're lying there like that I can only say yes.

"Sometimes I think you're trying to convince me it's not."

"God, no. But I know I'm impossible sometimes."

"Maybe you have an excuse."

But we lie there together as if, for the moment, she isn't sick. We haven't made love since the morning after she came back from the hospital because she has always been exhausted, or sick to her stomach, or generally miserable, but now she seems to be herself again. I kiss her, tentatively, and she kisses me back. "This has been the most awful week of my life," she says. "I can't stand it that this has to happen the instant you arrive. I mean, why should you want to be with me, of all people? I'm a goddamn wreck."

"I feel as though I haven't seen you in days."

"Me too." She disengages herself, raises up on one elbow and reaches over to the night table, finds a roll of Life Savers and puts one in her mouth. There are packages of Life Savers and cough drops all over the house, and she's constantly sucking on them to get the bad taste out of her mouth that the drugs have put there. "Want one?" she says.

"We can share it," I say, kissing her. "It's more fun that way."

Augusta lies back down, looking at me almost shyly; she puts one hand up and pushes her hair back from her face. She showed me some hair that came out while she was brushing it this morning, but she still looks like herself. She doesn't say anything, but her eyes don't leave mine; I can feel her stop inside, let go, surrender to the moment, the same thing I see in her sometimes when she's asleep, only she isn't asleep this time. Right then I know that all she ever has to do is look at me like that, trust me enough to let down her guard, and I will always love her.

I begin unbuttoning her shirt and she lies and watches me do it, her eyes responding to every touch; I take it off her and caress her breasts, her collarbones, her sides. She's even thinner than before after hardly eating for several days; that worries me, makes me feel that she's delicate and has to be touched and held with great care. Taking out the lump has left a small shiny scar on her breast, nothing much, an

insignificant mark except for what it means. I take off my shirt and we hold each other and kiss, tasting each kiss separately as if we have all the time in the world to be lovers, and all of it is like that, patient and slow and careful, until the abandon takes over and carries us away.

We lie there together, saying nothing, until our hearts stop beating so hard. Finally Augusta turns over, her back against me, and pulls my arm around her, holds my hand with both of hers. My nose is in her hair, her feet touching mine. "It's going to be so hard for me," she says, "not to have you here to hold me at night. I can feel it even when I'm sleeping. That's why I was so mad at you. I know you have to go, but I can't help it, I need you."

"It's not going to be easy for me, either," I say. Her body, her physical presence, has only grown more precious to me now that it is threatened, and I've had so little of that presence that I can't resign myself to giving it up, even for a while. "Did you just tell me that you needed me?"

"Yes," she says.

"That's a first."

She nods, and we lie there for a while silently adjusting to those words being out in the open. We're going to have to try to make a life together, that is clear, if we have the chance.

"You don't have the right to go away, either," I say.

"If I can help it."

A bit of a breeze blows over us, a breath of coolness in the warm night.

"I'll tell you, if cancer doesn't kill me, the cure just might," she says. "Destroy the village in order to save it, you know?"

"They say it helps your chances."

"That's easy for them."

"It's been driving me crazy not to be able to do anything for you."

"You have, don't you know that?" she says softly. "And look what you got for it – a temper tantrum."

"I survived."

She sighs. "Maybe it's better that you have to go now, before the rest of my hair falls out."

"I don't know – if it did I could find out what it's like for Orthodox men with their bald wives."

"What?" She sounds like she thinks I've lost my mind.

"Orthodox women shave their heads after they're married – they're supposed to, anyway. They wear wigs all the time."

"You're kidding."

"No."

"God, this is an even more peculiar world than I thought."

"Stay in it," I say, holding onto her tight. "You already left me once, that was all I could stand." She turns to face me again, and we hold each other for a long time, not falling asleep, not speaking because there is nothing to say. Being together that way, the length of her against the length of me, and breathing together in the quiet of the night, under the knowledge of what could happen, feels like the limit of intimacy. As though our being one might keep her alive.

But in the morning I wake up to find her pale and coughing, the top sheet wrapped around her as if she were cold; she asks me to feel her forehead and tell her if she has a fever. I don't think so, but that doesn't change the fact that she isn't well. I put on her blue bathrobe, bring a wet washcloth from the bathroom and wash her face for her, thinking she may object to that much attention; she seems too tired to do anything but lie there and accept it. For a moment I wonder guiltily if making love the night before was too much of a strain on her system.

"Reach me my nightgown, would you?" she says. I get it out of the dresser and hand it to her; sitting up to put it on seems to be difficult for her, and I begin to understand better how she feels: is this a cure?

She lies down again. "Can I get you anything?" I ask, putting my clothes on, already knowing how guilty I'll feel about going off and leaving her this way.

"Stay here a while," she says. I pull a chair over to her side of the bed and sit down next to her, reach for her hand, but she says, "Not like that, it's too much like I'm the patient and you're the visitor."

I take off my shoes and sit next to her on the bed, on the side where I was sleeping, my back against the headboard; after a moment she turns on her side and puts her head on my lap. "Are you comfortable enough this way?" I say, resting my hand on her shoulder.

"Mm."

We stay like that without speaking for a long time. Sometimes when I look down at her, her eyes are closed, sometimes open. From time to time she coughs. I keep remembering her saying she needed me. Beyond the leaves of the sycamore trees the sky is bright, and I'm sure it's already hot outside, but her room is not too hot yet; through the open windows I can hear the sounds of New Franklin, screen doors and car doors, lawn mowers, a church bell, trucks a block or two away,

the locust noises that I've begun to take for granted. I hear Karen get up. There are long stretches of quiet. I try to realize that this is Augusta's life and has been for many years now, that summer mornings always sound and smell and feel like this, and she has lived them so often that they are the way the world is to her. All this cannot be foreign to me anymore, because it is her life and our lives are joined. How did I ever end up here, I think, not only in New Franklin but at this place where it seems as though everything I know is about to be overthrown, and the future is almost wholly out of my control, and it's already too late to do anything but keep going the way I'm headed.

Augusta is asleep. There are beads of sweat along her hairline; I feel her forehead and now she does feel as if she might have a fever. I sit there for a few minutes more until I'm sure she's going to sleep for a while, and then gradually I ease myself away, trying to slide a pillow under her head instead without waking her up. But when I stand up from the bed she mumbles, "Don't go." Her eyes are still closed; she doesn't move.

"I'm just going to go down and grab a glass of juice or something and then I'll come right back, okay?"

There is a long silence, until I think she has fallen back asleep. "Quickly," she says, in hardly more than a whisper.

"Yes."

"How is she?" Karen says, looking up from the paper, when I come into the kitchen.

"Not so good. I think she's got a fever."

She has made a pot of coffee, and I pour myself a cup, wondering if she heard Augusta crying the night before, or saying "Damn you," or the rest of it. Not that I have anything to hide from Karen; she is part of my life now, like the town. "I'm glad you made this, I need to go back up and keep her company."

"Want to take the paper with you?"

"Oh – I might as well." It's a rotten newspaper but it'll be something to read while Augusta sleeps.

"Are you still going to leave today?"

I nod. "My plane's at one-forty-five," I say, glancing up at the kitchen clock; there isn't much time left. "I hate it, but I've got to."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to yell at you," she says, with a half-smile, and I send her a look intended as thanks, but already I'm thinking that tonight I'll be at home, with Amy, and I will have to tell

her, and though she might not yell at me either, the silence will be terrible.

Augusta insists on going along to the airport, though Karen and I both try to tell her to stay home. She's obviously sick, and in a different way from what she has been so far; her cough is getting worse and all morning she hasn't gotten out of bed. "I'm not going to let you leave without going along to say goodbye," she says. "I'll be okay, I've been saving my strength all day." It doesn't look as though there's much to save.

The day is clear and hot. Karen drives, Augusta's in the passenger seat, cranked back as far as it will go so that she is half-lying in it, I'm in back. Nobody says anything as we leave New Franklin and get on the Interstate heading west. I sit in the middle of the back seat, leaning forward so that I'm next to Augusta, my hand on her left shoulder, watching the road come at us, sparkling and shimmering in the heat. The same cornfields pass by; the last time I felt strange to be travelling between them, and now it's stranger still to know that I'll be seeing them again.

"When you first said you were going to come I was really jealous," Karen says, "and now I wish you weren't leaving."

"Jealous?" I say.

"I'm used to having Augusta all to myself. Or I was."

"Was it true that you made her call me?"

"I couldn't stand to be the only person who knew about it."

"Good work," I say. Augusta reaches her right hand up and touches my hand that is on her shoulder, holds on.

"I had the whole thing planned," Karen says.

"What did you think was going to happen when you came here?" Augusta says.

"I had no idea, did you?"

"It made me pretty damn nervous," she says; I think she's going to go on, but she has an attack of coughing and can't. We all are brought back to the present and what's happening to her. It has been hard watching her feel sicker and sicker and standing around uselessly while it happens, but it may be harder to be away from her and not know. The three of us have become a peculiar sort of family, the last thing I expected to find by coming here, and I wonder how soon we'll be together again. And for what reason.

In the distance I can see the Arch, and I realize we're almost to St. Louis already. So one could live in New Franklin and commute. It's

as if a different life is pulling me toward itself whether I'm ready or not.

"When are you supposed to see the doctor again?" I say.

"Next week."

"What happens then?"

"I think he wants to see how much more poison he can jam into me."

"If you think of it that way it'll never work."

The closer we get to the airport, the quieter we all become. Augusta isn't talking much anyway because she's sick, and I'm beginning to feel the time running out, the pressure to say all the things that need to be said. Which only makes it harder. I keep thinking back to the night of the Homecoming carnival; are there any more secrets left untold? I don't think so. The past is over, as Augusta once said. Think about now. There is life to be lived, forward, from moment to moment; the only question is how long it will last.

I keep trying not to think about telling Amy, not to be pulled out of these last few minutes with Augusta, but it's hard to help it. Make it quick. I will have to screw up my determination and do it, tonight; living along in the pretense that it isn't really over would be intolerable. We've done that long enough, without knowing it. Or without admitting that we knew.

Of the two things to fight about in a divorce – children and money – we only have one, and not an awful lot of that. Perhaps if I give her the house we can work something out. The thought weighs down my soul; I know too well what we'll have to go through. And this is not the time, with Augusta next to me, to borrow all that trouble. Think about now.

"You're not going to go back to Maryland and think this was all a form of temporary insanity, are you?" Augusta says, as if she overheard not only my thoughts, but the undercurrent under them, that I don't even want to admit to myself – what will happen if I don't tell Amy right away, will I sink back into that life, rob myself of everything I've finally found, without ever meaning to or deciding?

"No," I say. "It can't happen." That would be the real insanity. But there is no getting around it: once I land, everything will come at me, inexorably familiar, and if I don't resist, how long will it take before this seems as unreal to me as Maryland does now? I have to act at once no matter how hard it will be, say the irrevocable words, stake my claim on this life while I still know it's possible.

"I couldn't stand that," she says, reaching up to hold my hand again.

Karen takes the exit for the airport; we're passing hangars – FLY TWA – "I wish I were coming back instead of leaving," I say.

"How long till the plane?" Karen asks.

"There's plenty of time. I couldn't miss it now if I tried." And there's nothing to do but go and face what has to be faced. Anything worth having takes some courage in the getting.

"Are you going to call me?" Augusta says.

"Yes."

We pass through a green light – I would have preferred it red – and onto the ramp leading to the terminal. "Soon," Augusta says.

"Soon." Momentary vision of being at my desk in my office tomorrow, dialing Augusta's number; and what will I be telling her about tonight? Will the unimaginable moment be behind me already?

Karen pulls over to the curb just past the TWA sign, and we're there. No more time. Karen turns to face me, and we all look at each other. As long as we stay in the car, we'll still be together, the circle will be unbroken. "I'll miss you," Karen says, surprising me.

"I'll miss you too."

"I think I'll open up the back," she says, taking the keys out of the ignition and getting out. To leave me and Augusta a moment alone: inwardly I thank her for that.

Augusta and I contemplate each other; she seems open to me without defense or disguise, as I feel towards her, and everything we have done together or said, all the time of knowing each other, and even of not knowing each other, from the beginning, is there between us without words: this was what it was about, all along. For a moment I want to say again that I'm sorry I have to leave, and then I realize that's silly. She knows everything I have to say.

"I love you, Allan," she says quietly, never taking her eyes from mine.

"And I love you."

For a moment we are at perfect peace; then the world presses in again, the sounds of cars, people hailing cabs, a cop trying to move the traffic on – in a moment he will get to us.

"I have to go but I don't know how to leave you."

"I know," she says, stretching out her hand to me and pulling me toward her to kiss her. "It's okay."

I lean over the seat and kiss her. "This is too hard to do from back here," I say. "Let me get out and do it right."

She gives me a look that takes me back to the night before, as if being sick vanished; if you keep that up, I think, I'll never be able to leave. I get out and go around to the back to get my bags out, but Karen has already put them on the sidewalk. I give her a hug; it feels a bit awkward, uncertain at first, and then right; she kisses me on the cheek. "Goodbye," she says.

"So long."

I open Augusta's door and she holds up her hand to me; I help her out, slowly. "God, I feel so light-headed," she says as she stands up. "This is very strange."

I hold her; she has her arms around my neck and her cheek against my shoulder. I can feel her ribs and her hipbones and I think she'd better not lose any more weight, and how can she help it if she can't eat? "Those doctors had better know what they're doing," I say.

"I won't let them do anything too awful."

We stand there for a long moment, unwilling to part.

"Allan, you have to come back soon," she says, and I feel a stab of fear that she somehow knows we don't have much time.

"I will, I promise."

She leans her forehead against me. "I can't stand this, it isn't fair, damn it." But the way she says it – sounding like herself – makes me feel hope.

"I'd better go before it gets any more difficult."

"Oh, God, I suppose you're right," she sighs. She lets go of me, turns up her face to be kissed, and I kiss her; then I help her in. She closes her door and holds her hand out to me, out the window; I crouch down and take it.

"Goodbye."

"I hate that word," she says. "Say something else."

"See you soon."

She nods her head in a way that makes me think for a moment that she might cry; then she turns away and lets go of my hand. "Let's go," I hear her mumble to Karen. She keeps her eyes on the floor of the car. Karen gives me a last glance and I raise my hand to her; then she puts the car in gear, and they're gone.

K A R E N

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As we drove away from the terminal Augusta lay back in her seat and closed her eyes. I looked in the rear view mirror to see if I could catch a glimpse of Allan, but he was lost in the crowd. The suddenness of it seemed cruel to me, for both of them, and I missed his presence, too: it was up to me now, and Augusta did not look good at all. She lay there with her hands clasped and her eyes closed, looking as if she were focused only on enduring the car ride so she could get home and go back to bed.

I drove as smoothly as I could, trying to speed up or slow down gradually, not to take turns too fast, to make it as easy on her as I could, and she said nothing, all the way to the river and across it. I was sure she didn't have the energy to talk; what little she had was expended in coughing. But when we were across the river and on the Interstate heading for New Franklin she seemed to recover a little; she opened her eyes and looked around.

"How are you?" I said.

"So-so." But I had a feeling that "so-so" from her meant terrible.

"We'll be home soon."

She was silent for a mile or two. Then she said, "Was I really awful last night when he said he was going to leave?"

I thought about that. "Medium awful," I said. "What I saw of it, that is."

"I need somebody to follow me around and hit me over the head with something when I get like that. It's not even forgivable, I hate that side of myself."

"He seems to be able to forgive it."

"I don't know how he does it," she said, and lapsed into silence again. Augusta already was the person who followed herself around

and hit herself over the head, but it never worked. That would be the last thing that would change her.

We drove into New Franklin, taking the railroad tracks slowly so they wouldn't bump her around any more than they had to, past the little store and around the block to the house. I parked in front, thinking it would be a little shorter distance from there to her room than if I pulled into the back yard. I got out and went around to help Augusta out; at first I could tell she didn't want me to. She sat up, then turned sideways on the seat and put her feet on the ground, but there she stopped; with one hand she held onto the car's doorframe as if she were dizzy. I held out my hand to her, and she took it; I helped her up, and put her arm around my shoulders, and that way we slowly made our way up the walk past the cicada killers, up the porch steps and into the house. I thought again that Allan and I shouldn't have let her go along to the airport, but we couldn't say no to her. "Shall we go up?" I said.

"Yes."

Slowly we climbed the stairs; I tried to feel when she was ready to take each step. Halfway up we had to stop for a while for her to get over a coughing fit, but finally we reached her room and she lay down on the bed. I took off her shoes, pulled down the shades, got the fan and turned it on so that it would send some breeze her way. "Do you want that?" I asked.

She was lying with her eyes shut, her hands limp, and didn't respond for a while. "Not right on me," she said.

I looked her over; she was pale and sweaty. I put my hand on her forehead, and it was hot, but it was hard to tell anything from that because the day was so hot. I went and got a wet washcloth from the bathroom and applied it to her forehead, wiped off her face and her neck, thinking that might make her more comfortable. "Does that help?" I said.

"Yes," she said without opening her eyes.

"Do you feel feverish?"

She nodded. Now what, I thought. Fevers. Take aspirin. I knew that much.

I went into the bathroom and got the aspirin, looking at her medications lined up in the medicine chest and knowing I didn't understand them. If she got any worse we were going to have to call the doctor, and I knew she wouldn't want to do it. But there wouldn't be any choice. If she wouldn't do it, I'd have to. Or if she couldn't. But I didn't want to think about that. As I went back to her room, hearing

her cough, I could feel the emptiness of the house around me, watching me, waiting to see if I was up to the job of being in charge.

"How about taking a couple of aspirin? It might help bring your temperature down."

She opened her eyes and didn't look at me for a moment; then her eyes moved to me slowly, as if even that were an effort, and she said, "All right." She sat up with difficulty, and I gave her a glass of water and two aspirin. When she had swallowed them, she lay down again and closed her eyes and said, "Give me a cough drop, okay?"

I found a package of them in the living room; it crossed my mind to put one in her mouth, but it seemed as though that would be a statement that she was too sick to move, and I put it in her hand. "I'll leave them on the night table," I said.

She made no acknowledgement except to put the cough drop in her mouth. I pulled a chair closer to the bed and sat down, watching her and wondering what else I could do. This was probably all a side effect, I reminded myself, but that didn't help much. Maybe it was no worse than having the flu, and would go away by itself. Maybe it was no different. But it had to be; she had all kinds of drugs inside her. Were they as hard on the cancer as they were on her?

I sat until I was sure she was asleep, and then tiptoed out. I adjusted all the shades in the upstairs so that the afternoon sun wouldn't get in; I knew the whole day's routine of keeping the house as near to cool as it could be. The dimness of the living room with the shades down was a part of normal life, but now it felt like one more sign that things were not what they should be. I stood there baffled, worry eating away at me. I should have given her some cough medicine, I thought, and went into the bathroom to check and see how much was left. Enough for today and tonight, anyway. I almost wished that the bottle would be nearly empty so I would have a reason to go buy some more; at least that would be doing something for her.

From the bathroom I wandered into the spare room that Allan had made livable in his need to do something even remotely helpful. Or maybe just something difficult; I could understand that. It seemed wrong not to be doing something hard, in the same house with Augusta and what she was going through. Now the door to that room, which had been closed for years, stood open; the shades were up, the windows were open, the room had aired out. I remembered wondering if Allan would, or could, sleep in there; a lot had happened since then. The room he wouldn't need was available now, thanks to him, and it only added to the emptiness I felt in the house. The walls were bare,

the room as stark and lonely as a furnished apartment waiting to be rented; it needed to be used, filled up, lived in, but there was no one to do it. That unnerved me, existing right there in the house with us – it seemed to be saying that all of our life in it was only a thin veneer after all.

I closed the door on the spare room and sat down on the couch, perched there uncomfortably because I couldn't decide whether it was all right to go downstairs or whether I had to be within earshot of Augusta in case she should want me. Mentally I began to go through the refrigerator and the cupboards, asking myself if we had anything she might be able to eat or drink. Would she even want anything? Well, she had to drink something. There was ginger ale and iced tea. I wasn't sure if tea would be bad for her or not, because of the caffeine. What else did sick people eat? Bouillon, toast without butter, crackers . . . maybe bananas. My mother had always given me those. We didn't have any bananas. I would have to get Augusta to tell me which medications she was supposed to take when; up till now I had left that to her, and I wished I hadn't.

Maybe it was time to call my mother, I thought, but something in me refused. Not yet. It would happen soon, but not yet. Not without asking Augusta.

I got up and tiptoed into Augusta's room to look at her. She had turned on her side and was sound asleep; she didn't look as pale as before. It seemed to me that I could dare to go downstairs. I pulled a mystery novel at random off the shelf and went down to the parlor; it was right below Augusta's room and I was sure I'd hear her if she called.

But after a couple of chapters I found I'd read the book before – like Augusta, I had about worn out her mystery library – and in any case I couldn't keep my mind on the story. I got up and began prowling around looking for something to do; I washed what few dirty dishes there were, scoured the sink, cleaned off the stove – the momentum of it took over. I looked around the kitchen and saw all the smudges and fingerprints on woodwork and cabinets, the floor that needed mopping, the cobwebs high up in the corners where no one bothered to knock them down. Mindless tasks. They were exactly what I needed; I let myself dive into them.

As I cleaned, part of my mind was still thinking about what was happening to Augusta, what I would do if she got worse – or even stayed the same for long – when would I know it was time to call someone, do something drastic? Why did Allan have to pick today to

leave, of all days, I kept thinking. And where was he? His plane had landed by now, and he would be on his way home, someplace I couldn't imagine. To me he didn't belong there, he belonged in New Franklin. And what was he going to tell his wife? At least they didn't have any children. I wondered, not for the first time, if either of my parents had had an affair before they split up. That seemed completely implausible, but how would I know? If I saw Allan walking down the street in his suit, would I imagine what his real life was like? There still weren't as many rules as I thought, things were less predictable and more dangerous than I had imagined . . .

I heard the toilet flush upstairs and glanced up at the clock: nearly five. Was she all right? I stopped rubbing at the smudges around the handle of the refrigerator, threw my sponge in the sink, and went up the back stairs, wiping my hands on my pants. On the way up I heard her coughing.

When I got there, I found Augusta just lying down again on her bed. "How are you?" I said.

"I've been sweating so much, you can't imagine. But I feel a little better." Her eyes looked much more alive than they had; I felt her forehead.

"Did you take your temperature?"

"Actually, I did. It's a little under a hundred."

That didn't sound so bad. She was still wearing the dress she'd worn to the airport; it was all wrinkled and twisted around, damp with sweat. "Don't you think you'd feel better if you took that dress off?"

She thought for a while – asking herself if it was worth the effort, I thought. "I guess so." Slowly she sat up; she unbuttoned the top and then stood up, holding onto a bedpost for a few moments. Then she pulled the dress off over her head and dropped it on the floor; I tried not to look, but I couldn't help noticing how thin she was. I didn't like it one bit. If she couldn't eat something pretty soon there wouldn't be time for her to die of cancer. "There's some nightgowns in my dresser," she said, and I got one for her.

"Look," I said, "why don't you lie on the couch for a minute and I'll change these sheets?"

"Oh, that's all right," she said, but without much conviction.

I gave her my version of the teacher look. "Just do it, okay?"

"Okay." She sat down in the armchair in the corner of her room. Too tired to argue with me, to refuse to be helped. I pulled off the damp sheets and pillowcases that I knew were making her uncomfortable and put on clean ones, plumped the pillows up, helped

her up from her chair so she could lie down again. When she was back in bed she lay for a moment with her eyes closed, then looked up at me and said, "You're pretty good at this."

"Thanks," I said, wondering if I could be good enough. "Now, do you suppose I could get you to drink something? Or maybe even eat something?"

She thought for a while, looking up at the ceiling. "Something fizzy would be good," she said.

"Okay." I turned to go. "And while I'm gone, think about what you could eat."

I brought her a glass of ginger ale, and a couple of crackers just in case, but she only took a small bite of one. "This is not the moment," she said, putting it down. As if a crumb had caught in her throat, she started coughing; it took a while for the fit to end, long enough to bring all my worst fears back.

When she had stopped coughing, she lay for a while with her eyes closed, getting her strength back, and I wished Allan was still there. But maybe it was better he wasn't. Maybe she found it more bearable to have only one person to see her like this; and better me than Allan.

"Have you taken any cough medicine recently?" I asked, when she opened her eyes. She shook her head. "What about the rest of those medications?"

"Those I took."

I got the cough medicine and she took a couple of spoonfuls, grimacing slightly at the taste. "You know you're in big trouble when you read the words 'pleasant-tasting' on the label," she said. That sounded like the Augusta I knew; maybe she was going to start feeling better. I had an inspiration: "How about if I go and get the *Post-Dispatch* and you can read about the Cardinals game last night?"

"Good idea. Who won, anyway?"

"I don't know. I turned it off after you went to bed."

"And you didn't even look in this morning's paper?"

That brought a smile to my face from sheer relief. "I'll never learn," I said. "But I'll be right back, okay?"

I half-ran to the little store to get a *Post*, partly from the pleasure of being out of the house, out in the air, but mainly because Augusta seemed better all of a sudden. Maybe the fever had been just a passing episode, one more side effect. Maybe the worst part was over.

My pleasure was dampened somewhat when I came back and found her asleep; but she still looked better than she had. Let her get

some rest, get over this cough, then maybe tomorrow she'd eat some actual food . . . I left the paper on the bed beside her in case she woke up and went downstairs to poke around among the leftovers and find some dinner for myself, in what was becoming a very clean kitchen.

But as I was eating some leftover chicken I remembered that this was only the first dose of the chemotherapy. Maybe every one would have the same effects. And that wasn't even the problem; the problem was, she had cancer – and what was the cancer up to? What if all this didn't help?

It was a long night. I kept waking up, listening for Augusta; usually nothing. Once I heard her coughing and debated with myself whether I should go and check on her, but just as I was about to, there was silence again. It went on for long enough that I thought she must have gone back to sleep, but I couldn't sleep, so I got up and went to her door to see how she was. She was asleep on top of the sheets; the streetlamp outside cast a pale, greenish light that bounced off the ceiling and made everything look ghostly. I went over to her and laid my hand on her forehead; it felt sweaty and hot. She stirred restlessly when I touched her, and I backed away, not wanting to wake her up. But I had felt enough to start me worrying again.

I woke up and instantly turned over to look at the clock, feeling somehow that it was late, I'd overslept, she needed something from me and I wasn't there. Eight-ten. Not that late after all. But I couldn't turn off the anxiety that vibrated inside me. I got out of bed, pulled on some clothes as fast as I could, and went to her room.

She looked the way she had during the night; the sheets and her nightgown were rumpled and tugged around, and she was lying there with her eyes closed. I went in and laid my hand on her forehead, and my heart sank; she was burning up. Her mouth was slightly open and she was breathing shallowly and quickly. I had to do something for her, something serious, now. For a moment I could only think, I don't know how to handle this, but there was no time for that, I had to handle it whether I knew how or not. Cool her off, I thought. I almost ran to the bathroom, got a wet washcloth, applied it to her face; she flinched when I touched her with it, opened her eyes. "Don't," she said, in a weak but urgent voice.

"Augusta, I've got to, you're so hot." I kept on, over her face and neck. She squirmed slightly, even raised a hand to try to pull the washcloth away.

"Can't stand it," she said, and I knew she meant it. But maybe I had to anyway.

"I'll make it not so cold," I said. I went back to the bathroom, ran the hot water until it was lukewarm, and then tried it again; this time she flinched but allowed me to do what I wanted. She didn't open her eyes, and seemed too weak to resist; when I lifted one of her arms it was limp. And burning hot. "I've got to take your temperature," I said. She didn't reply. I looked on both night tables and her dresser but couldn't find the thermometer. Into the bathroom again. Yes, it was there. I shook it down with some difficulty and put it in her mouth; then I sat down on the chair by the bed and took her hand. I looked at the clock by her bed; how long did it take? Two minutes? Three? But I knew that she was seriously sick, why did I even need to know what her temperature was? I was out of my league; the moment I'd been dreading was real.

I sat and watched the second hand on the clock crawl its way around three times, making myself wait, and then took out the thermometer, turned it until the elusive red flashed into view. One hundred and four. Bad news. I couldn't remember the last time I had a temperature that high. "Augusta," I said, "I've got to call the doctor. Your temperature's a hundred and four."

She didn't respond or even open her eyes to look at me, and I had a terrible moment of thinking, What if she's delirious, what if I can't get through to her, I don't even know his phone number, what am I going to do? I was completely unprepared for this, and it wasn't as though I hadn't had time, I'd failed her by thinking she would always be in charge no matter what. Thinking she was superhuman. And now I wasn't ready.

"Augusta, I've got to find his phone number, I don't know what it is."

She muttered "ghastly," or something like that, as if she were making a macabre commentary on the whole situation, and I had to make a conscious effort to hold down panic. Then I realized she was saying "Grassley" – that was the doctor's name. I looked around the room, searching for anything that might help me, and my eye lit upon a vial of capsules, one of her medications. I snatched it up, read the label. Dr. Grassley. And they had come from the hospital pharmacy; there was a phone number. But I didn't want to call the pharmacy. I got the hospital's number from St. Louis information; they answered on the fifth ring and then put me on hold to try Dr. Grassley's

extension. He was not available at the moment, another voice said, cool and indifferent.

"Listen, I have to talk to him, I'm calling about one of his patients, she has a very high fever and I think she needs to be in the hospital."

"Could I have the patient's name, please," the voice said imperturbably.

"Augusta Streeter."

"Just a moment." The line clicked and I was on hold again. Augusta coughed, weakly, as if coughing were too difficult for her. I had visions of jumping through the telephone and strangling the woman on the other end. "Dr. Grassley is not in the hospital at this time. If you'll give me your telephone number, I'll have him call you as soon as possible."

"When is he going to be in?"

"Dr. Grassley is on call," the voice said, in a tone reserved for dealing with importunate children. "If you will give me your telephone number, he will be in touch with you shortly."

I gave her our number. "Tell him it's urgent," I said.

"Thank you," the voice replied, tonelessly, and hung up. I wanted to bang down the phone, but I didn't, for Augusta's sake. She started coughing again, harder this time, and I sat there helpless until it subsided and she sank back looking even more exhausted.

"Have you been awake a long time?" I said, wondering if I should have been keeping her company. But what could I have done?

"Don't know," she said.

"I think it might be really a good idea if I could give you some cough medicine and maybe some aspirin."

"Took some."

"Took some – cough medicine?"

"Yes."

"Take any aspirin?"

"No."

"When did you take the cough medicine?"

There was a long silence, then: "Don't know." If she didn't know, too bad. She needed it. I went and washed off the spoon – it had been sitting on the night table all night, and looked sticky and dusty – and was about to try to get her to sit up so she could take the cough medicine when the phone rang.

I snatched it up. "Hello?"

"Hello, this is Dr. Grassley." His name filled me with relief. If he called me back that fast, surely he couldn't be the bastard Augusta said he was.

"This is Karen Moss, I'm Augusta Streeter's niece, I'm taking care of her at her house and she's running a high fever, I'm getting very worried about her."

"Have you taken her temperature?"

"It's a hundred and four."

"When did this fever start?"

"Um – yesterday, I think. Or maybe night before last." It was hard to think in those terms; I was on a different clock. Already it seemed a long time had passed since Allan had left.

"Could I speak to her, please?"

I wasn't sure if he could, or not. I held the phone away and said, "Augusta, he wants to talk to you."

She opened her eyes and looked at me. "You," she said, and closed them.

What to say? "I don't think she's up to it right now. She hasn't said more than two words to me together."

There was a momentary pause. Would he insist, would he take my word for it, what was going through his mind? "Any other signs of distress accompanying the fever?"

"She has a bad cough, I think it's getting worse. Actually, she's been coughing for a while now, but not like this. She's been feeling sick to her stomach, she hasn't eaten much for days."

"How high was her temperature yesterday?"

"The only time we took it, it was about a hundred, but I think it was higher some of the time. I mean, that was when she was feeling relatively good."

"I'd like to admit her to the hospital. Do you think you can bring her in, or do you want me to send an ambulance?"

"I can do it," I said, reflexively; then I realized how complicated it might be, but I couldn't take it back.

"All right," he said, in a tone that said that was taken care of. Suddenly it was clear to me what I was responsible for. "Do you need directions?"

"Yes." Why couldn't Augusta have let me drive her to the hospital before this, so I'd know the way? The doctor gave me directions that were so precise it was almost intimidating, told me to call him to send an ambulance if I had any trouble moving her to the car, and said he'd be at the hospital when I arrived.

I said goodbye and hung up, feeling very alone as soon as the connection was broken. I had wanted him to take it seriously, but now it seemed to me I didn't know how serious this was. "Augusta," I said, "we've got to go to the hospital."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Instinctively, I was waiting for her to object, but she made no response. That made me understand all over again how sick she was. And the doctor calling right back, and wanting her in the hospital. This was for real.

Take it step by step, I thought, my mind racing ahead trying to foresee everything I had to do. Get her dressed. "Augusta, can you sit up?" I said. She opened her eyes and looked at me for a moment, as if to say I didn't know what I was asking of her; then she took a deep breath, or tried to, but it made her start to cough again. We both waited until the fit passed. I put my arm around her shoulders and helped her up, moved her legs over the side of the bed so she was sitting on its edge. "I've got to get you dressed."

"I know."

She pulled up her nightgown until she was holding the bottom of it bunched up in one hand; I helped her stand up for a moment so she could pull it up past her waist. She sat down again and I pulled it off over her head. For the first time I noticed the small silvery scar on her breast; it made my guts squirm. So that was what this was all about.

What was I going to put on her? Anything I could get on easily. I looked in her closet and found a thin cotton dress, put it on over her head, helped her work her arms into the sleeves. Leave the rest for later. I found a pair of shoes and put them on her feet, realizing that I didn't have shoes on myself. "Lie down a second," I said. "I'll be right back."

I ran into my room and found my sneakers; as I was lacing them up I began to think of what came next. Car keys were in the car. Bring my wallet. I would need money to park the car. If I didn't have any

money I'd have to take some from Augusta's. Maybe I should bring Augusta's wallet too in case someone wanted to see her identification. What else. What did people need in the hospital? Take her medications. What she needed was to be there, now.

The question was, what about getting her down the stairs?

She was lying down, eyes closed. "We need to get going," I said. "How strong do you feel?"

"Not very."

I helped her sit up first, and then after a moment helped her stand. "Hold onto the bedpost, okay?" I zipped up the dress in back, tied the sash around her waist. "All right, now . . ." I guided her arm around my shoulders and held onto her hand. Slowly we made our way out of her room, through the living room. "I'm so dizzy," she said.

We got to the top of the stairs. The one thing we do not need, I thought, is for you to fall down these. Slowly we descended, Augusta holding onto me on one side and the banister on the other. We had to stop once for her to cough, a minute or more. I thought of carrying her on my back, the way we had learned to do in modern dance class; I was sure I could do it if I had to. But maybe not down a flight of stairs. When we finally reached the bottom, she said "Let me down" and sat down on the next-to-last step, arms crossed over her knees, head on her arms. I noticed that her hair was getting thin near the crown of her head. I ran to the kitchen, found her purse and my own wallet, pounded up the back stairs to her room and dumped the medications into her purse.

I came to the top of the stairs again, her purse over my shoulder, and looked down to see her at the bottom, hunched over that way, not moving, and I couldn't bear to see her suffer, but there was no time to give in to that. "Now all we have to do is go to the car," I said.

Slowly I got her up, got her arm around me again, and we went out the door. I pulled it shut behind me. Then across the porch, down the steps into the hot sun, and step by step down the front walk. I had probably never gone down it so slowly, especially not when the cicada killers were out in force, circling and weaving in and out of the hedges on either side. It was a damn good thing I'd learned to face them, I thought, as they passed in front and back of us, avoiding us in their flight; if they had decided to sting us there was no way we could have avoided them. "Just act as if they don't exist," Augusta had said once, and I had thought that would be impossible, but it wasn't. Now we went slowly, and they circled very fast, and once again we passed

through their territory and out of it. I opened the car door and helped Augusta in; as soon as she leaned back against the seat all the strength seemed to go out of her. The hem of her dress was hanging over the doorframe; I put it inside and closed her door. As I went around the car I suddenly thought, the directions. Where were the directions? I opened Augusta's purse, rummaged in it frantically, two wallets, lots of pills, Kleenex, no directions. Then I remembered I had stuck them in the pocket of my pants. I took them out and unfolded them, studied them for a moment, got in and started the car. I looked over at Augusta, felt her forehead again; it occurred to me that I probably should have given her something to drink. Too late, I thought. Get to the hospital.

All the way to St. Louis I was in the left lane exceeding the speed limit; worry gnawed at me that when I got there I wouldn't be able to understand the directions after all. St. Louis was not a place I knew well. I kept looking over to check on Augusta; she didn't move except to cough. Even though her eyes were closed I was sure the glare of sun was bothering her, but there was nothing I could do about that. The directions turned out to be as exact as they had sounded when Dr. Grassley gave them to me in a manner that almost felt military, and seeing the hospital itself I was filled with relief and foreboding at once. They would take the responsibility off my shoulders, and then what?

I stopped the car right in front of the hospital doors where it said No Parking and got out, expecting to be accosted by some guard and to tell him what I was doing, but no one interfered with me as I helped Augusta out of the car. She steadied herself with one hand on the car and I could see her make an effort to gather her strength. She wanted to make an entrance, I thought, to do justice to herself, but still I took her arm and we walked through the automatic doors together, slowly, into the air conditioning and the smell of something other than air conditioning, and across the tiled lobby where people were sitting in all the attitudes of long waiting, a few of them in wheelchairs, and other people in uniforms were moving through fast; a voice was paging someone over the public address system. The lobby had tall windows facing toward the street but there was something dim about it, the light seemed grainy and weak. We reached the reception desk; I was going to speak for her, but Augusta gave her name and said she was there to see Dr. Grassley. Then she said to me, "I've got to sit down"; I could see the receptionist wanted to ask her a series of questions, but we turned away and found her a chair. I did the best I could with the receptionist; apparently it was good enough, because

after a while I heard Dr. Grassley's name being paged. I sat next to Augusta and held her hand, feeling she was already being taken away from me, looking around at the lobby full of strangers, the potted plants, pictures on the walls that looked cut from travel posters. We did not belong here – especially she did not – but we had no choice.

A doctor was approaching us, a nurse with a wheelchair following him, and I realized this had to be Dr. Grassley. Augusta drew herself up somewhat. He looked about Augusta's age, with wiry graying hair, cut short, and a precisely trimmed mustache and beard; his eyes were stern-looking, they seemed to administer some sort of rebuke. His white coat looked freshly starched. "Ms. Streeter. How are you feeling?" he said.

"So-so," Augusta replied.

He nodded, as if he expected no more than that. "Is this your – ?" he said, meaning me.

"My niece. Karen."

"Karen Moss," I said.

"How do you do, I'm Dr. Grassley." He held out his hand, shook mine firmly, impersonally. "Thank you for calling me."

"Thanks for calling me back."

He nodded again, no longer paying attention to me. "Ms. Streeter, if you could sit in this wheelchair, please, the nurse will take you upstairs."

The nurse wanted to help Augusta up, but Augusta ignored her and held out her hand to me. I helped her into the wheelchair and gave her a hug. I said in her ear, "I'll come see you as soon as they let me, okay?"

Weakly she patted me on the shoulder. "Okay," she said. I let go of her and the nurse wheeled her away, leaving me stranded there, washed up on a strange shore alone.

"She'll be staying at least overnight," Dr. Grassley was saying. "Or longer, depending on what I find. If you want to visit her, you can find out her room number from the patient information desk. It will take a while for her to be assigned a room." He looked unwaveringly at me as if he had allotted an exact number of seconds to allow me to reply, perhaps to ask him a question, but under his gaze everything I could think of to say sounded stupid.

"Thank you," I said, though I wasn't sure for what. "Am I going to get to visit her today?"

He looked at his watch. "Oh yes. Definitely." Then he turned and followed the nurse, who had wheeled Augusta into an elevator

and was holding it for him. Augusta had her back to the door and so I couldn't see her face, only the outline of her head, held straight, by an effort I was certain, as the doors closed.

After a moment of looking around myself, lost, I remembered that the car was still in the driveway out front. Or would be if they hadn't towed it away. I hurried out and found it still there, apologized to a security guard who was looking at it grumpily, asked him where I could find a parking lot. The hospital had one, around the corner, an expanse of hot blacktop surrounded by more tan buildings like the one Augusta was in; I seemed to have entered a world of hospitals. I felt very small walking back to the front entrance, moving my feet but hardly seeming to progress down the sun-glittering sidewalk. I kept on for a long time, down a blank stretch of the hospital's side, past loading docks and a white tank with a fence around it labelled liquid oxygen, past more unbroken wall; finally I came to the main street where the front entrance was. Traffic was heavy; trucks and buses were passing by, filling the air with exhaust and engine noise and the sound of changing gears, and across the street the leaves of trees in some park seemed to be shaken by their passing. People on the sidewalk were full of purpose, moving faster than I apparently could, I didn't understand how. I got what Augusta had meant about driving back, the day she heard the news, when she had said it was like the whole thing was an illusion. Now I was seeing that same movie, but there was no one back in New Franklin to go home to.

Finally I reached the hospital entrance again, and went in. There was nowhere else to go. I looked at the clock and was numbly amazed to find that it was barely past ten. That reminded me that I had not eaten breakfast; I wandered down the halls, reading signs, until I found the coffee shop. A couple of kids, busboys with nothing to do, were sitting at a table in the corner muttering to each other an animated conversation I couldn't hear; otherwise it was almost empty. Mid-morning. I sat there and drank tasteless coffee – hot black liquid with no particular flavor – and the movie went on.

The minute hands of the clocks in the hospital didn't progress imperceptibly; they waited a minute and then jumped to the next with an audible click and waited again. Doling out time, letting impatience build up to a peak, waiting for that jump. Each minute it seemed possible that time might have gotten stuck.

I made myself wait until an hour had passed, then went to see if I could find out what room Augusta was in. 714. But when I went

there, filled with apprehension about seeing her in a hospital bed, there was another woman in the room, who glanced at me with indifferent eyes, but no Augusta; only an empty bed. I wandered down the hall thinking I'd made some mistake until I reached the nurses' station and one of them asked if she could help me in the voice of the person in charge. Ms. Streeter was having some tests done, she said. But I could wait there and she would notify me when I could see her.

The floor was dark and highly polished; I could see circular highlights left by the janitor's machine, all the way down the hall, the same patterns I was used to seeing in the halls at school. The walls were off-white, the ceilings acoustical tile with fluorescent lights set into them. It smelled of air conditioning, disinfectant, and something else. Always something else. The public address system kept paging different doctors, or saying other things I didn't understand – "Code Red" – always in the same mechanical intonation. The phone at the nurses' station didn't ring, it made more of a rattling noise. Occasionally their shoes squeaked on the floor. Some doctors came past, but not Dr. Grassley, some orderlies with carts, cleaning ladies, other lost civilians like myself. The clocks waited longer and longer before each jump. I began picturing the house in New Franklin, the garden, what I would be doing at that moment, but it all seemed hypothetical, as if when neither of us was there it began to thin out and lose its reality. Leaving me with nothing but this off-white alcove off a corridor.

I went to find the ladies' room; there I saw myself in the mirror – a disaster, dishevelled and tired-looking, my hair in knots. I looked in Augusta's purse to see if she had a brush, but there wasn't one. I found a comb and pulled it through my hair as best I could. There were the medications, too. I had forgotten all about them. It seemed stupid to have brought them here. Coals to Newcastle.

When I came back to the nurses' station, Dr. Grassley was standing there talking to the head nurse. I hovered about five feet away, waiting for him to finish; as soon as he did, he turned away, already in motion.

"Dr. Grassley," I said, going after him; he looked around. "I'm Karen Moss, Augusta Streeter's niece, we met this morning."

"Of course."

"How is she doing?"

He thought for a moment, his face severe-looking as before. "She has a fairly serious respiratory tract infection."

"Does that mean she's in danger, or not?"

He seemed to unbend just slightly. "It's a good thing you called me when you did. This type of infection can develop into pneumonia, and then it's dangerous, yes. I've ordered a different antibiotic; once the new medication takes hold she should improve dramatically."

"This isn't the cancer?"

"No. Chemotherapy suppresses the immune system, and sometimes the antibiotics we give to help it out don't work. It's not always clear why not. As in this instance. She's vulnerable to all sorts of infections." His eyes slid away, as if he didn't like to admit not knowing why the medications hadn't worked; then he looked at me again, more like one human being to another this time. "This should only take a few days to clear up now that she's here."

I wanted to ask him if all this was going to cure the cancer, or at least make her live longer, but I couldn't. Something about him stopped me. Or maybe I was afraid of hearing that he didn't know the answer. "Can I visit her?"

"Of course. I think it would help her if you did."

He gave me the ghost of a smile – it bore the same relationship to a true smile as air-conditioning has to air – and turned away; in a moment he was gone down the hall.

I went the same way, much slower, wondering what I'd find when I entered her room; I turned the corner into a corridor marked "701-720" and came to 714. The door to the room stood open, and I went in. Augusta's bed was nearer the door – a floor-to-ceiling curtain was drawn between hers and the other bed in the room – and she was in it, in a hospital gown, asleep – not conscious, anyway – the head of the bed raised somewhat, an I.V. in her arm. She looked helpless, frighteningly pale, and at first glance she looked old, which scared me more than anything. I took a chair which was sitting against the wall and moved it over by the bed, trying not to make a sound; I sat down next to her and touched her hand. It was still hot, her breathing was still shallow, but maybe not as quick as it had been. Her mouth was slightly open and her face looked gaunt, as it had looked when she got out of her car, the day she came back from St. Louis with the news. Her hand lying on the coverlet was bony-knuckled, freckled and long; I knew how strong she was from years of watching her work, but seeing her in a hospital bed, drained of all that, overturned everything I knew. This should clear up in a few days, he had said. But he didn't know why the first antibiotic hadn't worked, and what if this one didn't? What if the infection developed into pneumonia, or another one came

along, any one of the thousands of possible infections that must be circulating through the hospital . . .

I had been pushing this away all along. Even if she had cancer, even if it couldn't be treated, the moment of Augusta actually being in the hospital, not just for treatment but because she was that sick, had been somewhere in the future. Somewhere I didn't have to picture it. Time would pass first, I would have a chance to prepare myself. Only none of that was true. She might look no different if she were actually dying.

It was possible that someday not long from now – not in forty years, but sometime soon – Augusta would leave her house, be taken to the hospital and never come home. The trip would be one way. On some inarticulate level, I hadn't believed that could actually happen, despite everything we'd talked about, until I saw her there helpless on the high metal hospital bed with the starkly white sheets.

I sat and watched her breathe, thinking, What if I were waiting for the end, knowing she was going to die, the way George must have waited for his father to die. I wished that he were with me – he had faced this, much more than this, and his presence alone would be a help. He must know a great deal that I didn't.

And yet I did know, all along, that everyone was eventually going to die. Supposedly. I knew that was what happened, only somehow I thought it never did – and she was only twenty years older than me, fewer years than I had already lived. Twenty years had seemed like forever not long ago.

I remembered Augusta telling me that she'd found out a lot of things didn't matter very much, like painting the shutters, and as I sat and watched her breathe it was amazing how clear that became. Augusta had spent years alternating between trying to look as though she followed the written and unwritten rules one minute, and the next minute openly defying them; the combination had always bewildered and fascinated me. But between the two I wasn't sure she had ever really lived, until now. Perhaps she could forget all that and just be what she was – given Allan, given a chance. But Allan was in Maryland – for how long? – and she was in a hospital bed. Something Allan had written in his letter to Augusta, seven years ago, came back to me: "I'm afraid as hell of dying without having lived." And wasn't that why he had said he'd be there, the second she told him her news?

The woman in the other bed muttered something to herself and turned over, interrupting my thoughts, bringing me back to Augusta who hadn't moved since I came into the room. I tried to work out a

prayer for her, but all I could come up with at first was Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done. And what if it was God's will that Augusta should die of cancer at the age of forty-two? I knew I wasn't supposed to set my will up against God's, but I couldn't accept that; and I wasn't even certain what I thought about God – I had stopped going to church when I was sixteen. Still, with eyes closed and hands clenched in my lap, I tried to cobble together a prayer. God, I know I haven't done much to make myself especially deserving, but I need Augusta to live ... I kept circling over my fears and needs, feeling how unsatisfactory and inadequate they were as a prayer, and how ignorant I was, thinking them to whom or to what I didn't know.

I sat in her hospital room for hours, getting out of the way when the nurses came to check and rearrange, then moving back to sit next to her; most of the afternoon passed and she did not wake up. I kept willing her to be healed by this sleep and whatever they had put into her. Time seemed to lose its meaning; a minute seemed an indefinite expanse, but that was of no importance. That same stretch of time could have been called an hour or a day and I wouldn't have cared. Finally I realized that I had eaten nothing all day and visiting hours were about to come to an end. I stood next to the bed for a while, just touching Augusta's hand, to make contact without waking her up, trying to send energy from myself into her; then I picked up her purse and left. As I emerged into the hall I felt as disoriented as if I'd been sick myself; it took me a moment, in the featureless corridor, to remember which way I wanted to go. I passed through the halls and stood in the elevator as if disembodied, noticed by no one and having no desire to be noticed; I had a feeling that if I spoke no one would hear, but there was nothing I wanted to say. Inside myself was some kind of knowledge, gradually opening, and I had to pay attention to that.

When I was in the car again and in motion, it occurred to me I could drive to George's apartment. He of all people was the one I needed to talk to, who would understand, better than I did, what was happening to Augusta and to me. I left the parking lot, driving by instinct, and found myself on the streets of St. Louis at rush hour, in traffic passing by the front of the hospital and then coming to a major intersection: it was Delmar, the way to George's place – he had told me he lived just off it, right outside the city limits, on a street called Westgate – I turned in that direction.

I felt too removed from ordinary reality to be impatient as I worked my way along Delmar with the traffic, past storefronts and restaurants, apartments, liquor stores, auto parts places, a used car lot, a couple of supermarkets, a street of plain city like plenty of streets in Chicago that I'd gone down without remembering a thing about them. It occurred to me that I might not find his street, but I let that thought go. I would. I was beginning to wonder how I would know that I'd left St. Louis when there was a cross street that looked different from the others – wider, leafier – and then a little after that the style of the street signs changed, though Delmar still looked more or less the same. There was an old movie theater, then a corner restaurant that looked as though it hadn't changed in twenty years, and that was the corner of Westgate. I turned; the side street was quiet, and there was the apartment building, just as George had described it. One of those windows would be his. Was he home yet from work? I tried to picture him living his life here, going to a movie down the street, buying his groceries, a whole way of life I had never quite bothered to imagine, completely separate from New Franklin and me. If I found his bell and rang it he would invite me in, give me dinner, I'd meet Clifton and I'd have to talk in some sort of social way – but all I really wanted was for George to be there and let me sit with him and say nothing at all until I knew where to begin, and all I wanted him to say to me, perhaps, was "I've been there too." What needed to be said would come.

But the thought of talking to anyone else was too much; I felt pulled down so far into myself that even getting out of the car and ringing George's doorbell would require an effort. I sat for a few minutes thinking that if George came along and saw me, that would mean the time was right; but he didn't come down the street, and I started the car, turned around, and headed back toward downtown and New Franklin.

I drove home in that same trance, held in thrall by something below thoughts, something changing underground while the rest of me held still and waited. I was starving when I walked into the house, but after I ate a few bites of leftovers I found I wasn't as hungry as I had thought; I turned on the radio and listened to the news for a minute or two, and then turned it off. There was no room in me for any other voices.

I went through the house, room by room, standing in each one listening. I was a secret now, hidden in the house, visible to no one; I could do or turn into anything, unwatched. The house ticked and

creaked a little around me, living its own private life. I wandered upstairs, through my room, Augusta's room, the living room, the spare room Allan had just cleared out, down to her study, the parlor, the dining room, the kitchen, and all these rooms were too full, of Augusta and Allan and me, of her illness and my thoughts and hours of talk, too full of the past; after the first few moments, there was no silence in any of them. Finally I came to the back sitting-room; of course it would be the last room I would enter. Nothing ever happened there. There were no voices in it. In the far corner was an old overstuffed love seat, nondescript, probably not sat on in years; I sat down there, with my legs under me Indian style. The shutters on the windows behind me, facing the back yard, were closed, and the shades were pulled in the little excuse for a conservatory that was on my left, where boxes of old letters and Christmas ornaments got shoved out of the way. The room was full of doors – to Augusta's study, the front hall, the dining room, the back hall, the back porch; it was a place to pass through.

I sat in that shadowy, unused corner and gradually everything stopped. My thoughts stopped yammering and carrying on, stopped worrying and figuring out and apologizing. The silence was like being underwater. Something made a sharp creak, somewhere in the house. I began to hear sounds from outside – voices of children saying words I couldn't make out, birds, a dog barking somewhere in the distance, a car going down the street and away – I followed the sound of it, picturing it going away block after block, until it slipped below the threshold of perception. There was a world of sounds at that far horizon, and I tried to listen to them; the town was suspended in a transparent medium, and I sent my hearing out through that, I felt myself extending through it, almost no different from that medium, scarcely Karen any longer, only holding onto one tiny spark of self which could notice that this was happening. Then I let go of that spark.

Into nothing and no time came a thought, like the first thought: she's going to live. It came and went like words forming and dissolving in space. I went back to the farthest sounds, sent my hearing to the horizon again, more aware, now, of the thread of myself. I wanted to let go again but something in my heart would not. The thought crossed my mind that I could not do it. Then the house creaked again and at that instant, without thinking, I released myself from my own grasp.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The phone rang, jolting me back into my Karenness, making my component atoms that had been spread out over New Franklin rush together in an instant and coalesce into me; the shock made my heart pound. Instinctively I got up, my feet carried me toward the kitchen; I could feel them tingling, they had started to fall asleep.

As I entered the kitchen I glanced up at the clock; a couple of hours had passed since I had last looked at it. I picked up the phone, more to silence its loud insistence than anything else.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Karen?"

"Yes."

"It's Allan."

I sat down on the window seat next to the phone and looked out at the side yard. "Allan. How are you?" It had begun to rain; I realized I had heard that sound behind the phone's ring and Allan's voice without noticing what it was.

"I've been trying to reach you all day. How is she?"

Had it only been yesterday that he left? "She's in the hospital. She got a lot sicker after you left, I took her in this morning."

"What is it, what's wrong?" His rushing voice reminded me of how scared I had been.

"It's a respiratory tract infection. That's what the doctor calls it. She started running a high fever and coughing more and more, but he says once the new antibiotic starts to work she'll be okay. She's supposed to be out in a few days."

There was a silence except for the soft fall of rain, more like something I breathed than something I heard. It was dusk; the light in the kitchen was growing dim. Allan gave a heavy sigh.

"It's because of the chemotherapy," I said. "It doesn't have anything to do with the cancer."

"Except curing it," he said glumly, but he didn't sound convinced.

"Exactly."

We were both quiet, thinking the same thoughts.

"I picked a terrible time to leave," he said.

"You couldn't help it."

"No."

"What's happening there?"

"I told her," he said; the words were too simple, too short for what they meant. "She said she suspected for a long time." I tried to imagine what it would be like to have to get through such a conversation, for him or for her, but I couldn't. Think how hurt she must be. And yet I couldn't conceal from myself that I wanted Allan to leave her.

"What did she do?"

"She sat there and looked at me and didn't say a word for a long time. For a while I thought she intended to stop speaking to me right there and then. Then she started asking me questions. When did it start, what was in the letters we wrote to each other. Why did I wait this long. She was very thorough, she's been waiting a long time to find out."

"God, that sounds horrible," I said, thinking of both of them. All I knew was I had no way of imagining what it would feel like.

"It was not fun." He sounded exhausted. "It was worse than I thought it would be. Just as well I didn't know beforehand."

"I wish there were something that could make it easier."

"We've been married ten years," he said. "It isn't supposed to be easy." I felt reproached, as if I had deliberately brought about this situation by making Augusta call him up – thoughtlessly asking him, and his wife, to go through an ordeal I knew nothing about. "When she was done cross-examining me she got up and left the room, and that was the last I've seen of her. I slept in the guest room. This morning I found a note from her asking me to move my clothes out of the bedroom. I think she intends to have as little to do with me as possible. Understandably enough."

My mother had been in Allan's shoes when my parents got divorced – the one to leave, to say it was over, and all at once I saw that in a new light, almost admiring her for having the guts to do it after so long a time of putting a face on things. My father would have gone on

forever trying to pretend; even now he kept it up with me and my mother, tried to tell me that everything was basically fine between us when I knew it was not. At least she acknowledged that.

"When I think about what's happened to you in the last couple of weeks – " I didn't know how to finish.

"There's a price to pay for everything," Allan said.

And what if Augusta didn't make it after all? Then wouldn't the price have been too high? But I couldn't say that, and there was no point – I was sure that thought was tormenting him already.

"I wish Augusta were here to talk to you," I said.

"So do I. Are you going to visit her tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Tell her what happened."

"Of course."

"Tell her I love her, tell her I'll call her. Maybe I should give you my phone number at work."

"Okay."

He gave me the number and I copied it down. "You can always call me at the office. I'll be working late a lot, I'm behind on everything. And I won't be in any hurry to go home." I'll bet you won't, I thought.

"Good luck," I said.

"Thanks, Karen," he said, but I could tell he didn't intend to rely on luck.

After I hung up I still sat there on the window seat holding the piece of paper with Allan's number on it, looking out at the side yard and the garden. Dusk was about to pass over into night; rain darkened the leaves outside. I kept trying to imagine what it was like to live his life right now, to split up with his wife, to put an end to everything he called home, not knowing if Augusta would live or not – the stakes were awfully high. I had never been at a place in life like that, where everything was on the line, and I wondered how I would handle it. Allan sounded calm, as if he knew exactly what he had to do even though he couldn't know how it would turn out. Maybe when things got to a certain level there was no other way to be.

I had not turned on the kitchen light, and now it was as dark inside as on the other side of the screen. I sat with my knees drawn up and my arms around them, leaning my back against a little cupboard that separated the window seat from the stove. There was not a light on in the house; that gathering darkness, and my solitude in it, were comforting – again I was a secret, and by being a secret I was free. The only sounds were the quiet rain and subdued waves of insect noise and

occasionally the passing of a car. The yard and the garden were on the verge of losing color in the dimness; their greens were almost gray, the shadows were already inky black. Only the yellow of some squashes, peeking out between their vines, still stood out as a color, and that was fading. Opposite me, on the other side of the kitchen, was a window facing east; in that direction it was night.

Maybe I had been where Allan was, I thought; maybe there was no time when the stakes were not that high. If there was one thing I seemed to have learned, looking at Augusta in that hospital bed, it was that there was no time for trying to paint life by the numbers.

He had made his choice; there wouldn't be any going back, now that the secret was out. And Augusta had made hers, about Allan. I tried to imagine myself in their place, and it made me see what a real decision was: it came from someplace way below the words you'd say about it someday that would make it sound as though you had thought the whole thing out. I thought of Will, fleetingly; that decision seemed to have made itself a long time ago. I would write him a letter, find some imperfect words, try to say something close enough to the truth that wouldn't cause unnecessary pain – that was all I could manage right now and it would have to be enough.

The crossing signals started to ding, announcing that a train was approaching New Franklin, and I could picture a last couple of cars hurrying across the tracks before the long striped arms came down; when they did the headlight would still be far down the track. The sound of the engine came over the horizon; then it blew its horn, a long chant of one chord, but changing within itself, the overtones shifting as it grew louder and louder, the sound seeming to cut a channel through the town. It peaked and the note changed, shifting downward, as the train went by, starting to trail off and then abruptly stopping; when the engineer stopped blowing his horn it meant the engine had passed the last crossing in town. Then there was the long metal sound of the wheels pounding over the joints in the rails, car after car after car; the repetition of that hypnotized me until I was doing nothing but listening to their rushing and clacking, and as the sound dwindled away finally to the east it seemed to carry all my thoughts with it, over the horizon into silence.

It was full dark; I got up to turn on the kitchen light so that I could see to dial the phone. As it rang, I reached for the string that hung from the light fixture and turned it off again. I was at home in the dark, in the sound of rain, held by it, supported.

"Hello?" said the cranky voice I'd heard before.

"Hello, is George there?"

He didn't bother to reply, just put the phone down with a clank that jolted me, for a second, out of the half-hypnotized state I was in. "For you!" I heard him yell. Then there were footsteps and farther from the phone I could hear the same voice saying something about getting an unlisted number. The receiver was picked up.

"Hello?"

"George, it's me. Karen."

"How are you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? What's going on?"

"I came by your house earlier, I was going to ring your bell but for some reason I couldn't get it together."

"You did? What time was it?" George sounded bewildered by me, and I couldn't blame him.

"I'm not sure. Late afternoon."

"What were you doing over here?"

"I had to take Augusta to the hospital."

"Oh," George said, and I heard the sinking feeling in his voice.

"Her fever got worse all of a sudden, she hasn't eaten anything in days."

"This doesn't sound good."

"It's some kind of infection. The doctor changed the antibiotic and supposedly she'll be okay in a few days. Side effect of chemotherapy."

George sighed. "I remember those. 'Side effect' doesn't seem like quite enough to describe them, does it?"

"No."

"How are you holding up?"

"Okay, I guess. It was scary when I realized how sick she was. Allan went back yesterday, just when she started to get worse, it was up to me to deal with it."

"Nice time for him to leave."

"It's not his fault, he really had to. He hated leaving, it was written all over him." I was a little surprised at how eager I was to defend Allan.

George was silent for a moment. "You're in a difficult position," he said.

I almost wanted to say, But does that matter? But it was easier to slip back into the trance I had been in ever since the afternoon in

Augusta's room, since I had begun to understand. I remembered her saying to me once, about Allan and maybe herself, "There's such a thing as waiting too long," and maybe all waiting was too long, if time was as short as it looked today.

"Are you there?" George said.

I had to make an effort to rouse myself enough to speak. "I think I understand what made you so impatient," I said. "After your dad died. I think I got it today."

"Is that how you're feeling?"

"Not really. Maybe. I don't even know how I feel. But I know why you felt that way."

"Still do," George said. "I just don't like to admit it."

"George, listen."

"What?"

"I can't talk on the phone. I just can't right now. Do you think maybe you could come over?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

I turned on the light, opened the refrigerator, took out an opened bottle of wine and poured myself a little. It seemed to go straight to my head; it made me realize how tired I was. I wondered if I would have anything to say to George even after he got here.

I put down the glass and went upstairs, thinking I'd lie on the couch and listen to it rain while I waited for George to arrive, and the next I knew his hand was touching my shoulder, he was kneeling by the couch awakening me. He had a gentle touch, full of inward recognitions; I could tell he was still my friend, all I had to do was accept that.

When I opened my eyes he took his hand away. "Hi," I said.

"The door wasn't locked."

"It never is."

"I remember," he said. "How are you?"

"Asleep."

He sat down on the rug, sideways to the couch so he could see me, leaned his head on his hand and contemplated me as if I amused him. "Just like nap time in the toddler room."

It seemed to me I ought to at least try to stay awake, now that I'd made him drive clear over here. "How were they today?"

"They wore me out. Friday afternoon is the toughest day of the week."

"Were you mad at me the other time, when you were over here?"

His eyes danced a little, teasingly. "I told you what I was."

"So you weren't mad?"

"That, too."

"I was mad at myself, afterwards."

He yawned cavernously. "Don't worry about it," he said.

He must be tired too, I thought. "Bored already?"

"No, I'm supposed to be the boring one, remember?"

He yawned again, not so wide, and I yawned too. "Stop that, it's catching."

He went through an elaborate pantomime of closing his mouth with a zipper and then trying to open it without success. I thought the toddlers must love it. "Is it still raining out?" I asked. He shook his head, his mouth zipped shut. He turned so his back was to the couch, extended his legs, leaned his crewcut head back against the seat cushion. The house was silent, and most of the lights were out. We made a sort of T, he stretched out on his level and I on mine; he seemed content where he was. I was a tiny bit more awake now, but I could feel that it was only the prelude to sleep.

"George," I said.

"Hmm?" he said, through shut lips.

"What do you do about the impatience?"

He thought for a while, and I watched him think.

"Try to make it pass for courage," he said, speaking to the books on the shelves. Then he looked over his shoulder at me. "Also I try to remember not to be too much of a pain in the ass. But I don't always succeed."

His prickly head was next to my hand, and I ran one finger over the crown of it. Meaning to do it this time. He reached his hand up, open, waiting for me to put mine there, and I did. We stayed that way for a good while, forming a T, connected, and I felt myself drifting again, over the brink of sleep. "I'm sorry, George," I said, making a last effort, "I can't keep my eyes open."

"It's my job to watch two-year-olds take naps – why not you?"

If you don't mind. I only thought the words. I could still feel his hand in mine as I faded away.

When I swam up out of sleep again it was the middle of the night. All was dark and silent, and for a moment I wasn't sure where I was, couldn't remember how I got there, and then I recalled that and in

the same moment I thought of George. I had fallen asleep on him, after getting him to drive all the way over here, and what must he have thought of that? I sat up, pushed my hair back out of my face, looked around. Streetlight coming in the door to the porch roof dimly illuminated the space, and I made out a dark shape asleep on the floor. George. He didn't go home, I thought, telling myself the simple, surprising fact. He had pulled the cushions off a couple of armchairs and made them into a makeshift bed in the middle of the rug. Sound asleep, his legs curled up so they'd fit on the cushions. I remembered him telling me how he used to wake up at two or three in the morning and wander around the neighborhood. Maybe not really past tense, maybe it happened last night and that was why he fell asleep on the floor. I got up and tiptoed over to him and knelt down and inspected him: the shape of his head, the peacefulness of his eyelids. His hands were open as if waiting for something, his fingers slightly curled. He had taken off his shoes, and I was tempted to tickle the soles of his feet. He seemed utterly open lying there, unguarded, his outline clear and straightforward as a child's; and even though I remembered how complicated he was, it was as if the complications were only superficial and what was simple and clear went deep and to the heart. Maybe that was never true. Maybe a handful of times it was.

I stood up to leave him in peace, and went toward my room anticipating the relief of taking off my wrinkled clothes that were all twisted out of place and confining. The night had finally grown cooler. It was good to stand up and stretch; I had been cramped into the narrowness of the couch for hours. I thought of George on those two cushions and how he'd feel in the morning and it didn't seem fair. He could sleep in the guest room. Except there weren't sheets on the bed. Maybe he wouldn't care. He could sleep on the couch, at the very least.

I went back over to him and knelt there again, put my hand on his shoulder. He stirred but didn't wake up. Maybe I shouldn't, I thought. Maybe yes. I shook him a little.

"Hmm?" he said, as if responding to something in a dream.

"George," I whispered.

"Hm?" He stirred and I thought his eyes opened a little.

"Are you awake?"

"Uh-huh."

"You don't have to sleep on the floor, George."

"What time is it?"

"I don't know, I just woke up."

His eyes were open now, he was looking me over, bewildered to find himself there. "I just didn't want to fall asleep driving back," he said. "So I thought I'd – "

"It's okay."

He sat up and scratched his head, looked around. "It must be really late, I didn't mean to – " He felt his pants pocket. "I better find my car keys."

"Oh, don't worry about it, you might as well stay. But don't sleep there, you'll be so uncomfortable when you wake up. At least sleep on the couch."

"Okay." He rubbed his eyes and blinked, looked at me kneeling on the rug. I could see him begin to take in the situation. "It's been a long time since I spent the night in this house," he said, and of course it was only what I could not help thinking of myself.

He gazed at me in the dimness, and his face was still open and clear. I was sure that without speaking he was asking me many things, offering many things if I would take them. Please don't let this be wrong, I thought, don't let me be making some kind of stupid mistake. "Use your words," I said.

I thought I saw a smile flicker over his face, but it was too dark to be sure. He sat there cross-legged and thought, and I watched him and asked myself what I wanted him to say. That he still loved me? It embarrassed me even to think of wanting such a thing. And who was I to set him any kind of a test?

"Want to know a secret?" he said.

I nodded my head Yes.

"I was a virgin too. It would have been the first time for both of us. I've wished it had been, ever since."

"Why?" Not that I didn't wish the same, as soon as I was on the train back to Chicago and we had missed our chance. He would make me think of that, make me remember the violence of regret.

"Because then there would always have been that. No matter what else happened. Something that really mattered, that could only happen once in a lifetime, it would always have been right."

But something in me couldn't bear the idea of meaning that much to him. "I don't know, maybe it wouldn't have, maybe I was just too young."

George looked down at his hands, curled in his lap. I seemed to have shamed him for his secret thoughts, and how unfair was that? "I guess I'm not using my words very well," he mumbled.

"Oh, that isn't what I mean – I mean – I'm sorry, George, I'm so contrary with you now, and I don't even want to be, something just comes over me."

"It's a quality that I bring out in people."

What had I done to deserve the kindness of that excuse? If the simplicity that I had seen in George asleep was no longer between us, I was the one who had driven it away. An accomplishment for which there would be no rewards. I would have to do something much riskier than that, and less obvious. I thought of Augusta startling me with the word "innocent," of her beauty at seventeen or eighteen in that picture I had found, of her losing her virginity in the back seat of a car, her fear of becoming an old woman overnight, the sight of her in the hospital, George saying he tried to turn impatience into courage. I held out my hand to him, and he took it. "Listen," I said, my heart thumping inside me. "If we sleep together – " Just getting that much out was not easy, and the rest was harder – "I can't make love to you, but can we just be together? Can you do that?"

He didn't answer at once, and I thought probably that was too much to ask, that it was one more proof of how self-centered I really was that I hadn't just let him go home when he intended to. "If it's what you want," he said.

"Come on then," I said, standing up. Too late now to change our minds. He followed me into my room, and I closed the door; it was darker there because the shutters were closed, but enough of the streetlight still came in so we could see. I knew he didn't know how to act, whether to touch me or not, whether to look or not as I unbuttoned my wrinkled blouse. I turned my back to him and took my clothes off, trying to pretend that he was a roommate and not a lover, trying not to feel his eyes on me as I took off everything but my underwear and then grabbed my Red Sox T-shirt off the chair and pulled it over my head. I lay down on the bed and pulled the sheet over me even though the T-shirt was already too warm. I glanced up at George – he was taking off his shirt – and realized I shouldn't watch, of course I shouldn't, if I had told him the truth about what I wanted. I turned on my side with my back to him, leaving him plenty of room in the bed, and waited, wondering if I was an extremely foolish person, hearing his clothes fall to the floor, and then he pulled back the sheet and got in bed with me. Did he understand what I had meant when I said "be together?" Yes: he put his arm around me, and I fitted myself next to him and held his hand in both of mine. I could feel his stiff penis against me, pressed between our two bodies, and that was a good feeling, for now, no need

for more. But it made me feel guilty, too. "Is this too hard for you, George?" I whispered.

"Not unless you talk about how hard it is."

We lay in silence and I wondered if either of us would sleep. Maybe this was a terrible idea. I pushed the sheet down off me; it was too hot, with George next to me.

"Life is really peculiar, isn't it?" I said.

"More and more so all the time."

"Did any girl ever do this to you before?"

"Yes."

"Really?" I hadn't imagined that.

"Mm-hm."

"What did you think about it?" Like, did you get up and leave the next morning and never speak to her again?

"I thought it was her way of finding out if I cared about her or not."

"And did you?"

"It was you, Karen. You'll have to figure it out yourself."

Oh.

His words stopped me and made me quiet inside, held me in place like a serious gaze. Time to get it together, time to stop thinking about Karen and understand this boy, this man next to me – an impatient man who offered me his restraint, a grown man who offered me the company of the solitary boy inside. An imperfect man who offered to forgive my incompleteness. Without meaning to, I let out a sigh that was more of a groan, and George's arm tightened around me and he said, "What's wrong?"

"I hate not being ready for things, I can't stand myself sometimes for not being prepared. Every time I think I know what I'm doing I turn out to be wrong."

"You and everybody else."

"What the hell am I supposed to do about this?"

"Improvise."

And what else was there to do? I turned over toward George, put my hand on his side, and it took him almost no time at all to realize I wanted him to kiss me. I met his kiss and we sank into it, another space, a dark interior world of pure sensation. It had been a long time since I'd kissed anyone but Will. I could not remember anymore how it had been with George years ago; kissing him now blotted out the past. His hand slid up my back under my T-shirt, pressing me to him, touching my sides as if counting my ribs – almost tickling me, making

me squirm slightly, and as I turned his hand covered my breast. He slid his hand under my bra and fondled me gently, making something in me uncoil, let go and seem to melt and yet ache at the same time, deliciously. It was too late to stop and I did not want him to. The last thought of even pretending to object evaporated. George pulled off my T-shirt and unhooked my bra. I could feel him stiff against me and my hand found its way to his hard penis; I traced the length of it with my fingertips. My heart began to pound with the knowledge that we were going to make love, that I was going to do something I had said, only a few minutes before, I wouldn't do. I could see George in the light from the streetlamp outside that filtered in through the slats of the shutters; he looked more solid now than he had at seventeen, and there was that scary quality lurking somewhere in his maleness. He was taking me in with his eyes, his face solemn and intent as he touched me, kissing me as he traveled the shape of me with his fingertips, my shoulders, my hipbone, my sides, fondling my nipples with the lightest of touches and then squeezing them to the threshold of where it would begin to hurt; when he let go, pleasure would rush through me. His hand slipped down my belly and inside my wet panties. He played with me until there was nothing in the world but that sensation, only stopping to pull my panties down and off me. I was free in my nakedness, I told myself I would show him how much I'd learned about making love before the night was over. His hands seemed to be everywhere on me. I caressed the definite shape of his penis thrusting toward my touch, and then he was above me, opening my legs with his, and I guided him into me; I wrapped my arms around him, held him close. He buried his face in my neck, our bodies trying to find one rhythm, he was big inside me and the weight of him on me was perfect. "God, I want you," he said, against my neck, and I hooked my legs around his and thought, Say it again. But each time he entered me I knew exactly how much he wanted me, and I him, and how lucky I was to still be on the pill so that I could whisper to him, "Come inside me." He did, filling me with delight, and we lay for a while just breathing and exchanging kisses; then he knelt between my legs, tall above me. I could see how happy his body was, he was more graceful now, more flexible. He looked at me as if he'd only now begun to see me naked, and played with me and sought out the touch I'd respond to until I came, and came and couldn't bear any more and had to pull myself away, panting, from his touch. Then we held each other in silence, a shared trance of pure sensation – he was hard again, I could feel him against me – and after a while he came into me again, and we made love until I

had to say "Stop a moment" because I felt my head swimming in an overwhelmed way and I almost didn't know where I was. And after that we made love some more. I thought it would never end.

It was deep into the night. We lay together, my head on George's shoulder, his arm under my neck. After all our lovemaking, his body felt so familiar that there didn't seem to be a boundary between it and my own. Outside the cicadas whirred, and a slight breeze breathed coolness on us for tantalizing moments, always making me want more. Making love, we had been slippery with sweat – I could taste it at any moment by touching my tongue to George's skin. We were in absolute contact, my breast flattened against his side, our legs intertwined, breathing the smell of our lovemaking. I was no longer in the world we'd been in before George took the last of my clothes off. We hadn't spoken in what seemed like a long time; looks and touches and breaths were like words.

I pulled him on top of me, wanting that pressure against my chest, my hipbones. He took my head in both hands and kissed me and said, "Can we do this every night?"

Didn't he know he was bound to get hurt if he just put his head down and ran right at whatever he wanted? "Maybe," I said, but knowing that we could, that such an offer was mine to agree to if I liked, felt much better than maybe.

"I know I want too much sometimes. It can't be helped. At least I can't help it." I pulled his crewcut head down, making him kiss me, stuck my tongue in his mouth to shut him up.

"No apologizing."

We resumed the position we had been in before, side by side, my head on George's shoulder, and I felt myself sliding irresistibly into sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

There was an instant, when I first awoke, of surprise that I was not alone in bed; then I remembered everything, stretched my legs, turned over, went back to sleep with my back against George's. When I awoke again and turned over to look at him, he was awake, watching me. So this was what it was like to wake up in bed with a man, my lover, in my room at Augusta's – something I had never quite thought would happen.

"Good morning," he said.

"Been awake long?"

"No."

I burrowed into his embrace and we held each other, half-awake, as if we were accustomed to such mornings. I waited for myself to feel uncomfortable with him, to have second thoughts about everything that had happened, but the second thoughts didn't come; the longer we lay there, the more I remembered how it had felt when we made love. I wasn't going to try to deny that.

George's hand lay lightly on my head, his fingertips moving slightly in my hair, and that was like a statement of some kind, untranslatable, that made my heart feel good. I tried to remember what it had been like, almost making love with him years before, but I couldn't call it back; I was too full of the present. All I knew was that if we had, it could never have been like this.

He raised himself up on one elbow to look at me, and it was freedom to be with him in the morning light, to still be wanted as much as I could see he wanted me, even after all the love we had made deep in the night – to be seen, and caressed, and to touch him wherever I wanted. He wanted to start playing with me all over again, but I had to move his hand away. "What is it?" he said.

"I'm sore. You wore me out last night." Was there the beginning of a smile? "A person needs to be in training to make love with you."

"You'll just have to keep in practice, won't you?" he said, and kissed me. "When am I going to see you again?"

"Oh – in a couple of weeks."

"A couple of *weeks*?" His dark eyes probed mine.

"I'm teasing, George, take it easy."

"Jeez, don't do that to me." I raised my arms up over my head and stretched, pointing my toes, feeling the luxury of my satisfied and desired self, and my eyes lit on the clock and it was ten-thirty. "Oh," I said.

"What?"

"It's late, I'd better get up, I've got to go see Augusta."

"Oh." George tried not to look crestfallen.

"Don't worry, there'll be other mornings. If you're still interested."

"Would you like me to show you how interested I am?" he said.

As I was combing my hair he stood behind me watching me in the mirror – wearing the same clothes as the night before, of course, but he would never look the same to me. "You never have to comb yours, do you?" I said, struggling with tangles. His gaze made me a little self-conscious, but why – what was there of me that he hadn't seen?

"What time do visiting hours start?" he said.

"Oh – I'm not sure – by the time I get there, they will have." He put his hands on my shoulders and kneaded them gently, kissed the back of my neck. "Your top button isn't buttoned," he said, doing it up.

"You know that girl who dumped you, George?"

"Yeah?" he said guardedly.

He probably hadn't had sex in months and I was the first willing female to come along . . . I turned around and put my arms around his neck. "Are you sure you're not in love with her anymore?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"She wasn't very smart." He kissed me. "Do you think you could go down and make some coffee?"

"Could I make coffee? I practically live on it."

He made it twice as strong as I would have – but maybe that was just as well – and he asked me if he could see me that night and I told him to call me and before he left he kissed me and said, "I never guessed how wonderful this would really be." That made me uncomfortable. "Don't be dramatic," I said.

He smiled as if he knew he couldn't promise that. "I'll try," he said, and then he was out the door and I could take a breath and begin to let what I had done sink in. I felt I owed Augusta something for the hours I had spent with George, oblivious to her, enjoying my body so much while she was sick, and I went up to her room and pulled the bedsheets taut, plumped up the pillows. I tried to set everything to rights, straightening, putting the furniture the way it should be, throwing out the old newspapers and Kleenexes, returning the cough medicine and the thermometer and the aspirin to the bathroom. All the time I was trying to think of what I'd say to her about him, when she was well enough to talk the way we always had. And when would that be?

It was time to go.

As I drove toward St. Louis I kept remembering how George's touch actually made me feel as beautiful as he said I was, and how right it had felt at last to let go of all the voices in my head and their contradictory commands, and be naked with him, to take what he gave and give what I desired. It was a secret still, ours alone. No one but us knew that he had been there at all, or that we had made love. Thank God I was still on the pill. And this time I was not going to get on a train and leave. There would be a while yet before I had to go home, not long enough if it kept on being like last night – not even close to enough – but time to get up from the campfire where part of me crouched in solitude, trying to ignore the darkness, and see if George and I could go together around at least the first bend in the path.

And then my thoughts would jump to Augusta in a hospital bed, and everything that meant. And to Allan in his private hell. One memory kept blanking out the other, but never for long, and there didn't seem to be a middle way between them. I came over a rise, and there was the Arch in the distance – smokestacks, the tops of buildings – in the foreground, still a little country between me and the city. Cumulus clouds towered overhead, pure white, no more rain today. If she was the same – still out, no better – what would I do? Sit there, I supposed, and let it take as long as it would, keep remembering that this was intended to make her well.

I passed by rail yards and old brick factory buildings, through a series of ramps and exits, across the river and down into the streets of downtown St. Louis. I double-checked Dr. Grassley's directions; they seemed easy this time, almost obvious. Again the walk from the parking lot to the hospital entrance seemed peculiarly long; I was full of impatience, and at the same time some part of me did not want to go

in and breathe the hospital smells and walk down the featureless corridors. That was the closest I could come to what death would be like, eternity in corridors, all the doors unmarked and closed. It was a few minutes after noon as I went up in the elevator, along with a couple of doctors talking shop about surgery, and an orderly with a cart of blood samples rattling in their metal holders, watching the numbers of floors light up one by one, painfully slow. The walls were stainless steel, a fan in the ceiling whirred in a way that seemed to block out thought. No wonder Augusta hated this place.

It didn't seem half as far from the elevator to Augusta's room, now that I knew where I was going. A nurse left 714 as I approached, and fleetingly I wondered if something was wrong; I came into the room, and there was Augusta, as before, her eyes closed, and my heart sank to think that she was no better. Then she opened her eyes at the sound of my footsteps and made a little try at a smile. "Hi, sweetie," she said.

I put my arms around her, my cheek against hers, blinking away tears of pure relief. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you, are you feeling better?" I pulled away to look at her; she nodded, and I could see it in her eyes. Then she tried to stifle a cough. Surreptitiously I checked her hair to see if it looked any thinner; I thought perhaps it did.

"I was really scared for you," I said, pulling a chair close to the bed. "I was really scared, period."

"That was no fun," Augusta said. "But I think he got the medication right this time."

"I must have sat here for four hours yesterday, and you didn't move once." That made me remember the I.V. in her arm; it was gone. They must think she had improved, too.

"Sounds pretty exciting."

"Do you still have a fever?" I said, feeling her forehead.

"Oh, a little. No big deal."

"It worked," I said; now it began to seem silly to have thought it might not.

"Grassley almost smiled when he saw me this morning."

"He'd better watch out, his face might crack."

Augusta gave me a smile, mostly with her eyes, and we sat there sharing the same feeling, I was sure – thank God that's over.

"Is this going to keep happening the whole time you're on chemotherapy?"

"God knows." She coughed a few times and closed her eyes, held out her hand for mine to let me know she was still in contact. We

were quiet for a while; her face looked solemn, but better than it had – her color had begun to come back. Maybe she was running on a very thin reserve of energy, I thought, and talking to me had used it up. Outside the room the same voice went on paging doctors, same speed, same tone.

She opened her eyes and looked at me. "This doesn't feel much like a cure," she said. "It's the scorched earth policy, and I'm the earth. I'm tempted to chuck the whole thing." I knew what she meant; it didn't look much like a cure either, but I didn't know whether to admit that or not. Already she had refused to have the operation, who knew what she might do next?

"What else is there? Acupuncture? Faith healing?"

"I don't know," she said, but I thought those things didn't sound as farfetched to her as they should have.

"Allan called last night," I said. "He said to tell you he loves you. And he told his wife about you." Think about that before you talk about chucking the chemotherapy.

That got all of her attention. "What happened?"

"Apparently she's been suspecting it for a long time. That's what she told him, anyway. She made him tell her how it all happened, and then she walked out."

"Of the house?"

"No, out of the room, but it sounded like she's not speaking to him anymore. She left him a note telling him to move his clothes out of the bedroom."

Augusta looked away from me and shook her head. "Serious business."

"He sounds wiped out. I think he really needs to talk to you."

A cough stopped her from answering, but she nodded, as if to say she knew that, and thought for a while, scanning the bed as if reading something there. "It's time for them to end it," she said. "From everything he's told me."

"That still doesn't make it easy," I said, but Allan didn't expect it to be, and when Augusta's eyes met mine, I could see she didn't either. "Of course not," she said. Okay, I thought, you're right, I should know the rules by now.

She sighed, closing her eyes. "I don't mean to seem cold," she said. "It's just that some things have to happen." There was a silence. "And I love him too much to give him up to anyone who isn't right for him."

"I can't imagine you giving him up at all."

She looked at me in acknowledgement and closed her eyes again. After a while I stopped waiting for her to say something. She seemed to be falling asleep. I thought about how many times she had given up Allan already, a story which had driven me crazy every time I heard it. It had taken too long to get that over with.

When I was sure Augusta was asleep, I went downstairs and bought a paper. When she woke up I could always read to her about the Cardinals, if that was what she wanted. For the time that it took to get back to the seventh floor I allowed myself to think about what it would be like when I saw George, but once I turned the corner into the hall where her room was, those thoughts seemed too out of place. What if the chemotherapy really didn't work, or God forbid, what if she gave up on it? She was still asleep when I came back into her room, but a slight scrape of the chair as I sat down made her open her eyes. "Hi," she said, only half-awake. She rubbed her eyes and sat up a little more, coughed a few times, drank some water out of a glass by her bed.

"Have I been asleep a long time?" she said.

"Not very."

"You got a paper."

"Yeah, want to hear about the Cardinals? I hate to tell you, but they lost."

"Then skip it." That seemed like the right attitude to me.

I couldn't wait any longer. "You're not really serious about chucking the chemotherapy, are you?"

She avoided my eyes.

"Augusta, I hate to tell you this, but you've got to live. I don't care how it works. I'm sorry the treatment's so horrible, but you can't die, Allan and I both need you too much."

"I don't have a choice, huh?"

"No."

She sighed. "I guess as long as you put it like that . . ."

"One day I was trying to make Allan feel better, and I said that you were too stubborn to die" – a hint of a wry smile passed across Augusta's face – "and he said he was afraid it might be just the other way around."

She gave me a long, somber look which made me think she missed him, and sighed. She studied the coverlet for a while. "Do you know what I did to Allan? You don't even know the worst part of it. When I went to New York I had this plan for how I was going to decide about us – I didn't use birth control, and I decided if I got

pregnant I'd stay with him, and if I didn't . . . " She raised her hands as if letting go of something.

"Wait a minute. You what?" That was too much, impossible even for her, and I had come too close to doing it myself.

"Getting pregnant was going to be my big trick," she said. "It was going to be a shotgun wedding, only the shotgun was going to be pointing at me, and then I'd get what I wanted in spite of myself. Not that I had it all thought out – you know what I mean. But it didn't work out that way."

"Has it always been like this?" I said. "One big struggle with yourself?"

"Just about. Why? Doesn't it show?"

"Usually it looks like you think you have it all figured out."

"Really? I thought you knew better than that," she said.

I shook my head, and we were both silent, lost in thought; the angel passed over. Augusta sighed. "I try too hard," she said. "I don't know who the hell I'm trying to impress. But I'm sick and tired of keeping it up."

"Then stop," I said. "Just stop. Now. One day it has to end, if it's ever going to."

She reached for my hand and held it. "I'm trying," she said, and if she hadn't started coughing I would have told her that trying didn't count. When the fit passed, she said, "But you know what I've got to do right now? I've got to get out of this goddamn hospital."

"Now? Is the doctor ready to let you out?"

"I don't know, but he's not running a jail here. I've got to get home. I mean, just look at this place," she said, waving her hand at the room. "Would you stay here one second longer than you had to?"

"No, but I don't want you getting as sick as you were yesterday, either."

"I'll get well twice as fast if I get out of here."

Yes, I thought, that's probably true. "So what do you want to do?"

"Get dressed."

"Right now?"

"I feel pretty good, I might as well do it now as later."

"How's your temperature?" I said, putting my hand on her forehead. It was true, her fever was hardly there.

"Well?" she said, when I didn't say anything.

"It's up to you. Just don't tell Dr. Grassley I suggested it."

"I'll take the blame."

I got Augusta her dress and her shoes, and she put them on, without my help this time except for zipping the top of the back. As soon as she was out of a hospital gown she looked healthier, and I began to think she had the right idea. As we left the room I wondered if I should take her arm, but she seemed steady enough on her feet – just slow. We came out of her corridor, and I turned toward the elevators; I wasn't sure if she meant to simply get in one and leave, but I would leave that to her. The doctor knew where she lived.

A nurse passed us with some syringes in her hand, then turned and came back. "Ms. Streeter? Has Dr. Grassley discharged you?"

"Not yet," Augusta said.

"Then you should be in bed until he does so," she said in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Whether he formally discharges me before or after I leave is not my concern," Augusta said, even more definitively. "I hope to speak to him before I do."

The nurse's face took on a frozen aspect, rigid with self-discipline. She turned without a word and headed back, double-time, to the nurses' station, where we could see her expostulating with the head nurse, gesturing in our direction. The head nurse picked up her telephone.

"Let's go have a talk with her," Augusta said. The fight hadn't gone out of her. The first nurse passed us again, pointedly not looking our way.

"I have paged Dr. Grassley," the head nurse said, when we reached her station. "You may wait in the alcove." She turned her back on us. Augusta slid me an amused look, but I could tell she was relieved when she could sit down. She coughed a little, trying to suppress it.

For five minutes or so we waited in strict silence; I felt like a child outside the principal's office, but it seemed to me Augusta only saw this as an inconvenience. When Dr. Grassley appeared, the rebuke on his face was unambiguous; Augusta stood and looked at him unwaveringly as he had his say, technical and intimidating as it was. I noticed that, if anything, she was a fraction of an inch taller than he was; maybe that made it a little easier.

"Look," she said, when he had finished, "I've spent forty-two years living in this body. And with myself. I'm sure you understand medicine extremely well, but I want to tell you something about me. I am going to be better off at home."

He looked at her for a few moments without speaking, and I thought I saw something change in his face, though I couldn't have said how. "For any course of treatment to be a success, it must be a cooperative effort," he said.

"Yes," Augusta said.

There was another long moment as they continued to look each other in the eye, neither one backing down. Was it a standoff, or had they come to an understanding of sorts?

"I'll send a prescription to the hospital pharmacy for the new medications. Pick them up on your way out. And call me at once if anything changes for the worse."

"Thank you," Augusta said, holding out her hand. He shook it, gave her his air-conditioned smile, inclined his head slightly at me, and he was in the act of turning to leave when she said, "Don't go yet."

He turned back, sharply, fixing her with a look that said he heard the same tone I heard in her voice. "I have decided to cooperate with you, too," Augusta said. "I want you to schedule the operation."

He took a moment before he replied, watching her as if he was having as hard a time believing his ears as I was. "The operation as we discussed it," he said. He didn't make it sound like a question, but I knew it was one.

"Yes."

"As soon as possible?"

"I don't know what I'd be waiting on."

"Thank you. I believe you've made an excellent decision," Dr. Grassley said. "Could I ask you what influenced you to change your mind?"

A look that was almost amusement passed over Augusta's face. "No," she said.

Dr. Grassley nodded a few times as if that were a whole explanation. "I'll call and notify you as soon as the operation is scheduled." Then he turned on his heel and left, passed the elevators without pushing a button, and took the doorway to the stairs instead.

Augusta and I made our way down the hall much more slowly than he had; I thought I could feel the nurses' eyes on our backs. "I may actually end up being able to stand that guy," she said.

We got to the elevators and sat down on a bench there to wait. "Okay," I said in my teacher-voice. "Why didn't you tell me first?"

A faint smile crossed her face. "I was hoping to surprise you."

"You're incorrigible." But that was a good sign.

"I know."

"So what was it? What made you change your mind?"

She took my hand and held it, tracing my fingers with hers. It worried me to see how bony her hands were compared to mine. "I was lying there this morning and I remembered when you told me I brought you up the past few years, and I thought, What the hell kind of an example am I anyway? I can't let you turn out like me. Or if you're going to, I'll have to – hurry up and grow up first, I guess. And believe that Allan means it when he says he loves me, and just . . . live with it. If I do."

I pulled her toward me, into an embrace, and holding her in my arms, I remembered the day before, sitting in the shadows of the back sitting-room, how the certainty had floated into my mind that she would live. On that, I would be as stubborn as she had ever been.

As we waited at the pharmacy for Augusta's medications to be ready, I felt my own piece of news building up inside me like a held breath – and she did seem more like herself than I had imagined she could. Finally I couldn't stop myself. "George came over last night," I said, trying to sound casual, between announcements from the intercom about whose prescription was ready to be picked up next.

"Good," she said, abstractedly.

"I'm sure he'd like to come back tonight, but I didn't know you'd be home – is it going to – ?"

"How is it with you and him? What did the two of you do last night?"

"Everything." Just saying that word made it real to me over again.

"Ah." She smiled faintly. "Seems to me I recall you telling me that wasn't going to happen."

"It wasn't, but it did anyway."

"And you? Do you want him to come over?"

For a moment I hesitated. Yes, of course I did; I had let myself have what I wanted, had done the thing that was so hard for Augusta to do; something new had begun and its time was now. "If it's okay with you."

"You don't have to tiptoe around me."

"I know, but – I'm supposed to be taking care of you."

"So? You're not going to quit on me, are you?"

"No."

She gave a little shrug of her shoulders as if to say that was settled. "Well then. He talks baseball much better than you do."

Over the intercom the pharmacist called her name. We got the prescriptions, and I made her sit in the lobby while I went and got the car. The parking lot did not seem so far away this time, and even the air of the city streets was a relief after being in the hospital. When I pulled up she was already outside waiting for me, sitting on a bench by the driveway, under the shade of a projecting roof. The dress I had grabbed without thinking the day before suited her pretty well, I thought; the dark blue set off the color of her hair. From a distance she looked like any woman sitting there, in the midst of life, waiting for someone to come so she could go on with her day.